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Habermas and Social Research

Between theory and method

Edited by
Mark Murphy



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According to this excellent volume, Habermas is considerably more than the armchair critical theorist characterized by much of what has been written about him. Mark Murphy and his co-authors clearly see Habermas as the critical sociologist for whom theory is but a tool for sharpening the direction of social research in any domain and, ultimately, facilitating emancipation in our knowing of and social practice in that domain. Each of the chapters takes up this theme of Habermas and the 'applied turn' in his influence on the second generation of Frankfurt School scholarship; collectively, the volume teases out the theme in relation to a variety of social research applications, illustrating in each case the difference that the Habermasian perspective makes to understanding and practice.

Terence Lovat, *Emeritus Professor, University of Newcastle, Australia,
and Honorary Research Fellow, Oxford University, UK*

While Jurgen Habermas's status as a contemporary classic is beyond doubt, the *practical application* of his work remains unexploited. In this timely edited collection, Mark Murphy has brought together a fine group of international scholars who, in their different fields, all demonstrate the relevance of Habermas's key concepts of *colonization*, *democratic deliberation* and *communicative action* for empirical social research.

Daniel Chernilo, *Reader in Social and Political Thought at
Loughborough University*

Habermas and Social Research

One of the greatest contributors to the field of Sociology, Jürgen Habermas has had a wide-ranging and significant impact on understandings of social change and social conflict. He has inspired researchers in a range of disciplines with his multidimensional social theory; however, an overview of his theory in applied settings is long overdue.

This collection brings together in one convenient volume a set of researchers who place Jürgen Habermas' key concepts such as colonisation, deliberation and communication at the centre of their research methodologies. Full of insight and innovation, this book is an essential read for those who want to harness the potential of Habermas' core concepts in their own work, thereby helping to bridge the gap between theory and method in social research. Structured around three core themes, *Habermas and Social Research* provides a range of research case studies looking at system colonisation, the politics of deliberation and communicative interactions. Issues as diverse as social movements, the digital public sphere, patient involvement, migration and preschool education are all covered in the book, intertwined with a set of innovative approaches to theory application in social research.

Designed to help researchers realise the potential of Habermas' core concepts as methodological tools, this timely volume will prove highly useful for graduate and upper level undergraduates within the fields of theory and method, research design, education and public policy, urban and environmental planning.

Mark Murphy is Reader in Education & Public Policy at the University of Glasgow, UK.

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Introduction

Putting Habermas to work in social research

Mark Murphy

Introduction

For someone often touted as a ‘grand theorist’, Jürgen Habermas has a surprisingly modest appreciation of theory and its significance. He once stated in an interview that ‘it’s good not to expect any more or anything different from theories than what they can achieve – and that’s little enough’ (Habermas, 1994, p. 100). To those with only a cursory knowledge of Habermas’ work, this might come as something of a shock. But in the intellectual tradition to which he belongs, it makes complete sense. Since its inception in the 1930s, the Frankfurt School of critical theory committed itself to understanding the relations between theory and practice, viewing theory as a way to understand the world in order to change it (Kellner, 1989). Their commitment to praxis resulted in a body of applied research that inspired the second generation of critical theorists, of which Habermas was the spearhead, to take the social theory–research method nexus seriously. Habermas himself has emphasised an applied and flexible approach to social theory ‘whose fruitfulness can be confirmed only in the ramifications of social and philosophical research’ (Habermas, 1987a, p. 297).

Habermas saw the real value of social theory (including his own) in its capacity to illuminate forms of research practice. The power of social theory, which he likened to the ‘focusing power of a magnifying glass’, was realised in its *application*. Habermas viewed theory as one part of a bigger endeavour in terms of critical theory, of working towards practical solutions to complex societal problems – with his own theory playing an important but not the only role. His understanding of theory and its significance is therefore a qualified one – theorising the social is only one part of the equation.

This is an important point to make when it comes to Habermas. Much of the discussion surrounding him tends to focus on the veracity of his intellectual positions – which is fair as he has never been one to back down from an argument over the years. His polarising description of postmodern thinkers such as Foucault and Derrida as ‘neoconservatives’ (Habermas, 1987b) is a classic example. Such interventions tend to overshadow his influence in the field of applied social research, with consequently less interest paid to the way his ideas