

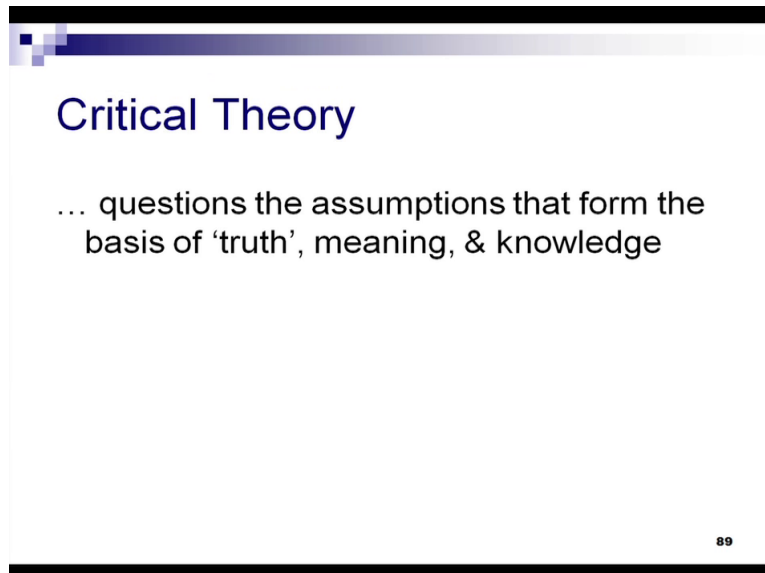
**Qualitative Research Methods**  
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**Vinod Gupta School of Management**  
**Indian Institute of Technology - Kharagpur**

**Lecture 13**  
**Criticisms of Interpretivism and Constructivism**

Welcome back to the NOC course titled Qualitative research methods; my name is Aradhna Malik, and I teach at the Indian Institute of Technology in Kharagpur and I'm helping you with this course and in this course we have been dealing with various paradigms of qualitative research, we have dealt with qualitative research, we have dealt with interpretivism, we have dealt with constructivism and today we will start with critical theory.

We will discuss what critical theories, how does it act as a foundation for the way we conduct research paradigms, I have explained to you earlier are, the structures in our minds the background from which we approach our research, the mindsets happy bring to our research and how are research shapes up as a result of these mindsets that we bring to our inquiry, so when we talk about critical theory, you know critical theory is one such mindset that we bring to the inquiry we conduct in qualitative research. Okay.

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**Critical Theory**

... questions the assumptions that form the  
basis of 'truth', meaning, & knowledge

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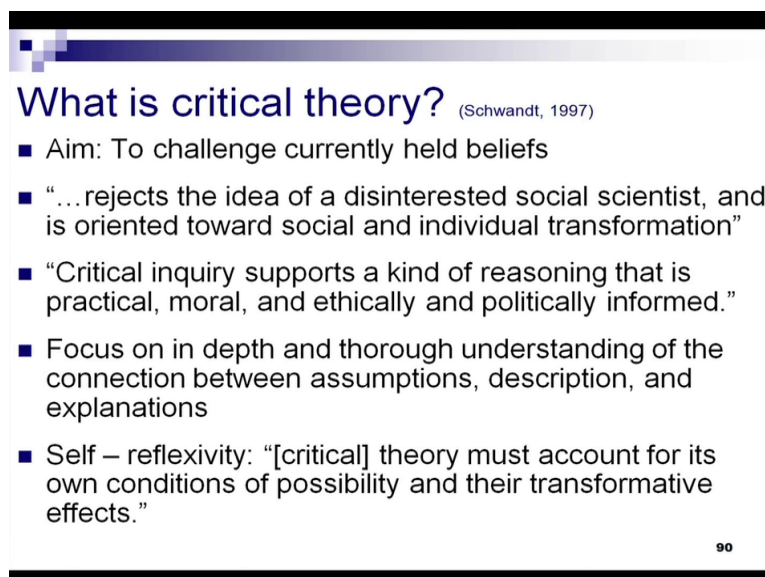
At the very core critical theory questions the assumptions that form the basis of truth, meaning and knowledge, critical theory it critiques, it tries to find out how these decisions regarding the most appropriate meaning were made, it questions what the basis was for the

arrival at certain meaning, certain interpretations, certain constructions, that is what critical theory at the very core does that's why it's called critical theory.

So we approach a problem with a an inherent need to understand why and how relationships that are assumed to be existent, that are assumed to be true, are being assumed to be true that is an example of critical theory, so and we do you know this will unfold as we go through this lecture, but when we talk about critical theory, we are trying to find out why we make decision that we do regarding the meaning of the phenomena that we inquire into.

So we try to gain a thorough understanding of the context that these were decisions made in and then we question the assumptions that we started out with, that is what critical theory does.

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**What is critical theory?** (Schwandt, 1997)

- Aim: To challenge currently held beliefs
- "...rejects the idea of a disinterested social scientist, and is oriented toward social and individual transformation"
- "Critical inquiry supports a kind of reasoning that is practical, moral, and ethically and politically informed."
- Focus on in depth and thorough understanding of the connection between assumptions, description, and explanations
- Self – reflexivity: "[critical] theory must account for its own conditions of possibility and their transformative effects."

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What is critical theory? the aim of critical theory is to challenge currently held beliefs, not for the sake of challenging them but for the sake of developing a deeper understanding into the phenomena we have always held's to be true or what into the day the meaning that we have always believed in. Critical theories "rejects the idea of a disinterested social scientist and his oriented towards social and individual transformation."

So critical theory goes a step further into the process of inquiry and we were talking about constructivism yesterday and in constructivism we layout, we lay our biases, our assumptions, our background, our mind set on the table and then we save this is wrong, this

perspective I am going to inquire about this problem and critical theory goes one step further and says we are all merest in a plethora of perspective.

So why are you choosing perspective A, why not perspective B, that is what critical theory does, so it reject the idea of a disinterested social scientist, it rejects the idea of a so-called objective interpretation and interpretation that would be the same irrespective of who interpreted the information that one was analyzing, it rejects the idea of a person of an inquirer who goes into a situation without being connected to it and is oriented towards social and individual transformation.

The idea behind critical theory is that we understand the assumptions, that we are basing our decisions on, if we gain a thorough knowledge of or if we are able to capture the essence of the contexts that we are coming from, we will be able to do something about the situation that we are inquiring into, so the goal is to understand the situation that the inquiry is taking place in and for the purpose of using this inquiry towards personal and social or social.

And individual transformation, that is what critical theory does. We question everything why? Why am I going in as a? You know, why is my relationship as the observer with the observed A? Why is the relationship not B? that is what critical theory does, okay. "Critical enquiry supports a kind of reasoning that is practical, moral and ethically and politically informed,"

So we take all perspectives, when we talk about critical theory, we say the phenomenon that is being observed is immersed in a practical context, it is immersed in a moral context, it is invest in an ethical context, it is immersed in a political context, it is immersed in a social context and we try and find out why it is so and how all of these different, these complexities of interactions between these different context are affecting the phenomenon that we are studying.

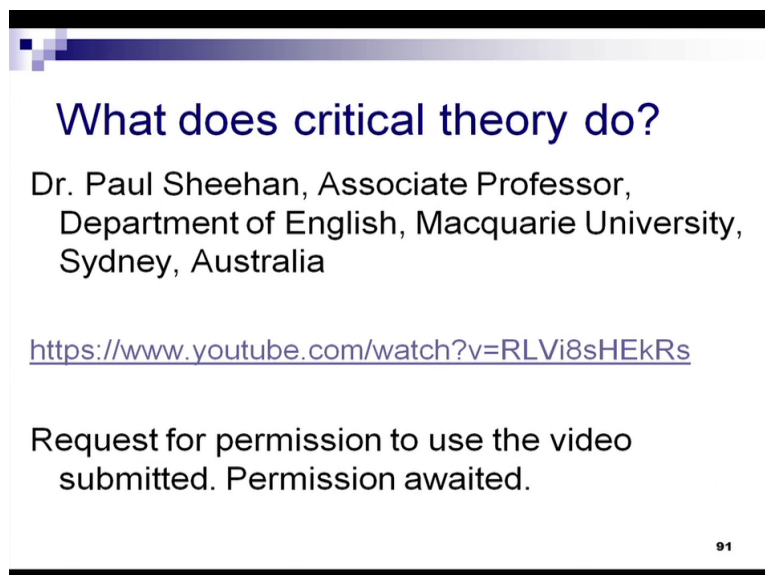
And then we after we understand this, we try and you know, we make sense of the phenomenon that you are studying in connection with these intricacies that we are dealing with. Critical theory focuses on in depth and thorough understanding of the connection between assumptions, description and explanations, so critical theory tries to understand how our assumptions are tied with a description and how these assumptions and descriptions.

And the relationship between these assumptions and description is tied with the explanations that we give and the interpretations that we derived, from the phenomenon that we are inquiring into. So the focus is on a thorough understanding, is questioning everything with the purpose of understanding or developing and deeper a more significant more robust meaning, from the phenomenon that one is inquiring into, okay.

Self reflexivity is another characteristic or that is another aspect of critical theory, “critical theory must account for us and conditions of possibility and their transformative effects.” So there is self reflexivity, when we talk about critical theory, we are talking about constant feedback from the phenomenon that we are studying, with the purpose of using this feedback from the phenomenon that is being studied.

To help us clarify or develop a better understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied, so you form an opinion and then they be observed says no, it's not like that and then you go back and then we were discussing something similar. But then in constructivism, yesterday when we talk about critical theory, we questioned the questions that are asked, why am I asking this question to find out more about this phenomenon, why not something else and it is self reflexive, there is constant modification, constant evolution of our understanding of a particular phenomenon.

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**What does critical theory do?**

Dr. Paul Sheehan, Associate Professor,  
Department of English, Macquarie University,  
Sydney, Australia

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLVi8sHEkRs>

Request for permission to use the video  
submitted. Permission awaited.

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What is critical theory do? Now here I would like to share with you a four and a half minute video recorded by Professor Paul Sheehan who is an associate professor in the department of English, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. I have requested for permission to use this

video I am still waiting for that permission, but the link is here I believe the video was recorded about five or six years ago and Dr. Sheehan talks about what critical theory is.

And you know he describes it in such a wonderful manner I did not want to paraphrase it and you know convey my understanding of his understanding to you, so I am taking you to the video.

### **“Professor Dr. Paul Sheehan Video Starts”**

Okay, well question as to what is critical theory actually is? I think, the good way to approach it is by looking at it in comparison to what came before, be it biographical studies of literature that essentially means you are looking at a text from the point of view that the author, everything that is in the text, deliberately put there by the author, so if we study the author, if we find out about his or her life, what he or she did, that will give the clue as to the meaning of the text.

It all about the meaning essentially criticism before theory, now what theory does is, it comes and along and says there are lot of factors that impinge on a text and there are certain assumptions in place, pre theory criticism is mainly concerned with value, with you know what's good about this text, why should we be studying it, so value and meaning, are the two key words their theory says.

There are lots of assumptions in place before a text even gets written, assumptions in the plot on the part of the people making the judgments that this is a great work or a near great work and so forth so theory is more stepping back from the position of criticism and it's a saying what are the assumptions in place? How is it texts produced? Okay, it comes from an author but an author doesn't have the final say over the meanings in the text they can come from.

A lot of different directions theory is really looking at these very various other directions, I guess the overall the broad category for that will be context, what is the context? Whereby a work comes to be produced, so it's looking at things like history, it's looking at often at economic questions, another big word here is power one of the criticisms that's always leveled at theory, is that theory post-modernism, whatever you want it doesn't believe in truth, doesn't think there is such a thing as truth.

That's a little bit extreme, that's a distortion of what theory is about, theory is more it takes the point of view of those who claim to possess truth, why are they doing this? What's at stake here? So truth for a theorist always tied in with the issues of power and relations. Theory is really about untangling those kinds of issues, what are the power relations here, when someone claims to possess the truth.

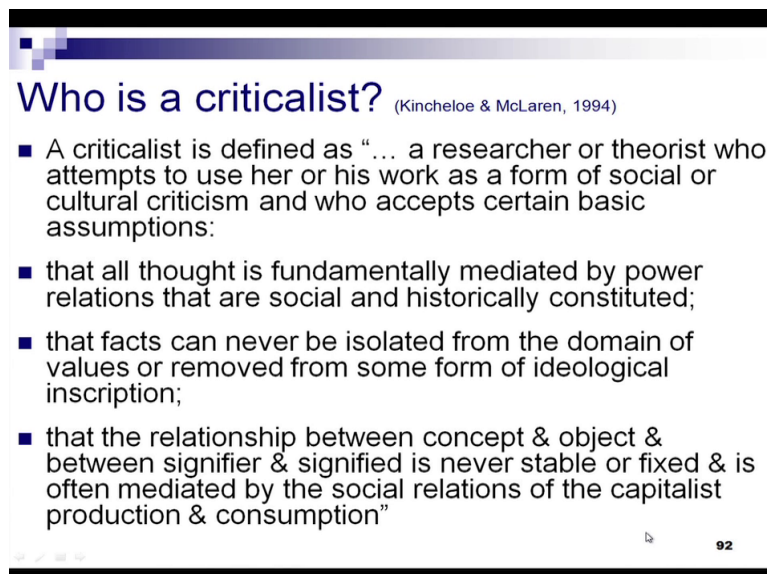
So it's not quite true to say that theory is against truth, it's more against what is being done in the name of truth, it also talks about the difficulty obtaining truth, in that sense it's a kind of ongoing criticism of human beings ability to possess anything absolute, essences that's another way of talking about the absolute, what is absolute essence of something, it's saying these are metaphysical questions, that us as fallible limited human beings don't quite have access to, when we do presume to have knowledge of some kind of absolute.

We are effectively taking the place of God, we are assuming a God's eye view of something which we don't have, we have our various perspectives on things, it doesn't mean, the pursuit of truth is, is not a worthwhile project, yes we need to greater accuracy in our understandings, our knowledge of the world, but we can't assume that, we can have access to the mind of God.

### **“Professor Dr. Paul Sheeman Video Ends”**

Okay, that was Dr. Paul Sheeman's description of critical theory, what critical theory does?

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**Who is a criticalist?** (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994)

- A criticalist is defined as "... a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions:
- that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted;
- that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription;
- that the relationship between concept & object & between signifier & signified is never stable or fixed & is often mediated by the social relations of the capitalist production & consumption"

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Who is a criticalist? So a criticalist is defined as "a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic

assumptions” that a criticalist is defined as a researcher, a person who attempts to use his or her as a form of social or cultural criticism, and attempts to use her work as a form of social, theorists who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions.

And the assumptions that a criticalist works under our first, that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations, that are social and historically constituted. So when we talk about a, what a criticalist inquires into, the criticalist assume that power relations will exist in the phenomenon that is being observed, that the phenomenon that is being observed will have a historical background, will be enmershed, will be entrenched in power relations that have been constructed historically and socially.

The second option here is that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription. And you know when we talk about pure science, when we talk about objectivity in research, we say no, everything should be looked at from a very distant perspective, we need to see phenomena as they occur, you know there are variables that we can control, there are you know so there are in independent variables, there are dependent variables that are influenced by other aspects in the environment.

And things that can and cannot be control, but then when we talk about critical theory we are talking about accepting that the phenomenon that is being inquired into or the object of inquiry cannot be separated, cannot be distanced, cannot be divorced from its historical, social background, cannot be studied you know as distanced or as separate from the power relations that it is a part of.

So there are some power relations playing part in the existence of the phenomenon, they are constantly shaping the phenomenon of the object of inquiry and that is taken as a given. Then that facts can sorry, then we were talking about sorry, that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or remove from some form of ideological inscription, so phenomena occur in a, you know they occur within a realm of values, within a realm of ideology.

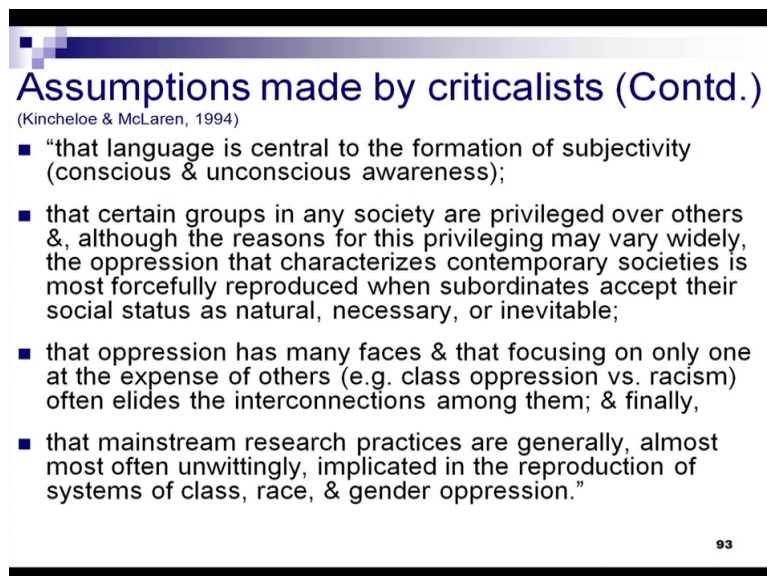
They occur as part of his social milieu that defines what is and what should be done, and what is ideal and what is good and what is right and within these different influences

phenomenon take place and critical theory accept these relationships with all of this phenomena in the environment of the observed. That the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed.

And is often mediated by the social relations of the capitalist production and consumption. So with critical theorist also assume that the observer and observed are not disconnected and the relationship between the observer and observed is constantly evolving even when the observer is being observed, sorry when the observed is being observed by the observer, the relationship between the two is constantly changing.

And the change in this relationship is one a result of the observer position as an observer. And to it is also a result of the social relations that are mediated, you know that the social relations that exist in that situation. Okay.

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### Assumptions made by criticalists (Contd.)

(Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994)

- "that language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious & unconscious awareness);
- that certain groups in any society are privileged over others &, although the reasons for this privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable;
- that oppression has many faces & that focusing on only one at the expense of others (e.g. class oppression vs. racism) often elides the interconnections among them; & finally,
- that mainstream research practices are generally, almost most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, & gender oppression."

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Then another assumption here is that language is central to the formation of subjectivity, conscious and unconscious awareness, language without words we cannot understand what is going on, so words play and a very, very significant role in this observer observed relationship and also in way the assumptions are formed, in the way the relationships between the observer and observed are studied, in the way inquiry is conducted.

So it is central to the formation of conscious and unconscious subjectivity, how we perceive things is dependent on the language we use, to form the schema in our minds, so to form the schema in our brains, we need language, we have representation and language plays a very,



very important role in helping us understand for mental pictures, from mental representations of whatever we inquire into, okay so the formation and the way person A, formed a picture of what is they observed or what is being inquired into, will be different from the way person B forms that picture.

And these two pictures will be contingent upon the language that is being used to form these and I'm using the word picture quite loosely here, we are not talking about images, we are talking more about perceived concepts in the mind and these perceived concepts our, you know whatever we grasp the meaning that we draw from the situations that we study and they are contingent upon the words that used to define these or the words that we used to understand these meanings and store them in our repertoire, okay.

The next assumption is that certain groups in any society asked our privilege over others and although the reasons for the privileging may vary widely, the oppression that characterizes contemporary society is most forcefully reproduced when subordinate accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable. So the power relations, the position one acquires within a context are also assumed by the critical researcher.

And critical researcher assume that the whenever a slice of the society is being inquired into, there will be some sections of the society that are privileged and there will be some sections of the society that are not so privileged, that are being you know that are being, that are subordinate to the privileged groups and this subordination or super ordination are a given in a social situation they are natural.

And they are necessary and they are inevitable, they will be found and the phenomenon that are taking place that we are inquiring into a social researchers as qualitative researchers, will have to be conducted or will have to be studied sorry the phenomena will have to be studied, knowing that these power relationships exist. Then that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others often eludes it should be eludes.

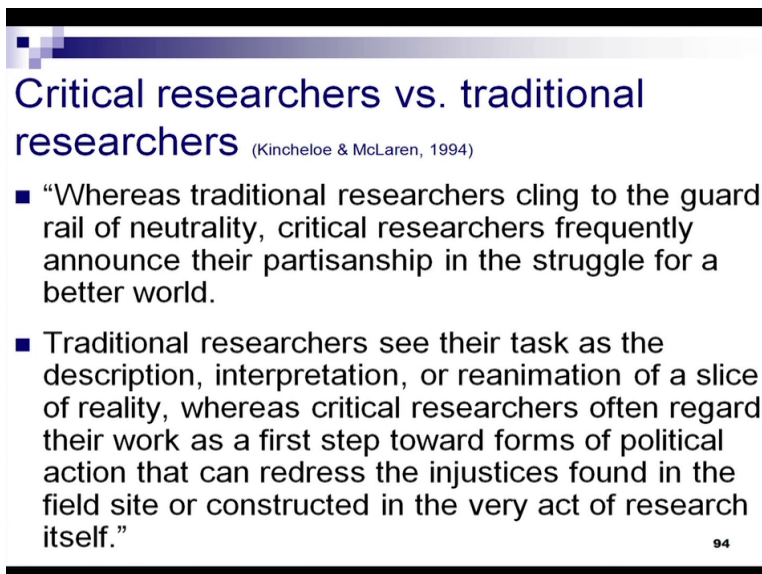
It shouldn't be elides, I'm sorry for the spelling mistake, often eludes the interconnections among them, so I am sorry it should be elicits not elides, I have made a mistake here, that oppression has many faces and that focusing on only one at the expense of others of an elicits

the interconnections among them. So when we focus on, you know when oppression exists in society and when we focus on one aspect of this oppression at the expense of the oppressed.

Then that elicits or that brings out the interconnections between the oppressor and the oppressed or the aspects of the phenomena that are being studied, that seem to be more important, or that seem to be overpowering the ones that are not being focused on and these relationships come to the fore only when we are not paying equal attention to all aspects of the inquiry that we are conducting.

That mainstream research practices are generally almost most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race and gender oppression, and research practices are also to a great extent influenced by the systems, the social systems of race, class and oppression, when we talk about critical theory, we take all these factors into account and these are the assumptions that criticalist make.

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**Critical researchers vs. traditional researchers** (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994)

- “Whereas traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world.
- Traditional researchers see their task as the description, interpretation, or reanimation of a slice of reality, whereas critical researchers often regard their work as a first step toward forms of political action that can redress the injustices found in the field site or constructed in the very act of research itself.”

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Now what is the difference between critical researchers and traditional researchers, traditional researchers cling to the guard rail of neutrality, traditional researchers say that we are neutral, we are studying a phenomenon the way it is happening, we are studying a phenomenon from an objective perspective, so we are neutral, we are not biased, we are not bringing our own feelings, our own mind set into the inquiry.

Critical researcher frequently announce that partisanship in the struggle for a better world, critical researcher say we are human beings, we will have assumptions, we are going to be

rooted in social, historical, political, economic, emotional contexts and this is what you are bringing to the table, within this context we are still conducting an inquiry, these contexts are likely to influence what we are doing, but still whatever we are doing will lead to a better world so that is the difference.

Critical researchers say we are going to question the assumptions, in order to help in order to facilitate the production of system or the creation of structures that will eventually benefit the world that they are occurring in. Traditional researchers see the task as description, interpretation or reanimation of a slice of reality, whereas critical researchers often regarded their work as a first step towards the forms of political action.

That can redress the injustice is found in the field side or constructed in the very act of research itself. So traditional researchers say that we are going to describe, we are going to interpret, we are going to reproduce, we create a slice of life as we see, in an attempt to understand what is going on and Critical researchers say we will do something about whatever we are seeing, we want to know why whatever we are seeing is the way it is.

And we would like to take a step further and try and find out, what is it that we can do to make the situation better that can address injustices that can make the situation that we are studying better.

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### Critical researchers vs. traditional researchers (Contd.) (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994)

- “Critical researchers enter into an investigation with their assumptions on the table, so no one is confused concerning the epistemological & political baggage they bring with them to the research site.”
- Characterized by the ability to challenge assumptions and reflexively adjust these assumptions based on their contextual fit
- “Critical researchers maintain that the meaning of any experience will depend on the struggle over the interpretation & definition of that experience.”  
(Giroux, 1983; McLaren, 1986; Weiler, 1988, in Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994)

Critical researchers enter into an investigation with their assumptions on the table, so no one is confused concerning the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them to the

research site. Critical researcher say this is who we are, this is a we are coming from, this is what is influencing us, this is what we are assuming within all of this we are going to study, whatever we are studying and we will explain whatever we are studying in light of whatever baggage we are bringing to the table.

Characterized critical research is characterized by a critical theory, is characterized by the ability to challenges assumptions and reflexively adjust these assumptions based on their contextual fit. So when we inquire from the paradigm of critical theory, we assume that we are, we develop an ability to challenge the assumptions and reflexively adjust these assumptions based on how they fit into the context that is being studied.

Critical research is maintained that the meaning of any experience will depend on the struggle over the interpretation and definition of that experience. So this is the last point here, where you know critical researchers accept that the meaning that is drawn from an experience is going to depend on how the meaning was interpreted what confounding factors there were, while this meaning was being interpreted, what was giving shape to this meaning.

And the definition of the experience that led to the interpretation of this meaning, so it's everything surrounding the understanding of a particular phenomenon, that is what is critical research is and that is what critical researcher do. That is all we have time for this lecture will continue with some more inputs on critical theory in the next lecture, thank you very much for this thing.