CRITICAL HERMENEUTICS: A CHALLENGE TO THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION

Critical theory is a powerful though ignored perspective for studying organizations. While it exists on the fringes of organization theory due to its widely contested meanings and interpretations, this paper argues that it becomes more useful as an epistemological and ontological orientation to business studies. The purpose of this paper is to provide insights on how hermeneutics can be a potentially useful interpretive approach in organizational studies. Hermeneutics is an interpretive methodology that has to do with interpretation of texts. In its earliest form it was a philosophical approach towards the construction of knowledge.

This paper draws upon critical theory to locate critical hermeneutics as an interpretive philosophy in organizational communication. First, it locates the hermeneutic tradition of interpretation in the broad domain of what is termed as organizational communication. Second, it describes the debate on hermeneutics as a theory or a philosophy. This section centrally draws upon a series of debates between Ricouer, Gadamer, and Habermas. In the third section, the paper explains how critical hermeneutics informs research methodology. It argues that a critical approach to interpretivism warrants greater reflexivity as it implores a researcher to search beyond the stated or implied meaning provided by lay accounts. This approach also becomes powerful to study phenomenon such as communication and rhetoric in organizations.

Hermeneutics as an interpretive philosophy is cynical about the truthfulness of the data. It argues that communication might be moderated by (1) the notion of power; (2) the need for norms of propriety in our communication; and (3) communication by itself is merely an interpretation of an event. Hermeneutics is therefore a methodology that calls for a heightened self-understanding. The strengths of a hermeneutic perspective lie in its prejudiced insights that the struggle for power is a central reality of organizational and social life.

However, this approach has several shortcomings. First, hermeneutics as a philosophical methodology is quite fragmented and unspecific. Second, it might have an overdeveloped notion of power and this at times implicitly forces a researcher to even think that such power can be challenged (Jacques, 1991: 333). Third, it does not explain what happens when a conflict of interpretations takes place? Fourth, as a researcher how does one actually classify whether a prejudice is legitimate or illegitimate. Fifth, it is quite possible that the people who are assumed to be oppressed and disfranchised might in fact be more powerful than their position might suggest. And sixth, the role of a researcher as an advocate of change is quite a debatable one.