

# **A Critical Essay On Three Main Approaches Or Meta-Theories In Social Research**

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## **Introduction**

This essay contribution to the field of meta-theory and approaches to social research is informed by a particular understanding of the world we live in. The understanding expressed in this essay, that meta-theories serve as a set of overarching and often invisible frameworks that shape and govern the way we understand, describe and attempt to influence the world around, is in itself expressive of a particular meta-theoretical view of the world.

The essay sets out to critically explore meta-theory from a perspective that is informed by the peacebuilding and conflict transformation agenda of this researcher. Meta-theory works in such a way that it shapes the nature of all research, including this assignment. The underlying assumptions about the nature of society and the people within it that are contained in every piece of research are usually rooted in the meta-theoretical framework through which a piece of research is undertaken. Wallis (2010:78) states this explicitly in his attempt to arrive at a definition of what he refers to as “metatheory”; “Metatheory is primarily the study of theory, including the development of overarching combinations of theory, as well as the development and application of theorems for analysis that reveal underlying assumptions about theory and theorizing.”

In this way, through its intentions to assist in understanding how meta-theory can be useful in developing the theory and practice of conflict transformation, in a manner that informs and invigorates the intentions of social transformation actors, the essay is implicitly influenced by its own meta-theoretical or paradigmatic standpoint.

Having stated this up front the essay begins by linking the concept of meta-theory to approach by first outlining briefly how meta-theoretical approaches in social research have evolved over time, and how they have been influenced by the context within which they have developed. The outline will include mention of some of the key foundational scholars associated with each. This introductory overview will identify the three main approaches that will be explored further in subsequent sections and that will be referred to in this assignment as positivism, interpretivism and radical conflict theory.

Building from this the implications of meta-theory for social change processes is discussed in brief, by way of introduction to a deeper look at the implications of different approaches. The essay will explore how the nature of existence is understood, namely the ontological implications, through the three selected meta-theoretical lenses. This will extend further to a discussion on the different meta-theoretical understandings of the nature of knowledge, described as the epistemological implications. The essay will outline how it is these ontological and epistemological implications that inform the differences in approach to research methodology.

These ontological and epistemological issues are useful in categorising the main meta-theoretical approaches that appear to be significant in social research. The essay will outline some of the different ways in which these overarching approaches to social research are named and understood. This section will include a brief look at the challenge of identifying and selecting the three main approaches, as required in the assignment outline.

Critical questions about the value of meta-theoretical discussions and an overview of some of the debates such discussions contain will be raised in the penultimate section of the essay. This will include discussion about the interconnections between meta-theory and the development of social theories that emerge out of research, as well as the links between theory and practice.

This section of the essay will be followed by a brief look at the implications of meta-theory for the development of a theory of conflict, and a theory of conflict transformation in particular. Using conflict transformation theory as an example the essay will conclude by arguing for the admissibility and value of theories that use more than one meta-theoretical base, citing examples of scholars that have set out to do this.

In conclusion the essay will revisit the main approaches and make some concluding remarks about the implications of these different approaches for social research in general and peace research in particular.

### **The Evolution Of Meta-Theoretical Approaches**

The underlying dominant meta-theoretical frameworks that shape, influence, and inform society and the people who live in it, are themselves shaped by the paradigmatic thinking that has come before them. Meta-theories are dynamic lenses through which

the world is understood and explained. Meta-theory is under constant revision and in the view of this researcher is as much a product of the society out of which it emerges as it an influence on that society.

Awareness of the manner in which these frameworks influence knowledge, and how we think can be useful. Social activists, including many peacebuilding and conflict transformation practitioners, have long held the belief that raising consciousness about these frameworks can be both an empowering and liberating tool. Critical theorists refer to consciousness in a similar vein, well expressed in the contribution from Alvesson and Willmott (1992:432) who describe emancipation as “the process through which individuals and groups become freed from repressive social and ideological conditions, in particular those that place unnecessary restrictions upon the development and articulation of human consciousness.”

Each meta-theory is ideological in nature, in that it shapes the goals, expectations and actions of those who use it. Similarly each approach articulates a value base that is often only implicit, but that has explicit implications for society and humanity. The quest to understand and articulate meta-theory is thus a political exercise that is rooted in an understanding of power in its relation to society.

From this starting point understanding how approaches to social research have evolved over time is usefully linked to the struggles by social researchers, and social activists, to assert the validity of their work, and to use the knowledge they have generated to influence and shape how the world is viewed, and changed, by the people around them.

The struggles between those who propounded rationalism in justifying the legitimacy of knowledge on the basis of reason alone, and the empiricists who argued against them, formed part of a broader struggle between groups of intellectuals who were intent on asserting the scholastic supremacy of their beliefs and in making sense of a world beset by crisis.

Drawing from Hughes, Sharrock and Martin (2003) it appears as though the struggles between idealism, associated with scholars like Hegel, and the positivism associated with Comte, and later Durkheim, as well as the evolution of each school of thought, were conditioned by the contemporary struggles at the time of their evolution. Comte's contribution and the emergence of positivism can to some extent be seen as a reaction to the French revolution and the emergence of Enlightenment, which was in itself a

reaction to the previous dominance of the clergy. Hamilton (1992:43) suggests as such in his account of the formation of modernity as a research method for creating knowledge that was not conditioned by dogma or superstition.

The assertion of the study of society as a science, rather than a philosophical or merely scholastic pursuit, and the emergence of positivism, as a dominant approach to social research, was an attempt to use the empirical methods associated with the natural sciences to bolster the claims of social scientists that they, like natural scientists, could legitimately present research findings that could be used to influence people in positions of power or reinforce the validity of policies and actions that affected the people living in society.

Challenges to the dominance of positivism, and the emergence of the anti-positivist more interpretive approaches, including the work of Weber and Simmel are also linked to the struggles taking place within society at the time of their emergence. With the rise of capitalism, the nature of the relationship between the state and its citizens, and the brutal manner in which less powerful citizens were often treated became a cause of major concern for social activists.

Hughes et al (2003) describe how the work of Marx and the early development of conflict theory, essentially rooted in Marxism, reasserted the value of describing the world in a manner that retained validity, without being rooted in empirical research and cause and effect methodologies.

This opened up space for subsequent scholars to use the study of society as an opportunity to defend the rights of citizens and explore the impact and implications for society of some of the practices taking place under the emergence of capitalism as a dominant social force.

A more people-centred approach to social research emerged that challenged the structural functionalism which had a tendency to ignore or set aside the devastating impact of these systems on the people within them. This space laid the foundation for the emergence and traction of the work of Weber, Simmel and other interpretive social scientists.

At the same time the structural functionalism of the approach put forward by Durkheim maintained a strong belief in the importance of the positivist empiricist approach that

allowed the social sciences to maintain a form of legitimacy within the academic field.

### **The Effect Of Meta-Theory On Social Change**

These struggles become even more important in that the dominance of each approach links to the validity of claims in relation to the agency of individuals and groups within society. In other words the dominant world-view affects the legitimacy of the views and actions of those who seek to argue or act for and against the nature of the world in which we live.

It is these underlying implications of meta-theories that make a deeper understanding of their impact on social research all the more critical. The manner in which research outputs are used or discarded beyond the academic realm to which they contribute is often dependent on the dominant paradigm in society and the particular paradigms of those who view these outputs.

The manner in which the nature of existence is understood and the understanding of the nature of knowledge thus condition social change processes that are based on research. It is these ontological and epistemological implications of meta-theory that make it all the more necessary to understand the differences contained within different meta-theoretical approaches.

In order to illustrate these differences this essay has set out to identify three main approaches through which it will discuss some of the apparent differences in social research approaches. Selecting the three approaches of positivism, interpretivism and radical conflict theory as the “main” approaches and deciding on the labels that they should be given is in itself an exercise that is implicitly informed by the meta-theoretical viewpoint of the researcher doing the selection.

Nevertheless this selection also assists in making distinctions that are related to the underlying implications contained within any approach to social research, and that are thus useful for a critical overview of the differences in meta-theoretical approach.

### **The Ontological And Epistemological Implications Of Meta-Theory**

Ontology and epistemology deal with social questions in relation to the nature of the world and how it can be explained and understood. These include the key questions in social research put forward by Burrell and Morgan (1979) namely whether reality is a given or a construct of the mind, whether one has to experience something in order to understand it, the related question of whether scientific method or direct experience are better forms of enabling understanding and finally the extent to which free will is possible in society, as opposed to the extent to which our actions are pre-determined by our environment.

These are posed as questions because there are no definitive conclusions on any of these issues in social research. Various scholars use combinations of answers to these questions as underlying assumptions that inform their particular approach to conducting research, in the construction of theories and in reaching conclusions as a result of their research.

Positivist, interpretivist and radical conflict theory approaches to social research have clearly distinct views on these questions and thus provide a useful foundation from which to build arguments around the differences that persist within meta-theories.

### **Positivism**

Positivists largely employ a functionalist paradigm, whereby society is understood as an organism with a set of functional discrete but interconnected parts, and where social behaviour is deterministic. This understanding is rooted in a strong belief in the methods of the natural sciences. For Comte (1856) this involved the establishment of laws, the use of experiment and observation and a belief that the subjective elements of social research could be carefully eliminated.

Central to the positivist approach is the need to employ empirical methods and statistics in the framing of hypotheses aimed at arriving at proofs. Positivism also stresses the need to eliminate philosophical concepts and argues strongly against notions of free will and individual agency.

### **Interpretivism**

Interpretivists, sometimes referred to as antipositivists, or non-positivists, are more phenomenological in approach. Interpretivism includes symbolic interactionists such as George Mead who place greater emphasis on the micro-interactions that take place in society. This implicitly counters the more deterministic understanding of social

behaviour. Subjectivity is viewed as largely unavoidable, and is seen as an integral part of understanding the research process. In keeping with this underlying paradigm qualitative research is seen as both valid and legitimate and an essential part of establishing real meaning in the pursuit of knowledge.

Max Weber (1922), often referred to as a founder of interpretivism, writing on the nature of social action, quoted by Runciman (1991:7) describes sociology as "... the science whose object is to interpret the meaning of social action and thereby give a causal explanation of the way in which the action proceeds and the effects which it produces. By 'action' in this definition is meant the human behaviour when and to the extent the agent or agents see it as subjectively meaningful."

Implicit in this approach is the underlying validity of the notion of individual agency and to some interpretivists a belief in the feasibility of free will. In this approach the individual is understood to define their own social reality and the reciprocity of the relationship between the individual and society is seen as fundamental. Symbolic meaning, and the significance attached to interpreting actions and events by individuals are seen as an important part of this process of constructing reality.

### **Conflict Theory**

Conflict theory is sometimes also referred to as radical conflict theory. Used in this sense conflict theory should not be confused with theories of conflict developed within the field of peace and conflict studies, but refers instead to a specific meta-theoretical understanding of the world we live in, with all of the ontological, epistemological and methodological implications ascribed to each of the other meta-theories outlined.

Closely associated with the work of Karl Marx conflict theory contains elements of determinism in that it proposes that the value systems of the individual are largely the consequence of the class position in society. Writing in *The Condition of the Working Class in England* Engels (2008:215), who co-authored the more famous *Communist Manifesto* together with Marx, aptly describes this understanding in his comparison between the slavery of serfdom and that of the working-man, "The modern bourgeois forces the working man to sell himself. The serf was the slave of the piece of land on which he was born, the working-man is the slave of his own necessities of life and of the money with which he has to buy them – both are *slaves of a thing*."

What sets conflict theory apart is that it is used specifically to advocate for radical social

change, and the inevitability and desirability of social transformation. Within this however the notion of social agency is disputed between the interpretivists such as Weber who may agree with some of the analysis of Marx and Engels but who argue that individuals have the ability to change society and Marx who argues that social structure limits or even dispels the notion of individual agency. In radical conflict theory free will is seen as a bourgeois construct designed to disguise the true nature of the manner in which capitalism enslaves the working class.

Implicitly rooted in qualitative and historical change research methods conflict theorists argue that radical social change is built into the nature of societal structures and that change will result from the political and economic crises when the contradictions these structures seek to contain inevitably explode.

### **Research Methodology And Approaches To Social Change**

As the preceding overview of social research approaches outlines there are some fundamental differences between approaches that contain important ideological variances on the nature of social science. These ideological variances, and the world views they contain affect the outcomes of the research process and the validity of the knowledge they contain. As Bhaskar (1998:25) points out “it is the nature of objects that determines their cognitive possibilities for us.” In selecting or becoming aware of the meta-theoretical assumptions behind the particular world view of a researcher it is easier to identify some of the implicit assumptions about the findings arrived at by a particular piece of research.

In other words if we know where a researcher is coming from we can expose the political and ideological intentions that are often invisible in the manner in which the research and its findings are presented. For a social activist or conflict transformation practitioner this can assist in ascertaining whether a particular piece of research, irrespective of the particular discipline from which it emanates, is likely to assist in sharpening and making more effective a particular strategy.

For practitioners and activists strategies are often developed on the basis of an analysis that is rooted in a multi-paradigmatic approach and informed by a particular theory of change. This understanding resonates well, with the critical realist perspective of Fleetwood and Ackroyd (2004:21) who suggest that meta-theory is a non-disciplinary tool that exists outside of any particular tool and that can be useful in informing a range

of methods.

Corbetta (2004:13) links methodology to epistemology and ontology and suggests that all three areas need to be carefully considered prior to undertaking any research. Corbetta contends that it is only by understanding these underlying meta-theoretical frameworks that an appropriate set of research tools can be developed, tools that are applicable to the particular research problem on which the researcher is focused.

In the view of Corbetta (2004:50) qualitative and quantitative research are not simply two different technical manifestations of what is substantially the same vision of the social world and of the purpose of research', they are the 'direct and logically consequential expression of two different epistemological visions, the methodological manifestation of two different paradigms which imply alternative conceptions of social reality, research objectives, the role of the researcher and technological instruments

While this diametrically opposing concept of qualitative and quantitative research would appear to have some grounding in the meta-theoretical frameworks with which they are associated there many scholars argue that both qualitative and quantitative methods can be utilised in research, without questioning the ontological or meta-theoretical implications of such an assertion. Neuman (2003) emphasises the benefits of combining various approaches, including the use of both qualitative and quantitative methods.

For many practitioners the pressure to demonstrate the results of a particular intervention often pushes for a more quantifiable demonstration of the impact of a particular project, even when the underlying assumptions of the project are clearly more interpretivist in their paradigmatic starting point. This dilemma is equally apparent in the formation of theories of conflict transformation and peacebuilding and are briefly explored in the section that follows.

### **The Theory of Conflict Transformation**

Within the field of conflict transformation there is a body of work that seeks to develop a theory of social conflict that acknowledges the validity of the need for structural transformation contained with radical conflict theory and the social activism agenda of interpretivists such as Weber. This body of work also sets out to provide practitioners with a useful framework for action at multiple levels that can harness the potential

positive elements contained within the structural tensions of an unequal society and prevent the potential for the destructive impact of violence that it often produces.

Lederach (2003) provides an example of a prominent scholar firmly located within this emerging science, who contributes consistently to furthering the development of a theory of conflict transformation. These contributions draw from multiple disciplines in their efforts to produce theory that is located within an interpretivist paradigm but that recognises also the validity of the radical restructuring and the shifts in power associated with conflict theorists.

The theory of conflict transformation associated with Lederach is concerned with deepening our understanding of the underlying meta-theoretical frameworks that define social conflict as the basis for an approach to engaging with conflict. Conflict transformation theory sets out an interdisciplinary approach to conflict that assimilates personal, relational and structural elements of conflict, into an integrated framework for understanding conflict and building peace.

Lederach builds from efforts by other conflict scholars who appear to draw from or at least acknowledge the validity of different meta-theoretical approaches. Deutsch attempts to straddle the meta-theoretical divide by making a distinction between “intrapyschic” conflicts, the internal conflicts that occur within individuals in society, and intergroup conflict. Deutsch places these group forms of conflict, including class conflict and race conflict, more firmly within the realm of social conflict. (Deutsch, 1973:33-72).

Azar (1989:6), in his influential proposition of the notion of protracted social conflict, stresses that there is a dynamic interplay of goals, actions and targets that form part of the multiple causes of conflict, and that conflict is affected by a range of sources and actors, including those that are considered to be both internal and external to a conflict.

Azar (1989:7-10) also makes the links between group identity formation, the desire for or denial of basic human needs, repressive or incompetent internal systems of governance and dependent international relations, and puts these forward as comprising the various factors that give rise to protracted conflict within a society.

According to Burton (1984:46) arguing against the concept of the ideal type in his essay on Dissent and Deviance:

“The individual is more and more being found to be, not the invented one, convenient to ... particular theories ...but a being who has certain potentialities that will be pursued, regardless of the consequences to society and self.” (Burton, 1984:46)

This assertion by Burton resonates with the ideas outlined by Azar and contributes to a set of interconnections that clearly inform the contribution that Lederach makes. The outline and explanation of the model of nested paradigms proposed by Lederach explores these interconnections in more detail.

In 'The Little Book of Conflict Transformation', Lederach (2003:8) talks of a set of three conflict transformation lenses. The first lens is for seeing the immediate situation, the second to seeks to understand and address what is happening at the level of the relationships involved and the third to enable us to create a platform to address the content, the context and the structure of the relationship. From this platform, Lederach argues, parties can begin to find a creative way forward.

In other works Lederach (1995b: 201) argues that the concept of conflict resolution "perhaps unintentionally ... carries the connotation of a bias toward 'ending' a given crisis or at least its outward expression, without being sufficiently concerned with the deeper structural, cultural, and long-term relational aspects of conflict".

Lederach places these interconnections between systems and relationships at the core of his contribution. Using a model of nested paradigms that draw from the work of Marie Dugan, Lederach (1997:80) provides an integrated framework for understanding conflict and building peace that links the immediate issues that manifest as crisis or visible conflict with the latent, deeper conflicts that lie within the relationships, subsystems and overarching systemic frameworks that form part of the context.

Highlighting the multi-layered interconnected and dynamic links between these personal, relational, systemic and structural factors enables Lederach to then suggest a nested time-frame of activities that can be carried out in response to the changes required at each level. Lederach (1997:79) suggests that we need two lenses, a structural and a procedural lens. These lenses, Lederach argues, work together to create an integrated framework:

"Structure suggests the need to think *comprehensively* about the affected population and *systematically* about the issues. Process underscores the necessity of thinking *creatively* about the *progression* of conflict and the *sustainability* of its transformation by *linking* roles, functions, and activities in an integrated manner." (Lederach, 1997:79)

Lederach (1997:82) takes this model of nested paradigms further in explaining that the concept of conflict transformation refers to change that works at both a descriptive and a prescriptive level. Descriptively it refers to the effects that social conflict brings about.

Prescriptively it refers to the deliberate interventions that are made in response to conflict, in an effort to direct the dynamics of conflict in a particular direction.

The ability of Lederach's contributions to illustrate the linkages between the multiple levels at which conflict impacts on society, and the interdependent and interconnected personal, relational and structural elements of society assists in deepening our understanding of conflict as a complex social phenomenon.

His arguments have the ability to link these theoretical models to concrete ideas and suggestions on engaging effectively with conflict. This adds a valuable element to the theoretical aspects of social conflict that enable us to break down the boundaries between academia and those that are active in the field.

As a proponent of the inevitability of conflict associated with the analysis of radical conflict theorists the work of Lederach is associated with the potential to make use of the opportunities for social change that form part of the constructive aspects of the tensions and conflicting elements of our society. In this sense Lederach enables us to view conflict not only as a force that has the potential to become destructive, but also as an opportunity for galvanizing societal forces behind a transformation agenda.

## **Conclusion**

Meta-theoretical frameworks that inform approaches to social research are aptly described as paradigms. The underlying assumptions contained within meta-theory, about the nature of society and the validity of knowledge have implications that go way beyond whether a researcher employs a particular research methodology. There are fundamental ideological and political implications of meta-theory, associated with how one understands power and the power relations between society and the individuals within it. These feed into the social agendas of the researcher and those who use their research in support of particular views and actions.

Acknowledging the starting point of any research endeavor, by explicitly seeking to outline these ideological value laden assumptions, would appear to be a less duplicitous way of maintaining the integrity of the research process. Efforts to mask ideological assumptions behind claims of objectivity and neutrality run the risk of at worst deliberately misleading and at best not fully informing the reader of the researcher and his or her intentions.

Within the field of conflict transformation and peacebuilding research, with its associated

emphasis on values and the explicit social change agenda it informs, this becomes all the more important. Efforts to build bridges across meta-theoretical differences hold some important opportunities for practitioners intent on forwarding a social change agenda that is both deep-rooted and sustainable.

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