# What’s “critical” about critical physiotherapy? Max Horkheimer and the idea of critical theory

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Max Horkheimer, a German philosopher and sociologist, had a great influence on the Frankfurt School of critical theory. He was the director of the *Institute für Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) in Frankfurt and his writings from the early years of his directorship in the 1930s have had a lasting impact on both his contemporaries and later generations of social thinkers. In this presentation, I introduce some of these early writings and re-interpret them in the context of physiotherapy.

Horkheimer’s early work was guided by the idea that social philosophy ought to address, interpret and re-interpret the real social world. On the one hand, he criticised philosophy that glossed over real human suffering, but he was also critical of positivism for focusing on brute facts whilst ignoring the kinds of social change that might alleviate suffering. His interdisciplinary programme for theory and research sought to find a critical niche between philosophy and empirical sciences. His belief was that philosophy ought to address the objective truth of society through empirical research and rigorous philosophising, whilst also acknowledging that research is always mediated by the particular social and historical moment in which it is conducted.

Rethinking Horkheimer’s early critical theory for critical physiotherapy studies raises questions that address the gap between philosophy and empirical research, or theory and practice. How might critical theoretical work help clinicians or empirical scientists in practice? Can empirical research take the philosophical question of subjectivity seriously, especially if all research is mediated rather than purely objective? Horkheimer might answer that critical physiotherapy calls for greater interdisciplinary cooperation that excels in both in social philosophy and empirical research. This would require that both critical and traditional physiotherapy move beyond the gap between theory and practice. This, I argue, is one of the greatest challenges for critical physiotherapy in future.

**Further reading/listening**

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/horkheimer/>

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/>

**YouTube:**

Horkheimer on critical theory: https://youtu.be/OBaY09Qi-w0

Esther Leslie on culture industry: https://youtu.be/KpUeG9-7KvY

**Primary and secondary reading:**

Abromeit, John. 2011. Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Adorno, Theodor W., and Max Horkheimer. 2011. *Towards a New Manifesto*. London: Verso.

Horkheimer, Max. 1982. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum.

Horkheimer, Max, Theodor W. Adorno. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Jay, Martin. 1996. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt school and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

**Questions:**

What does “critique” mean in philosophy and for Horkheimer? Does this have any implications for physiotherapy?

What kinds of gaps there are between theory and practice in physiotherapy?

What are the barriers for proper integration of theory and practice, both in clinical practice and in research?