A brief reflection on the issue of science, ideology and critical theory

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1. The key standpoint in the commentary

The previous commentary states that all research is ideological and that the appearance of neutral language, striving for objectivity and impartiality is simply a false pretense, i.e. "hiding one's identity behind statistics" (Simandan, 2021). Instead, the starting point for conducting research should be self-experience and the researcher's own embodiment in different sociodemographic dimensions. This should influence the choice of topics, methods and the manner of interpreting empirical evidence. Research should avoid any pretense that it is not ideological. In fact, research should be explicitly ideological in the sense that it represents the embodied self-experience and self-interest of the researcher. My answer will elaborate on the consequences of this key standpoint.

2. Social capital research and ideology

Probably no research is completely free from ideological bias and no researcher is completely free from prejudice. Research on social capital and health is an example. Social capital and health research is not, as stated in the commentary, based on "fuzzy values" (What are "fuzzy values"? Why use pejorative terms such as "fuzzy values" to denote other values than your own?), "cozy feeling", "catchy phrase" or "the romance of the community". Research on social capital and health is based on the notion that humans are social beings, and that social relations and contexts thus may affect health. The dark side of social capital has also been thoroughly discussed (Villalonga-Olives & Kawachi, 2017). Some authors imported social capital from political science and sociology (Putnam, 1993, 2000; Coleman, 1990) to public health in the late 1990s

to improve understanding of the influence of social contexts on e.g. health-related behaviors, access to healthcare and health (Kawachi et al., 1999). Other authors criticized social capital for "blaming the victim", i.e. to blame individuals and groups with low socioeconomic status for reportedly low levels of civic and social participation, trust in others, institutional trust and poor health instead of addressing the underlying material circumstances (Muntaner et al., 2002). This debate clearly has an ideological component. My own view is that both material and social/psychosocial approaches to the socioeconomic health gap are valid and not mutually exclusive, which is a rather common standpoint (Marmot, 2004, 2016). Social capital was defined as a key health determinant in 2011 by the Swedish government (Regeringskansliet, 2011).

Another debate with ideological repercussions in the social capital and health literature concerns the cohesion approach, based in political science and sociology (Putnam, 1993; Coleman, 1990), as opposed to the network approach, based in another tradition in sociology (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Portes, 1998). While the cohesion approach emphasizes social cohesion and cooperation (Putnam, 2000), the network approach emphasizes the individual's resources in terms of social support and network in order to enhance personal and group influence and power (Carpiano, 2006). It follows that the network approach may sometimes be more change and conflict oriented.

3. Science, ideology and critical theory

Science and ideology have a complex relationship. Originally, the concept of ideology was invented by the French enlightenment philosopher Antoine Destutt de Tracy (1754–1836) during the French

revolution. Destutt de Tracy wanted to initiate a research topic aiming to find the best ideas to achieve a free and equal society. However, ideology soon got a seemingly more pejorative meaning, partly influenced by Napoleon Bonaparte who among others depicted ideology as the self-interested ideas of different social groups in society (McClellan, 1986). Liberalism was first explicitly mentioned in connection with the party Liberales in Spain in 1812 (Gray, 1986). Conservatism was first used in France in connection with the Vienna congress in 1814/1815 following the Napoleonic wars and somewhat later in the UK in connection with the election to the House of Commons in 1832 and the profound parliamentary representation reform that ensued (Nisbet, 1986). Other ideologies soon followed. Marxism may be regarded as a special case, because Marxism openly claims to be both a scientific theory and a political ideology: "… the notion that what makes some (the ruling) ideas ideological is the fact that they hide things to the benefit of the ruling class." (Marx & Engels, 1846/2011; Scott & Marshall, 2005). Liberal ideology is also connected with research, probably most strongly in the case of economics, but the connection is not explicitly stated as a purpose. Furthermore, Marxism has been strongly influenced by liberalism partly through classical economics, the three basic pillars of classical Marxism being utopian socialism, Hegelian dialectics and classical economics.

The author of the commentary claims to adhere to critical theory. Critical theory in its broadest sense emphasizes reflexive assessment and critique of society and culture to uncover and confront inherent power structures, social structures and cultural belief systems rather than individuals as the sources of social problems. Critical theory regards ideology inherent in society as the main obstacle to human liberation: "… if they are to free themselves from social repression, the agents must rid themselves of ideological illusion." (Geuss, 1981).

Critical theory in its currently most common interpretation stems from the Frankfurt School founded in Germany in 1922. This variant of critical theory can be categorized under the broader theoretical and ideological umbrella of neo-Marxism together with e.g. psychoanalysis and existentialism (Jean-Paul Sartre). The aim of critical theory in this variant is the struggle for the redefinition of concepts such as e.g. nation, family, gender, culture and moral concepts with the explicit aim to either eradicate them or fundamentally reshape them. Academic texts based on this variant of critical theory are often typical in style and presentation. They typically present standpoints, views and values based on other theories or belief systems using unspecified, fuzzy and derogatory language (e.g. "fuzzy values"), and sometimes hidden behind a smokescreen of rhetoric they never specify what society and human life in general will actually look like when existing social conventions, social rules and social entities are gone. A legitimate criticism of critical theory is not the defense of repression but concerns how to avoid a condition of *anomie*, i.e. the absence, breakdown, confusion or conflict with regard to the moral values and norms in society, as introduced by Emile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1893/1997; 1897/1951), the ancient Greek word *anomos* meaning "absence of law" (Scott & Marshall, 2005).

However, critical theory (and ideology) does not end with the manipulation of language. Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), a member of the Frankfurt School who became the frontal figure of critical theory during the student revolt in 1968, stated that existing society was characterized by repressive tolerance as opposed to pure tolerance. Those who were defined as oppressed by critical theory researchers and their allies therefore have a right to use undemocratic means to fight the perceived oppression (Marcuse, 1969). One problem with this standpoint is that while oppression may exist, the judgement concerning which group is oppressed and which is not and whether to use undemocratic means ultimately rests on the subjective self-experience and judgement of critical theory researchers. A group defined as oppressed cannot simultaneously be oppressors. This means that the experience of other groups oppressed by such a defined group cannot be acknowledged, e.g. crime victims get less attention because the perpetrators are regarded as victims of oppression inherent in society. The philosopher

Alasdair MacIntyre also objected to Marcuse's conclusions because they constituted "an effective barrier to any rational progress and liberation" (MacIntyre, 1970). This does not in any way suggest that all proponents of critical theory embrace cancel culture and ultimately violence, but it suggests that prominent original theorists and ideologues (in their worldview synonymous) of critical theory as well as too many of their present-day disciples do.

I will shortly present the history of individual register data in Sweden. The example is well motivated because the commentary criticizes the use of the binary gender dichotomy in our article, which is the only measure available both in the 2008 baseline questionnaire and all Swedish register data thus far. In recent years, some individuals have re-registered their gender, but the dichotomy still remains, although questioned.

3.1. Three points of answer based on Sweden's long tradition of register data compilation

Sweden has an abundance of official population-based register data with high validity. Sociodemographic, in-hospital, primary healthcare, cause of death and pharmacy register data, as examples, may be combined, after ethical approval, to answer innumerable research questions. The tradition of compiling individual-level data has deep historical roots. The Church Act of 1686 stated that the entire population should be registered (births, baptisms, marriages and deaths) by the clergy, because the Church was the only part of public administration in direct contact with the entire population. In 1748, *Tabellverket* was founded partly on the initiative of the astronomer and statistician Pehr Wargentin (1717–1783) as the predecessor of *Statistics Sweden*. From 1750 registration of causes of death was conducted by the parish priests and reported to *Tabellverket* for analysis. The founding of *Tabellverket* fostered an interest in population health that stimulated early adoption of vaccination (smallpox), advice on breastfeeding, province physicians, healthcare modernization (county councils in 1862), scientifically trained midwives, maternal care, social medicine, public health and global health (see Bengtsson & Lindström, 2000, 2003; Lindström, 2021). This leads to three main answers to the commentary.

3.2. Three answers to the commentary

First, although there was an ambition to achieve high validity, the compilation of Swedish register data was never completely free from ideological motivations. The initial 18th century worldview was mercantilist, i.e. the state wanted to ensure that more children reached adult ages by decreasing especially the high infant mortality in the 18th century. Sweden needed more soldiers, craftsmen, sailors, farmers etc. in the mercantilist competition with other countries. Later, the same data compilation was motivated in terms of conservative, liberal and since 1932 Social Democratic ideologies. Strive for objectivity and validity in science obviously does not contradict the parallel presence of ideologies.

Second, the statements in the commentary have profound implications. Do some theories take precedence over others, as implied by the commentary? If so, who should have the power to define the power hierarchy, i.e. which theories that automatically cancel investigations following from other theories? These questions are relevant because a few years ago there were written complaints from singular students to cancel a lecture by a professor at Lund University who questioned the notion that gender should be seen "as a social construct through and through," to cite the author of the commentary, ignoring possible biological origins of social differences. The idea is thus to demand cancellation in order to defend threats to the ideology (which equals theory) instead of facing a scientific discussion based on empirical findings. The questions regarding power relations may be rephrased into a directly topic-related question regarding Swedish register data. Should all research based on Swedish register data, often yielding results that are generalizable and helpful also to many other countries than Sweden, be

cancelled just because the data does not contain information fulfilling the theoretical frameworks and categorizations of critical theory or any other imaginable theory? Please note that this second point is not a criticism of research on social construction of identity (including socially constructed aspects of gender) or the study of sexual identity and health per se, which is important research (see e.g. Lindström et al., 2014; Nystedt et al., 2019; Lindström & Rosvall, 2020a; 2020b). More research should be welcomed, but as science not as ideology.

Third, if research should actively and indiscriminately embody the self-experience and ideological beliefs of the researcher, there is an overwhelming risk that universities will become echo chambers for academics with postmodernist values. In fact, this process seems to be ongoing (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2019). Consequently, research will only reflect the ideology of a specific and restricted socioeconomic group in society. This deviation from the commission of often tax-funded academically trained civil servants and university scholars to serve the entire population and society to serve their own self-interest was already in the 1990s labelled as part of the revolt of the elites and the betrayal of democracy: "The talented retain many of the vices of aristocracy without its virtues" (Lasch, 1995).

Postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon has been measured by the World Values Survey (WVS) since the 1970s. Postmodernist values predominate among younger people in higher socioeconomic status groups with high formal education mostly living in urbanized areas. Postmodernism as a general social phenomenon represents a value shift in parts of the population in high-income countries. This value shift from values emphasizing economic (material) security and law and order to values emphasizing individual freedoms and individual rights has occurred due to an upward shift in the hierarchy of needs following economic prosperity, according to Inglehart (Inglehart 1990, 2018). Postmodernism rejects the modernist reliance on authority, rationality and objectivity of science and engineering. While the modernist stance rejects religion and tradition, postmodernism questions this rejection, although postmodernism notably only shows a renewed interest in religions and traditions other than western. Postmodernism in science also tends to rely on subjective feelings and the aim to pursue certain a priori defined ideological goals (Inglehart, 1997). The postmodern view of science is far from synonymous with critical theory, but the two are interrelated because liberalism and Marxism both stress the liberation of individuals from inherited culture (Crick, 1987; Gray, 1986). Critical theory (and ideology) may tentatively be seen as an explicitly stated and rather extreme expression of postmodernism's stress on the importance of self-experience, self-expression, subjectivity and ideological goals in science.

4. Conclusion

Science and ideology have two different roles. Science should strive for objectivity and high validity. Ideology should be the basis for underpinning personal and social group interests with rational thinking and empirical scientific facts in order to form relevant arguments in politics. The intentional merging of science and ideology into one inseparable entity will lead to soft totalitarianism, i.e. silence culture. This fact is illustrated by totalitarian states but also by the emergence of the postmodern phenomenon of cancel culture at western universities. The notion that critical theory solely enhances research based on individual self-experience is a false pretense, because critical theory is a broad ideological movement with diverse branches in academia.

Ethical statement

This manuscript contains an answer to a commentary regarding our article on social capital, miniaturization of community, traditionalism and mortality. It contains no empirical data needing ethical approval. No unsuitable language is used.

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