The ethical nature of critical research in information systems

Bernd Carsten Stahl
Faculty of Computer Science and Engineering, Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester LE1 9BH, UK, email: bstahl@dmu.ac.uk

Abstract. Critical research in information systems is based on and inspired by ethics and morality. In order to support this proposition, this paper will suggest a way of classifying critical research that differs from definitions common IS research. According to the current definition, research is critical when it is motivated by the intention to change social realities and promote emancipation. Based on this critical intention, critical research is furthermore characterized by critical topics, critical theories, and critical methodologies. Using these criteria of critical research, the paper argues that critical research is ethical in nature. To support this view, the paper introduces the concepts of ethics and morality by analysing two traditions of moral philosophy, here called the ‘German tradition’ and the ‘French tradition’. Using three examples of current critical research in information systems, the paper will show that ethics and morality strongly influence critical intention, topics and theories. Having thus established the ethical nature of critical research, the paper concludes by discussing the weaknesses of critical research from the point of view of ethics and morality.

Keywords: ethics, morality, critical research, Habermas, Foucault

INTRODUCTION

Critical research in information systems (IS) is based on and closely linked to ethics and morality. This is the central proposition that this paper will develop. Not all critical researchers will immediately agree with this statement. Part of the reason for such disagreement is the unclear nature of the concepts of ‘critical research’, as well as ‘ethics’. To overcome this problem, the paper will suggest a reformulation of the classical definition of critical research. According to this new definition, critical research can be characterized through its critical intention, critical topics, critical theories and critical methodologies. All of these are closely linked to ethics. In order to explain what we mean by ethics, this paper introduces issues of moral philosophy by distinguishing between the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’. This distinction is then discussed in two different traditions, named according to their geographical origin, the
German and the French tradition. Discussing these two traditions allows identifying some pertinent characteristics of ethics and morality, as well as several problems linked to the terms.

Based on these definitions, the paper establishes a close link between ethics, morality and critical research in IS. This is done by analyzing each of the four main characteristics of critical research: intention, topics, theories and methodologies, with regard to their relationship to ethics and morality. This analysis will allow the conclusion that critical research is indeed ethical research. The distinction of the terms ethics and morality also allows us to identify problems of the ethical underpinnings of critical research. These are discussed using examples of critical research in IS from the current literature. The conclusion outlines some of these problems and puts forward the argument that critical research requires explicit attention to ethical questions if it is to become more successful.

The contribution of the paper is a clarification of the concept and the ethical nature of critical research in information systems (CRIS). The idea of CRIS, which has been discussed for over 20 years, is currently attracting a growing amount of attention among IS scholars as evidenced by a number of conference tracks and special journal issues, such as this one. One central problem of this raised level of attention is that there is a decreasing agreement on what it means to do critical research (cf. Brooke, 2002a). The paper addresses this problem by suggesting a different definition of critical research. This definition is then used to argue that ethics is an intrinsic feature of critical research. Acknowledging the ethical nature of CRIS is important if critical researchers want to avoid inconsistencies in their research approaches and if critical research is to have the results it promises to have. The content of the paper is therefore of high relevance for critical IS scholars. It should also prove to be of interest for other IS scholars because it allows a broader understanding of the critical approach as well as ethical issues in IS.

TOWARDS A REDEFINITION OF CRIS

Critical research in the field of IS is usually described as an alternative research approach next to positivist and interpretivist research (Trauth, 2001). This is based on Orlikowski’s & Baroudi’s (1991) seminal paper, which was built on Chua’s (1986) work. This, in turn, can best be understood as a reaction to the dichotomous categorization of social science research by Burrell & Morgan (1979). Critical research in this context is a paradigm or a world view that consists of beliefs about the physical and social reality (ontology, social relations and human rationality), knowledge (epistemology and methodology), and the relationship between theory and practice. The concept of ‘paradigm’ was originally popularized in academia by Kuhn (1996). When it is used in IS research, however, it tends to rely on Burrell & Morgan’s (1979) understanding of the term. These two are arguably very different types of paradigms, which leads to some confusion. In this paper, I will follow Orlikowski & Baroudi (1991, p. 2), for whom the paradigm debate refers to a ‘consistent philosophical world view’. The value of this view is that it allows discussing alternatives to the prevailing paradigm of positivist research. At the
same time, it is misleading as it implies that the three paradigms are mutually exclusive and comprehensive. Neither implication is correct. There are large areas of overlap between individual aspects of the paradigms. Critical research, for example, can be based on a realist/positivist ontology, as well as on a constructionist/interpretivist ontology. At the same time, there are also possible approaches that are not covered. A further discussion of the relationship of critical research with other ‘paradigms’ would go beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth noticing, however, that there are considerable similarities between interpretive and critical research, which explains why some of the principles of interpretive field (Klein & Myers, 1999, p. 72) research are equally applicable to critical research. The overlap between the different paradigms explains why some researchers speak of ‘critical interpretive research’ (Pozzebon, 2004, p. 285). I have discussed the relationship of critical research with other ‘paradigms’ in more depth elsewhere (Niehaves & Stahl, 2006), showing that a definition of CRIS independent of the ‘paradigm’ debate is necessary.

In order to avoid the problems raised by the view of critical research as a paradigm, I propose the definition of critical research as research characterized by an intention to change the status quo, overcome injustice and alienation, and promote emancipation. This is the heart of critical research, and it allows the identification of further characteristics, such as typical topics, theories and methodologies. I wish to emphasize that this definition is not the only one possible. Harvey (1990, p. 19), for example, has suggested the characteristics of ‘abstraction, totality, essence, praxis, ideology, history and structure’. These different definitions should be seen as complementary. Harvey’s (1990) view, for example, reflects my emphasis on the critical intention when he says that ‘Critical social research includes an overt political struggle against oppressive social structures’ (p.20). The added value of the definition proposed in this paper is that it offers a different account of critical research and allows an identification of the close link between CRIS and ethics.

Furthermore, the paper should not be misunderstood to imply that CRIS is the only way to pay attention to ethics when doing research in IS. I believe that one can make a strong argument that interpretive research is built on ethical assumptions (Stahl, 2005). And it seems likely that a similar argument, albeit from a very different position, could also be made for mainstream positivist research. However, the current paper concentrates exclusively on the critical approach.

**Critical intention**

The most important characteristic of critical research is its critical intention, which means the fact that critical researchers aim at initiating and promoting change. This is the heart of Chua’s and Orlikowski and Baroudi’s claim that critical research is a third way, next to positivist and interpretivist research. Both of the latter research approaches can be purely descriptive, whereas critical research aspires to change social realities. As we will see later, this normative characteristic is closely linked with critical topics, theories and methodologies. It is based on the Marxist view of history as a history of class struggles and a negative perception of capitalism (Marx, 1969; Hirschheim & Klein, 1989; Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991). The injustices
and inequities inherent in given social structures require the researcher to search for better, freer, less alienating and more emancipated ones. Few critical IS researchers would call themselves Marxist, but most share a suspicion that current social arrangements are not in everyone’s interest and need to be improved.

The critical intention thus mirrors Marx’s (1964, p. 141) view that philosophy (or – in our case – IS research) has always just interpreted the world differently, while it is important to change it. Critical research thus seeks knowledge, but not for its own sake. Critical research wants to be practical, but in a specific way (Walsham, 2005), namely to change social practices in such a way that the negative effects of the way society and organizations are run will be minimized. ‘The critical social theory approach was never intended to be an abstract philosophy. It was to bring about real change in the human condition’ (Ngwenyama, 1991, p. 276). Critical research will therefore rarely aim at improving managerial tools or practices for the sake of efficiency. Instead, it tries to keep the bigger picture of the role of the economic system and individuals in society in mind.

The critical intention is central to critical research because it influences all other aspects. Most of the defining features of critical research found in the literature are consequences of the intention. An important example of this is reflexivity, which is often seen as a central aspect (cf. Alvesson & Willmott, 1992; Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001a; Waring, 2004). Reflexivity means that critical researchers are willing to be critical about their own assumptions, beliefs and ideologies, and render these open to debate. If the intention is to promote emancipation, then the researcher needs to allow a critique of her own viewpoint that may preclude successful emancipation from the research subject’s point of view. Similarly, reflexivity requires the researcher to consider whether the aim of the research is realistic. Research with well-meaning emancipatory aims that stands no chance of making a practical difference thus cannot claim to be critical. This raises a range of epistemological and political problems that exceed the limits of this paper, but should be seen as important problems that critical researchers need to consider.

**Critical topics**

On the basis of the critical intention to change society or parts thereof, critical research is interested in those areas where our social structures are in need of attention. These areas are what I call ‘critical topics’. Critical topics can thus be defined as objects of research that facilitate furthering the critical intention. This definition includes and goes beyond Harvey’s (1990) suggested topics of class, gender and race. Because of the importance of power structures for the individual and his or her ability to live a life according to their own criteria, power is probably the most important critical topic (Brooke, 2002b). Much critical IS research concentrates on the situation of the individual. A central critical topic is therefore individual empowerment. Critical IS researchers discuss how IS can disempower people, and how they can be used to empower individuals (Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1988; Brooke, 2002a). Empowerment can play a role wherever IS are used, including traditional profit-oriented capitalist companies, virtual organizations (Levary & Niederman, 2003) or educational institutions...
(Dawson & Newman, 2002). For the critical researcher, those uses of IS that exploit, dominate, oppress or disempower people are misuses, and the aim is to ‘promote liberating and empowering IS design and use’ (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001a). Following the Marxist tradition, critical research is worried about the alienating effects of current labour relations (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991; Varey et al., 2002).

Another critical topic, closely related to and sometimes used synonymously with empowerment, is emancipation. Emancipation is one of the most frequently cited topics of critical IS research (Klein & Myers, 1999; Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001b; Ulrich, 2001a; Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2002; McAulay et al., 2002). Capitalist work structures not only enslave and alienate labourers, but they also systematically take away their ability to develop and prosper. Emancipation is a slightly wider concept than empowerment as it needs to address the question of how the individual’s abilities can be developed and its potential achieved. Emancipation looks into psychological as well as organizational issues (Hirschheim & Klein, 1994). Related concepts are authenticity (Probert, 2002a) and autonomy, which also describe the individuals’ ability to interact with their environment. While the primary interest of emancipation is to aid the individual in achieving his or her potential, it has also been framed in terms of common interest. A workforce consisting of empowered and emancipated individuals can achieve better results, and is thus in the interest of the employer (Mumford, 2003). This interpretation relies on the belief of a conformity of goals between capital and labour, however, and is therefore contentious in critical research.

Apart from the fundamental topics of power, empowerment and emancipation, critical research is also interested in areas of IS where these basic questions lead to practical consequences. Among the topics for CRIS, one can find problems ranging from the organizational level, such as failure of IS (Introna, 1997; Doherty & King, 2001), to the level of society, such as gender and discrimination (Adam, 2001; Robinson & Watson, 2001), and international problems, such as access and the digital divide (Kvasny & Trauth, 2003; Tavani, 2003).

Furthermore, there are topics related to the underlying social structures, which tend to be critical of capitalism and demonstrate the problems resulting from capitalist social and economic structure. Some authors are interested in the fundamental contradictions and conflicts within capitalist society (Saravanamuthu, 2002a), but the majority of scholars interested in this area of critical topics look at consequences of capitalism, such as the commodification of information (Floridi, 1999; Ladd, 2000), privacy (Davison et al., 2003), labour (Giddens, 1984; Knights & Willmott, 1999) or humans and their activity in general (Klein & Lyytinen, 1985; Brooke, 2002b).

Finally, there is the critical topic of how capitalism and its alienating conditions came to power and retain a high level of legitimacy. This question is closely linked to the relationship of economic practice and its scientific justification. The underlying problem here seems to be a certain kind of purposive rationality, which is widespread in IS and thus constitutes another topic of interest for critical research (White, 1985; Hirschheim & Newman 1991; Wastell 1996; Wynn 2001; Cecez-Kecmanovic et al. 2002; McAulay et al., 2002; Saravanamuthu 2002a,b; Varey et al., 2002; Hirschheim & Klein, 2003).
Critical theories

Interest in the critical topics is usually linked to preferences for certain theories. Theory can be understood as ‘a way of seeing and thinking about the world rather than an abstract representation of it’ (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 37). Critical research uses the term ‘theory’ in such a wide sense, rather than the narrow empiricist understanding that is prevalent in positivist IS or business research, as exemplified by Bacharach (1989). The reason for the importance of theory for CRIS is that the choice of theory influences the type of research topic and methodology. The theory also has a large influence on possible conclusions and practical outcomes. As indicated in the discussion of the critical intention, the historical roots of critical research are to be found in the Marxist critique of capitalism. Consequentially, many critical theories go back to Marxist theories, to historical or dialectical materialism (Brooke, 2002a). Critical thoughts aimed at opposing oppression can of course be found in pre-Marx philosophy, including ‘Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Saint-Simon . . .’ (Harvey, 1990, p. 14). And the development of critical theory took place in discourse with other philosophical streams, including Nietzschian nihilism (an important influence on Foucault, cf. Mahon, 1992) or phenomenology, which is relevant for the later Habermas. Other philosophical roots can be found in Kant’s call for enlightenment (Kant, 1985), which can be seen as a precursor and starting point of the critical interest in emancipation. One should see, however, that – at least in continental European philosophy – critical theory means theory whose development takes its historical starting point from Marx. According to Harvey (1990), this close link to Marxism is not given in the Anglo-American understanding of the term, which is more closely linked to pragmatism.

The most prominent representatives of critical theory in the 20th century were located in the Frankfurt School, whose main protagonists were Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Bloch and others (cf. Wiggershaus, 2001). While the original scholars of the Frankfurt School are sometimes cited in IS research, most critical research in IS referring to it emphasizes the works of Karl-Otto Apel and, more importantly, of Jürgen Habermas. In critical IS research, Habermas’s Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) plays a central role (Habermas, 1981). The basis of this use of TCA in IS was laid down by Lyytinen & Klein (1985) and Lyytinen & Hirschheim (1988). The Habermasian framework, which combines a wide range of philosophical traditions, is critical in that it allows the questioning of validity claims and requires a rational justification of such claims. That means that it can be used to elicit hidden assumptions, ideologies and other bases of suppression, alienation and power inequalities. It is based on the counterfactual idea of an ideal discourse situation where there are no differences in power or ability to communicate, and where only the ‘forceless force of the better argument’ determines which validity claims are upheld (Hirschheim & Klein, 1989). The TCA thus allows the description of how meaning and social reality are created. At the same time, it facilitates the critical intention because it contains a model (the ideal discourse situation) according to which not only social structures but also IS can be modelled (Lyytinen & Hirschheim, 1988; Ulrich, 2001a).

While there seems to be a strong reliance on Habermas and his theories in current critical IS research, there are also other approaches. One of them is closely linked to Michel Foucault.
The strength of Foucault’s theory is that it allows the identification of the non-rational background of so-called rational discourse (Foucault, 1971). It is thus critical of the self-image that business in general and IS in particular usually display. Foucault also allows the observation of the importance of the body, and of physical and other means to establish discipline (Foucault, 1975). Finally, Foucault and his re-description of Bentham’s Panopticon offer a fascinating basis for the description of surveillance, which is an important aspect of the use of IS (Goold, 2003). Foucault’s theory is thus highly useful for addressing some of the critical topics, but less so for realising the critical intention. Foucault does not supply us with a framework or an ideal we could strive to realize (Stahl, 2004b).

There are, of course, other theoretical approaches open to critical researchers. One such might be critical realism (Mingers, 2001), which tries to overcome the dichotomy of positivism and interpretivism and opens avenues of understanding critical issues. Then there are critical approaches developing from different traditions, such as Rorty’s (1989) neo-pragmatism or post-modern approaches (Burrell, 1994; Calás & Smircich, 1999). It is impossible to give a comprehensive review of these here. For our purposes, it will suffice to point out that the Habermasian stream of the Frankfurt School and approaches in line with Foucault’s arguments are of central importance for critical research in IS (Brooke, 2002b).

Critical methodologies

The final characteristic of CRIS is the choice of methodology. Following the Oxford English Dictionary (www.oed.com), methodology will be understood as ‘a method or body of methods used in a particular field of study or activity’. This refers to ways of acquiring valid knowledge, and needs to be distinguished from structured approaches to IS development or data modeling (for a review of the philosophical basics of such methodologies cf. Hirschheim et al. 1995). Fundamentally, any methodology that allows the collection of relevant data concerning one of the critical topics, using a critical theory, aimed to fulfill the critical intention, can be used in critical research. This includes positivist, empiricist and quantitative approaches. Orthodox Marxist critical research would typically use such approaches to prove the subjugation of labour. Methodology is thus not central to critical research (cf. Avgourel, 2005; Walsham, 2005).

In the practice of critical IS research, however, it seems to be the case that there are some methodologies that are typically used by critical researchers, and these are generally on the qualitative and hermeneutic side. One important aspect of critical research methodologies is that they are reflexive – that they reflect on the role of the researcher within the research process (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2001a). There seem to be two groups of critical methodologies. One aims at determining the social realities of people who are affected by IS whereas the other concentrates on the use of language.

The first group of research methodologies comprises those research approaches that allow the development of an in-depth understanding of people’s view of their situation. This will usually require intensive interaction. One can therefore find participative approaches (Trauth & O’Connor, 1991; Walsham, 1995) used in critical research. One example of this is ethnography, which can be used in a critical way, making it ‘critical ethnography’ (Schultze, 2001). A
research method that is based on participant observation and that openly shares the critical intention to change given situations is action research (Gergen, 1999; Mumford, 2001). The other group of research methodologies is more interested in how the use of language hides power influences, how IS produce ideologies, how discourses lead to a disempowerment, and how these developments can be counteracted. Here we find methodologies based on the concept of discourses (Ulrich, 2001b). These can be based on assumption analysis (Hirschheim & Klein, 1994), discourse analysis (Schultze & Leidner, 2002; Thompson, 2003) or ideology critique (McAulay et al., 2002). More generally, most hermeneutic and narrative approaches to IS research seem to be well suited to serve as methodology for critical IS research (Heaton, 2001; van der Blonk, 2003). There is the difficult question of compatibility of these different research methodologies (Brooke, 2002b), which we will have to leave open.

Before we come to the next part of the argument, a brief explanation of the relationship between the four characteristics is in order. Critical intention, topic, theory and methodology define critical research. While this should allow an unequivocal description of most critical research, there are, of course, grey zones. Not every piece of critical research will display all four of the characteristics. They are typically linked, but this is not necessarily the case. As indicated earlier, critical research may use quantitative methods or be based on a positivist/realist ontology. Similarly, research looking at power issues, using a Foucauldian angle and a participative methodology, can still be non-critical. The most important characteristic of critical research is the critical intention, the wish to improve the situation of people who are caught up in the injustices of capitalist structures and organizations, and the desire to promote emancipation. The other aspects are consequences of the critical intention.

TWO TRADITIONS OF ETHICS AND MORALITY

The preceding section suggested a new way of classifying and determining critical research. It aimed to provide an alternative to the positivist – interpretivist – critical distinction which is often misleading. The main argument of this paper is that critical research is based on or closely linked to fundamental concepts and principles of at least two extant traditions in the philosophical literature on ethics and morality. In order to develop this argument, the section will start with a review of the concepts of ethics and morality.

The concept of ethics is an integral part of philosophy. It has been discussed in the Western philosophical tradition at least since the ancient Greeks. Introductory books demonstrate the complexity of the issue. They concentrate either on an exploration of the history of ethical ideas (cf. Brandt, 1959; Hinman, 1998) or an exposition of the most relevant authors (Dewey & Hurlbutt, 1977).

In order to come to a workable understanding of what ethical issues are, I will discuss two ways of distinguishing between the two terms. Based on my earlier work (Stahl, 2004a), I call them the French and the German traditions. This way of introducing ethics is relevant to the current paper as it allows the reader who is not well acquainted with ethical literature to comprehend the main questions it raises for critical research in IS. At the same time, it should
prove to be of interest for readers who have a good knowledge of ethics as it offers a different approach from the usual discussion of deontology vs. teleology, or a necessarily eclectic discussion of some relevant ethicists.

Three brief cautionary remarks are in order to preclude unnecessary criticism of the approach. First, the etymology of the two terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’ does not necessitate a distinction. Ethics has a Greek root whereas morality is derived from Latin. Both can be used to describe customs, good practices or expected behaviour. Indeed, a large part of contemporary Anglo-American literature does not make a clear distinction between them (cf. Hausman & McPherson, 1996; Johnson, 2001; Ricoeur, 2001). In contrast, I will argue that it will be useful to distinguish between the two, and that there are different ways of doing this. This should not be misunderstood to prove any other uses ‘wrong’. Second, I am using national attributes by labelling my two approaches a ‘German’ and a ‘French’ approach. This is done because it provides the reader with an intuitive link to the traditions that would not materialize if I used the names of particular scholars. Also, a large number of scholars from the respective countries follow the approaches, which can be explained by their intellectual histories. It does not imply that all scholars from those traditions (which would be impossible to clearly delineate in the first place) follow the distinction as explained here. Neither does it mean that the distinction is not used by scholars from different national and intellectual traditions. And finally, the reader should be aware that there are many other ethical traditions that are not covered by this approach.

Ethics and morality in the German tradition

The German tradition can be characterized by three features:

1 ethics is based on the idea of duty (deontology);
2 ethics and morality can be understood as theory and practice of good action; and
3 ethics is based on rationality.

One can only understand the German tradition by taking into account the strong formative role of Immanuel Kant. For Kant, the only good thing is the good will (Kant, 1995, p. 1 BA). The will is good if it is motivated by duty, which means that the maxim of the agent must be universalizable. These thoughts are famously summarized in the Categorical Imperative. The Categorical Imperative states that one should: ‘Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’ (translation by Kemerling, 2000).

Kant’s moral philosophy obviously fulfils criteria 1 and 3. It is duty-based, and duty can be recognized through the use of reason. In the Anglo-American reception, Kant is often described as a rigorous moralist, who wants to prescribe every action. This is a misinterpretation based on a lack of attention to point 2, the difference between ethics and morality as theory and practice. Kant’s ethics is purely formal. It provides a framework for the evaluation of maxims, which might best be translated as ‘frames of mind’, and it allows agents to identify maxims that are immoral because they cannot be universalized. It does not create any material duties. This reasoning can only be understood on the basis of the distinction of ethics and
morality as theory and practice, which, following Kant, is widely spread in German applied ethics, and which is of pivotal importance for critical research.

Morality, in this tradition, is the set of factually recognized norms that govern individual and collective behaviour. It is a positive fact that can be observed and studied by social sciences. Norms such as ‘thou shall not commit adultery’ or ‘it is bad to copy proprietary software’ are part of the canon of morality. This definition of morality is widely spread among German ethicists (cf. Homann & Blome-Drees, 1992; Bayertz, 1993; Steinmann & Löhr, 1994; Ulrich, 1997). According to this definition, morality can include norms that we would consider problematic. Norms such as the Mafia’s norm not to collaborate with police or Al Qaeda’s norm to kill as many infidels as possible would be part of a given morality. The question thus is: how can we distinguish between desirable and problematic moralities?

This is where ethics enters the debate. Where morality refers to given and accepted norms, ethics provides the theoretical framework of these norms. Ethics provides criteria that allow us to distinguish between good and bad forms of morality. This can be done by addressing issues of consistency of moralities and, most importantly, by establishing the foundations of moral reasoning, such as Kant’s Categorical Imperative. This definition of ethics is again widely spread in contemporary applied German ethics (cf. Lenk, 1991; Hastedt, 1994; Stegmaier, 1995; Ropohl, 1996). One should say, however, that this definition is not confined to German scholars, and has been reflected in a number of Anglo-American publications as well (cf. Severson, 1997; Velasquez, 1998; De George, 1999; Marturano, 2002).

This distinction of ethics and morality has several advantages. It allows an explanation why we can have diverging moral rules and still strive for universal ethical theories, thus addressing the problem of relativity in ethics. It helps distinguish the acceptance of norms from their acceptability. This gives ethicists a place in the debate without making them authoritative or dictatorial figures. The strong reliance on duty captures a moral intuition shared by many of us that good actions must be characterized by more than just good (and possibly accidental) outcomes. Finally, it attributes an important place to rationality, which means that ethical issues can be subject to debate and are not just idiosyncratic whims. The model nevertheless leaves open some questions and ignores some traditions of moral philosophy that are better captured by a different conceptualization of the terms.

**Ethics and morality in the French tradition**

Where the German tradition has developed from Kant’s thinking, the French tradition is rooted in French moralism, as represented by Michel de Montaigne (1910). The French tradition can be characterized as follows:

1. there is no final foundation of moral norms; and
2. ethics refers to teleology and morality to deontology.

The historical background of Montaigne’s view of ethics is the devastation of France in the 16th century due to internal and external wars and unrest. Montaigne’s main philosophical endeavour was a battle against totalizing philosophical systems as represented, for example,
by the predominant Christian theology of his times. He believed that life is infinite and cannot be described in full. Hence, there is no chance of a systematic foundation of philosophy and ethics. Montaigne’s position is hedonistic, which means that he thinks that joy and pleasure are our final ends. There is, however, one constant danger to our pleasure, namely death, which threatens us constantly. Fear of death thus limits our ability to lead a fulfilled life. The purpose of philosophy is to allow us to recognize the inevitability of death, to embrace its certainty and thereby overcome our fear. He famously revives Cicero’s dictum that engaging in philosophy is learning to die.

These starting assumptions affect the status of philosophy. The traditional distinctions of ontology, epistemology, ethics, etc., are no longer relevant since all philosophy must contribute to the aim of preparing for a good death. Such thinking is subversive for moral systems. When we realize that dying is not evil, we are free from external constraints. This, combined with the impossibility of providing a conclusive foundation of ethics, leads Montaigne to accept current morality as a necessity of social life, but without privileging it theoretically. Its main purpose is to establish and protect peace.

Building on these thoughts, the French tradition has developed a different understanding of ethics and morality from the German tradition. There is a general acceptance that abstract reason cannot be the foundation of the distinction between good and bad. Instead, there is a strong assumption that the starting point of ethical considerations must be a recognition of what constitutes a good life. This reflects Aristotelian ethics and also links in with Montaigne’s pursuit of happiness. In order for a community or a society to define norms, it must first agree on what it aims to achieve. These considerations are subsumed under the term ‘ethics’ (or ‘l’éthique’ in French). This shared perception of the good life is not subject to any higher-level justification. It is the starting point of moral philosophy. It also allows the development of ethical theories based on the interaction with the ‘other’, as suggested by a range of French philosophers in the 20th century from Sartre to Levinas (Ricoeur, 1994).

If ethics is concerned with the teleological aim, the vision of the good life (Ricoeur, 1991), then why do we need morality? Morality (‘la morale’) is understood as a set of rules, similar to the German tradition (Russ, 1995). The difference is that the French tradition emphasizes the obligatory and constraining nature of morality. The need for morality exists because unconstrained individuals threaten each other with violence, and thereby jeopardize the ethical vision of the good life. Morality is thus subordinate to ethics and it is a means of facilitating the ethical aims of a community. There is no further justification of moral rules other than that they allow the avoidance of violence and unhappiness (Weil, 1998), and facilitate the search for the good life. What the good life is or should be is beyond this conception of ethics and morality. This distinction of ethics and morality can be found in a number of French writings on moral philosophy (Ricoeur, 1990, 1991, 1994; 2001; Lenoir, 1991; Wunenburger, 1993).

The contributions and limitations of the French and German traditions to CRIS

The brief introduction to the concepts of ethics and morality in the French and German tradition gives me the conceptual support for the argument that critical research is intrinsically ethical.
It should not be misunderstand to imply a comprehensive coverage of the field of ethics, and neither does it imply that the two traditions just outlined are able to address all possible ethical problems. While they cover a range of ethical views, they are united in their focus on the individual human being in a decision situation. Neither can address issues where individual decisions are of low importance, as in the case of environmental ethics, nor are they open to feminist critique of ethics. Table 1 summarizes the discussion of the two traditions that will help me establish a link to CRIS.

**ETHICS, MORALITY, AND CRITICAL RESEARCH IN IS**

Having provided a framework of ethics and morality allows me to discuss the link they have with CRIS. This discussion is based on the defining features developed above, on critical intention, topics, theories and methodology.

**The ethics and morality of critical intentions**

Critical intention was introduced as the most important characteristic of critical research. Critical topics, theories and methodologies all follow from critical intention. Critical intention was defined as the desire to use research to initiate and promote change. Because of it, critical researchers not only want to observe, but they want to interact with their research object. This is what sets critical research apart from positivist and interpretive research in the Chua (1986) and Orlikowski & Baroudi (1991) tradition.

This critical intention must have a direct link with ethics. The formal reason for this is that it is prescriptive and, as Hume (1948) has shown, prescription cannot be deduced from description. There is an implicit normative premise in the critical starting point that the world should be changed. That premise would read similar to the following: `when injustice is being done, critical research should change it’. This premise is clearly of an ethical nature. While the suggested formulation may be debatable and can be replaced by another one, it will retain its ethical quality. It needs to refer to what should be done in order to justify the critical intention.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German tradition</th>
<th>French tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Theory and justification of morality; based on rationality; emphasizes duty.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality</td>
<td>Set of accepted rules guiding individual and collective behaviour.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td>● Open question of competing ethical theories.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Tradition provides no material ‘good’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Important aspects</td>
<td>● Relevance of duty in ethics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Formal approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Distinction between practice and justification.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

© 2008 The Author

Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Information Systems Journal
A material link between the critical intention and ethics is that the aim of critical research is to ‘make things better’ in a wide sense of the word. This ‘better’ is a moral notion, since it implies an improvement of the human condition and is directly based on anthropological assumptions concerning the environments and circumstances that will benefit humans.

Viewed from the German tradition, the critical intention implies a sense of duty to change an undesirable reality. It is a formal approach that relies on the possibility of rationally identifying ethical issues. However, the distinction between moral practice and ethical theory is not clear, as will be discussed in the next section. The French tradition informs the critical intention through its vision of a ‘good life’. Or, more to the point, critical researchers would probably find it easier to agree on the ‘bad life’, the alienating existence in a capitalist system, which should be overcome. Finally, the French tradition stresses the importance of avoiding violence by instituting moral rules. The critical intention per se does not indicate how this can or should be done.

The ethics and morality of critical topics

While the argument for the ethical quality of the critical intention is relatively straightforward, discussing the ethical quality of critical topics is much more complex due to the variety of critical topics. This paper can only offer a cursory glance at the possible arguments. For most of the critical topics introduced earlier, however, it is easy to argue that they are of ethical relevance.

The most important critical topic is power. Power is a complex term, but in most cases, it refers to the ability an agent has to influence another agent’s behaviour, to make one do another’s bidding. Power thus implies obligations, rules and norms, all of which have an ethical nature. This does not mean that power is intrinsically bad (or good), just that its exertion has ethical consequences (Giddens, 1984). This is true for political power (Rawls, 2001), economic power (Galbraith, 1958/1998), as well as information as power (Mason, et al., 1995). The argument extends to the attempts to free the individual from power as summarized under the concept of emancipation. While it is arguably impossible to completely free oneself from power relationships (Gergen, 1999), critical research attempts to identify and analyze those effects of capitalist societies that alienate individuals (Myers et al., 2002) and limit their options. The emphasis on power is linked to the concept of emancipation, which is central to critical research. Going back to the German tradition, it is not clear whether emancipation is a moral (practical) or an ethical (theoretical and justificatory) concept. It seems to promise clear and identifiable results, which would put it in the realm of morality, but at the same time, it seems to be a justification for action, rendering it an ethical notion. In the French tradition, emancipation could be seen as a representation of the good life.

The other critical topics that characterize critical research are also closely linked to ethics and morality. The digital divide, for example, is a topic of interest for critical researchers because it disempowers some and it precludes them from living up to their potential (Rookby, 2006). Britz (1999, p. 25) points out that ‘access to Information is the most important ethical question in the information age [. . .]’. Apart from the immediate ethical importance, access is
also ethically relevant as it affects the way society is organized, for example, through e-democracy or e-government (Breen, 1999). This argument leads easily to other critical topics, such as the problem of gender in IT. The central question is who gets access to which resources and on what grounds. This, in turn, determines chances and obligation, and is therefore a moral question (Stewart et al., 2001; Wheeler, 2001; Adam, 2002). Questions of IS failure derive part of their interest to critical researchers from the ethical effects they have. IS failures are partly an economic or technical problem, but their importance originates from the ethical impact they have. Failures waste money and other resources, thereby limiting the freedom of the agents involved. At the same time, failure is often caused by non-technical problems, most of which are related to ethics. These include organizational politics, recognition of legitimate stakeholders or a lack of respect for others (cf. Schiller, 1999; Keil et al., 2002; Wilson & Howcroft, 2002; Wilson, 2003).

The topics of critical research are united in that they have a moral nature. What is much less clear is how the argument supporting the moral nature of critical topics can be supported by ethical theory. It appears that critical research very much relies on moral intuition (‘it is bad that people are alienated, disempowered, have no access, . . .’), but that there is little explicit reflection on why it is bad or why one should concentrate exactly on those issues. From the point of view of the French tradition, these topics are of an ethical nature, because they refer to how the good life should be lived, but few indications of resulting moral norms are given.

The ethics and morality of critical theory

The question of the ethical quality of critical theory can be addressed by looking at the common denominator, at Marx. The orthodox reading of Marx (at least the later Marx) suggests that he rejected ethics, that society was a social system where ethics plays no role. Marx’s emphasis on the importance of the material world as a determinant for society but also for consciousness can be read this way (Marx, 1998). It should be noted, however, that a different reading of Marx is also possible (Wolff, 2003). The early Marx was clearly interested in ethical questions. But one can also see the later Marx as ethical. Rorty (1998) argues that the Communist Manifesto is an expression of hope for a better society, comparable with the New Testament, and equally based on an ethical view of human nature. Another stream of thoughts asks what the relevance of property in means of production is, were it not of an ethical nature (Kambartel, 1998). Similarly, how can one explain Marx’s interest in alienation and emancipation, if not on an ethical basis (Wynn, 2001)? Looking at the overall theoretical and political system based on Marx, one can therefore conclude that ‘[. . .] Marxism-Leninism is not only an economic system but a moral theory; a theory of production and a system of ethics’ (Vallance, 1992, p. 40).

Given the variety of critical theorists, it is not possible to present a comprehensive description of the link between critical theories and ethics and morality. In order to support the argument that there is such a link, I argue that critical theorists can be placed within the German and the French tradition of ethics and morality. I concentrate on Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault but briefly touch on other critical researchers.
The German tradition of ethics and morality in critical theory

The primary critical theorist in the German tradition is Habermas. Making the case that Habermas is an ethicist is not difficult. While he is read in the Anglo-American world, and particularly in IS research, mostly as a philosopher of language and a sociologist, he is also a leading ethicist. Habermas’s (1983; 1991) ‘discourse ethics’ is inextricably linked to Habermas’s (1981) theory of communicative action (TCA). In the TCA, Habermas develops a theory of communication. Its main purpose is to facilitate interaction and cooperation based on the recognition of the unconditional (moral) value of the other. There are different modes of interaction, but the most important one is communicative action. When one is engaged in communicative action, one takes the other seriously and aims to come to a consensus based on the best arguments. Each utterance in such communicative action contains three validity claims: (objective) truth (Wahrheit), (normative) rightness (Richtigkeit) and (subjective) authenticity (Wahrhaftigkeit).

The second one of these has an ethical quality. It is the starting point of discourse ethics. Habermas is a cognitivist ethicist, which means that he thinks that we can treat ethical statements as if they have a truth value. He explicitly puts himself in the tradition of Kant. However, he believes that the individual is not capable of satisfying the Categorical Imperative (Habermas, 1996, p. 48). The way in which norms can be checked for their validity is a discourse. Discourses are counterfactual pieces of communication where everyone affected can voice their opinion and where all participants are willing to come to an agreement. Discourses allow the (always fallible) determination of which norms are acceptable. The idea of the discourse thus replaces Kant’s internal check of universalizability (Habermas, 1983).

Habermas ethical theory fulfils the criteria of the German tradition. He uses the terms with slightly different meanings: morality (Moral) for him is the impartial general good, whereas ethics (Ethik) stands for the individual plan of a good life. What we have called morality, the existing set of accepted norms, he terms Sittlichkeit. However, he clearly distinguishes between existing norms and their ethical justification, which is done through discourses. His ethical theory, discourse ethics, is purely formal and implies a duty, namely to be willing to participate in discourses. Using Habermas’s theories as the basis for critical research in IS therefore establishes a direct link to ethical questions.

A very similar argument could be made for Karl-Otto Apel, who initially used the concept ‘discourse ethics’, and whose ethical stance is comparable to Habermas (cf. Apel et al., 1980). A more difficult question is whether the first generation of Frankfurt School scholars also conform to the ethical definition laid out here. This is a relevant question in this paper as there have been some attempts to draw on them for purposes of IS research (Probert, 2002b; 2004a,b). Adorno, on whom Probert draws predominantly, is no doubt deeply influenced by ethical considerations. He was forced to flee Germany under the Nazi regime and wrote a considerable part of his work in American exile. Like most German Jews who survived the Shoah, he suffered immense personal losses. In the light of these events, he was deeply pessimistic about our ability to overcome the destructive traits of humanity. An argument for the relevance of ethical issues for Adorno can be made similar to the argument for Marx’s ethics.
It rests on the question of what critical theory is good for if it will not contribute to the improvement of the world. However, Adorno shows a deep scepticism about the ability of reason to provide the means for a better world, and therefore does not fully conform with the German tradition.

**The French tradition of ethics and morality in critical theory**

A similar argument concerning the ethical quality of Foucault’s writings is not quite as easy to construct. One can read Foucault as being highly sceptical of moral claims. Indeed, much of his analyses of discourses investigate the use of morality as a means to exclude individuals or groups from participation. The main aim of Foucault’s (1976) ‘History of Sexuality’, for example, is to capture the development of sexual morality and to find out how Christian morality has developed and differs from classical Greek morality. In ‘Discipline & Punish’, Foucault (1975) looks at the way members of society are socialized into following the governing order, and how moral norms are an important weapon in the arsenal of subjugation. Foucault is thus highly sceptical of overt moral claims. However, that does not mean that his theoretical endeavours cannot be classed in the tradition of moral philosophy. Indeed, it is probably one of the most important tasks of ethics to criticize morality.

One can construct a similar argument about Foucault to the one made about the ethical qualities of Marx. While Foucault is sceptical about moral claims, there is no reason for him to engage in the genealogy of knowledge, if it were not for the hope of creating a better future. One aspect of this is Foucault’s notion of power. Power is central to Foucault’s work, which means that it is amenable to questions of empowerment. Also, power is not necessarily a morally bad issue, but it is constitutive of all social relations (Gomart & Hennion, 1999).

Foucault's ethical position can be categorized in terms of the two traditions. He is clearly a member of the French tradition in that he does not believe that rationality can be the final grounding of ethics. What makes it somewhat difficult to determine his position is that he does not give clear indications of what he takes the ethical telos of life to be. However, he gives much attention to the moral rules that society has created. He engages in a genealogy of moral rules, which he criticizes, without disclosing how he envisages the good society to be. This, by the way, is one of the main points of Habermas’s critique against Foucault, namely that he is incapable of providing a positive alternative to the moral practices he deconstructs (Ashenden & Owen, 1999).

One could counter such an attack by pointing out that Foucault’s implicit ethical vision is indeed one of emancipation, understood as the increasing ability of autonomy and self-determination. This is, for example, reflected in Foucault’s preferred method of genealogy, which Owen (1999, p. 36) describes as an ‘ethical practice’, which ‘orients our thinking to an immanent ideal which is nothing other than the (endless) process of developing and exercising our capacity for self-government’. For this reason, one can place Foucault alongside Habermas as successors of the project of enlightenment, of whose inherent problems both are aware of and to which they react with different means (Conway, 1999). Without the ethical and critical intention to improve people’s life, neither Habermas’s nor Foucault’s work is comprehensible.
Similar arguments can be made for several of his French contemporaries. Foucault was part of the politically active circle of French intellectuals, including Sartre and Bourdieu, who used their strong political influence to stimulate public debate. Despite philosophical differences between them, their attempt to raise issues publicly can be seen as the expression of the ethical nature of the critical intention to change social reality. Their activities as public intellectuals can also be seen as an attempt to help shape and define the ethical vision that is the basis of the French tradition. Finally, they share a deep scepticism regarding the possibility of a final justification of ethics, and particularly of individual reason as its possible basis.

The ethics and morality of critical methodology

The link critical research has to specific methodologies is relatively weak. Critical research cannot claim to have established a body methods or methodology (cf. McGrath, 2005). It often draws on established methodologies from other contexts or ‘paradigms’. There are nevertheless indicators that some methodologies, which are typically used for critical IS research, are linked to ethics. This can be said for methodologies which are linked to a close and direct interaction between researcher and research subject. The close interaction between the two requires a personal relationship to be built up, which, in turn, has ethical implications. The most typical research methodology for critical research is probably the one that includes the critical intention to change reality and the participative approach to the subject’s reality, namely action research. Action research can be described as being explicitly based on the emancipatory intention of critical research (Sandberg, 1985; Mumford, 1991). An action researcher wants to change things, but is also, ideally ‘dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge in an ethical manner’ (Mumford, 2001, p. 64).

The discourse-oriented methodologies can be interpreted as being closely aligned to ethics due to their communicative nature. Following a Habermasian theory renders all communication aimed at mutual understanding an ethical endeavour. But there are also other ethical theories that see a fundamental ethical quality in communication (cf. Ricoeur, 1990). In a wider sense, critical research tends to share methods with interpretive research in IS. The interactive nature of such mostly qualitative methods render them open to the argument that they must be based on ethical assumptions (Stahl, 2005) (see Table 2).

Examples of the ethical nature of critical research

If the argument of this paper is correct and critical research in IS has an irreducible ethical aspect, then examples of critical research should display ethical characteristics. Critical research is not a frequently used approach to IS research, but during the last 2 decades, a sizable literature has accumulated (Lee, 1994; Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997; Brooke & Maguire, 1998; Howcroft & Wilson, 2003; Parayil, 2005). It seems to enjoy more popularity in some areas, notably Scandinavia, than in others (cf. Ehn, 1988; Kyng & Mathiassen, 1997). In order to support this paper with examples, I chose three recent papers which could be clearly identified as belonging to the critical research tradition in IS and which reflect current thinking in the area.
A typical example of critical research in IS is Janson & Cecez-Kecmanovic’s (2005) paper, which uses Habermas’s TCA in order to analyze the interaction between buyers and sellers in e-commerce in the vehicle retail industry. The paper conforms to our definition of critical research. It has a critical intention, despite the fact that it is primarily descriptive. The authors hope that the development of a Habermasian framework in e-commerce will allow buyers and sellers to use communicative action that will emancipate both from the current alienating practices of the used car industry. While their topic is e-commerce, they concentrated on issues such as power relationships between buyers and sellers. Their theoretical basis is Habermas’s TCA, and their methodology is a critical hermeneutic. In all four of the characteristics, one can observe ethical assumptions and implications. The intention of investigating e-commerce as social interaction reveals the view that a technical reading of e-commerce is insufficient. Such a view is based on an implicit ethical understanding of how research should proceed. The topic of relationships and interaction between online buyers and sellers is only relevant from the point of view of TCA if the current state of these relationships is morally doubtful. The methodology, finally, is based on the communicative action between researchers and research subjects, which means it requires the acceptance of the ethical value of the subjects.

While Janson & Cecez-Kecmanovic’s (2005) paper can thus be integrated in the view of critical research as ethical research, it also displays some of the shortcomings of the German tradition. It assumes that a certain rationality will lead to ethically desirable outcomes and it

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Properties of criticality</th>
<th>Link to ethics and morality in German tradition</th>
<th>Link to ethics and morality in French tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intention: change reality, promote emancipation</td>
<td>Critical intention is prescriptive, aims at better society. Change is a duty for critical research.</td>
<td>Change of reality requires a vision of the good life. Overcoming violence is a condition of emancipation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic: share moral nature, intuition of injustice</td>
<td>e.g. power: power is not morally bad but requires rational reflection and justified rules to fulfill ethical requirements.</td>
<td>e.g. power: power is required to lead a good life in society. Power provides the constraints to violence but must itself be constrained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory</td>
<td>e.g. Habermas: Clear link in Habermas. TCA implies discourse ethics.</td>
<td>e.g. Foucault: Foucault is critical of conventional morality as a means of coercion. But, his research implies a desire to create a better society, emancipate individuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology: not necessarily linked to critical research</td>
<td>e.g. action research: direct interaction with research subjects requires researcher to morally engage with them.</td>
<td>e.g. action research: interventionist research requires a vision of the good life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CRIS, critical research in information systems; TCA, Theory of Communicative Action.
adopts Habermas’s procedural approach to ethics. It lacks the material view of the good life and therefore fails to criticize the context of the research. A different critical researcher could argue that the US used-car market is a primary example for alienation and exploitation, and for the commercial dominance of current society. Their approach does not allow Janson and Cecez-Kecmanovic to criticize an economic system where people are led to believe that owning a highly dangerous and polluting piece of technology will improve their well-being. They also fail to discuss the issue how technically mediated communication, which could be read as an example of Habermas’s systems theory, can lead to true communicative action. This may be a theoretical shortcoming or a problem of the TCA itself, a question that goes beyond this paper.

A good example of a completely different critical approach is provided by Edenius (2003), who relies on a Foucauldian angle to understand the use of email in discourses. Edenius focuses on the use of knowledge in email and draws on Foucault’s notion of discipline. The intention of his paper is to change our perception of reality by pointing out that email functions as disciplinary power, limiting the ability to participate in discourses. This intention is critical in that it will change social reality by demonstrating discursive closures that we face, which, by being exposed, become open to modification. Following Foucault, Edenius does not openly claim to advance emancipation, but implicitly does so by addressing discursive reifications. Among the topics he addresses we can find the typical critical candidates of power and meaning. In order to illustrate the arguments, Edenius uses a multiple case study approach, including interviews.

Edenius’s paper exhibits critical intention, topics, theory and methodology. Ethical assumptions can be identified in all of them. The paper’s aims to raise awareness of the alienating properties of current disciplines and discourses surrounding email. The paper argues that email is used to exert power by strategically using and distributing knowledge, and it continues to argue that this use of email is intrinsically contradictory because it leads to information overload. It can be read as an expression of the French tradition of ethics and morality in that it implies that there is a lack of a shared ethical vision, which it invites us in its closing sentences to start to develop. The second step of the French tradition, namely the development of moral rules to support the ethical vision, is not developed in the paper. However, it is relatively easy to see that such rules would have to result from an agreement on the ethical vision.

Fleshing out the ethics of Edenius’s paper following the French tradition shows that there is a lack of distinction between moral practice and ethical theory. Edenius admits that his work, like that of Foucault, could be faulted for not providing a positive view. Moreover, the approach does not allow the distinction between a desirable moral plan and an ethical procedure to check the acceptability of such a plan. The lack of a final foundation for ethics, which is characteristic of the French tradition, makes it difficult to develop a constructive analysis.

A final example of critical research is supplied by Klecun & Cornford (2005). They apply a critical view to the evaluation of systems in the healthcare sector in the UK. Unlike the other two examples, they do not explicitly draw on a specific theorist. Their critical intention is to change the way IS evaluation is perceived. They argue that current approaches to evaluation are too
narrow, concentrating on technical criteria or considering only privileged users, whereas the nature of healthcare systems requires a wide range of opinions to be considered in evaluation. Their topic is thus the empowerment of the individuals who have to deal with and suffer from systems, including healthcare professionals and patients. The theoretical basis of their work draws on the Frankfurt School, but includes other approaches such as the socio-technical approach, social constructivism and hermeneutics. From these different theoretical positions, they extract principles of critical research which they then apply to their area of interest. Their method of investigation is a stakeholder approach based on interviews.

The argument for the ethical quality of intention and topic of this study is similar to the other two examples. The wish to review the dominant approach to evaluation can be explained by the moral desire to improve IS practices. The purpose is to empower individuals who are currently silenced by the established evaluation practices. The case for the ethical quality of their theoretical background is more difficult to make because they use a broad approach, drawing on several research traditions. What all of these have in common, however, is that they emphasize the human element of technology and the importance of human interaction for the construction of meaning and understanding. This carries the ethical implication that humans’ views are equally valuable and need to be considered if the validity of evaluation is to be established. Their case study/stakeholder methodology allows a similar conclusion of the ethical relevance of the individual research subject. This is well established for stakeholder approaches, which are frequently used in business ethics research (Bowie, 1999; Donaldson & Dunfee, 1999; Gibson, 2000).

Klecun and Cornford provide a good example of critical research, whose ethical assumptions are quite obvious. They are nevertheless not developed sufficiently to support further action. The approach strongly suggests an ethics of respect for the individual, but it does not operationalize this in any way. From the German tradition, they could learn the importance to distinguish between moral practice and its ethical justification, which would help them justify their critical approach. The French tradition would help them to see the relevance of developing a positive ethical vision, but at the same time support and enforce it with moral rules. Both approaches would be supportive in drawing practical conclusions from the evaluation of IS projects.

These three brief examples are meant to support the argument that critical research does indeed share critical intention, topics, theories and methodologies, and that all of these are linked with issues of ethics and morality. The discussion of the examples cannot claim to do the authors justice but it shows that ethical implications tend to underlie critical research, but are often not made explicit. Doing so reveals problems of consistency and raises new issues that need to be addressed. The French and German traditions can help us understand what these issues are and how they can be addressed.

CONCLUSION: ETHICAL LESSONS FOR CRITICAL RESEARCH IN IS

This paper has introduced a definition of critical research as based on critical intention, topics, theories, and methodologies. After introducing some of the ideas of philosophical ethics by
discussing the differences between the concepts of ethics and morality in the French and German tradition, it has argued that critical research is based on ethical assumptions and aims to follow ethical objectives.

If we accept this conclusion, then the next question concerns the implications this has for critical research. These can be divided into theoretical and practical ones. The theoretical implications relate to the fact that critical research in IS rarely explicitly incorporates ethical theory. For critical research as ethical research this is not tenable. Critical researchers must render their ethical assumptions and presuppositions open to scrutiny. This is particularly important since ethical theory is always complicated and there is no ethical theory without weaknesses or counterarguments. A critical researcher who follows the critical intention to change reality and wants to promote emancipation will have to reflect on the reasons for this intention. How could social reality be improved, what does it mean to be emancipated, and why is it better to be emancipated than not? What can the researcher do if people resist being emancipated, and is it possible to promote emancipation across cultural boundaries? These are difficult questions that can only be answered if the normative theoretical background is made explicit.

The German and French traditions can be helpful when considering these questions as they offer hints of what aspects of ethics or morality should be considered. The German tradition reminds the critical researcher that there is a difference between factual moral norms and their ethical justification, both of which the critical researcher must reflect on. It also emphasizes the importance of a formal approach to ethical issues in a time when all material moralities seem to be contested. From the French tradition, the researcher can learn the importance of the traditional Aristotelian ‘good life’, which is a necessity in ethics. Indeed, the critical intention can be seen as the expression of a vision of the good life because it implies that there is a better alternative to the reality we live in. At the same time, the French tradition shows that the good life is no guarantee for the achievement of ethical ideals if matters of material moral duties are neglected. Ethical visions need moral enforcement. This is of high relevance for critical research, which assumes that it is possible to come to a better state of the world by facilitating emancipation, but often neglects to consider which rules will be required to achieve such aims and how they can be enforced. The two ethical traditions will thus offer some answers to important questions, but, as the discussion of the examples has shown, they are not comprehensive and additional ethical theories may offer further help in some situations.

These theoretical considerations thus have practical consequences. If it is the intention of critical research to improve social reality, then logical and ethical consistency require that the practical consequences of such research must be considered in evaluating its success. Or, more simply, it needs to be asked whether critical research that has no practical consequences can be considered critical research at all. This raises a range of epistemological and methodological questions, many of which have ethical angles. If a critical researcher aims to make the world better, then how can he/she know he/she succeeded? What is he/she to do if he/she did not succeed, or if his/her efforts had an inverse effect? This leads to other difficult questions, such as the question of realizability. How much effort must a critical researcher expend on deliberating whether the aims of his/her research can be realized at all?
All of these questions are difficult to answer. That should not distract us from their importance. The success of critical research can only be ensured and evaluated if the criteria of success are clearly defined. This includes a clear understanding of ethical implications and presumptions. Extending critical research in IS into the ethical domain will further complicate already complicated matters. However, a failure to do so is likely to burden the critical endeavour with conceptual confusion. One problem is that critical researchers are not necessarily conversant with ethical theory and its use in ICT. Fortunately, there are parallel discourses to the ones in IS, for example, those on computer and information ethics, which critical IS researchers can draw upon to incorporate existing ethical discourses in their work (Bell & Adam, 2004). I hope that this paper, having argued that critical research is linked to ethics and morality, will broaden the discourse on critical research in IS and help critical researchers avoid making the mistake of neglecting reflection on their ethical premises and implications. In doing so, the paper displays the characteristics of critical research. It aims to change the status quo (neglect of ethical issues in CRIS) and promotes emancipation (of researchers who will be freer to engage in ethical discourses). Using a conceptual and reflective approach, the paper should have ethical consequences because, by promoting the discourse on ethics and raising awareness of moral questions, outcomes of critical research will be more morally sensitive and ethically justifiable.

REFERENCES


© 2008 The Author
Journal compilation © 2008 Blackwell Publishing Ltd, Information Systems Journal


Marx, K. (1964) *Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels Studienausgabe*, Fetscher, B.l. (ed.). Fischer Philosophie, Frankfurt am Main, Germany.


© 2008 The Author


Biography

Bernd Carsten Stahl is a Reader in Critical Research in Technology in the Centre for Computing and Social Responsibility at De Montfort University, Leicester, UK. His interests cover philosophical issues arising from the intersections of business, technology, and information. This includes the ethics of computing and critical approaches to information systems. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of Technology and Human Interaction. More information can be viewed at: http://www.cse.dmu.ac.uk/~bstahl/