

Postcritical Ethnography: Research as a Pedagogical Encounter

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Since the 1990's there has been a growth in critically oriented research in education. In part, this popularity stems from the felt need to make research more socially relevant and more influential in efforts at social reform. It is also a reaction against forms of research that seem to benefit only the researcher (i.e., in the tenure process) or that serve to unproblematically reproduce the status quo. Critical ethnography in particular has become an increasingly popular approach to doing critically oriented qualitative research aimed at social transformation. Although not without its critics, it has gained significant legitimacy in the academy, with more and more critical ethnographies being written as well as how-to books being published (Carspecken, 1996; Thomas, 1993). Yet, the alliance between critical theory and qualitative research is problematic and uneasy. Many issues have been raised about the relationship between supposedly emancipatory social theory and ethnographic research practice. Foremost among these are questions about the relationship between the researcher and the researched, the values and agenda brought to the research, and the constitutive elements of useful and emancipatory knowledge. Yet, despite the challenges, there is something valuable to hold onto in critical ethnography. Such a critical approach to research has helped to illuminate how theory informs lived experience as well as how larger social structures can inhibit the development of

transformative social practice. In order to keep alive the valuable elements of this approach, yet at the same time seriously attend to criticisms and challenges, the time is ripe for the development of a postcritical ethnography.

The central theme of postcritical ethnography is the need to thoughtfully and systematically interrogate the assumptions and structures that we as critically oriented researchers bring to the research process. Too often, the guiding frame of critical ethnography is that there is a contradiction between the lived realities, behaviors, and choices of marginalized groups and the kinds of actions needed to emancipate them from real structures of domination and oppression. Critical researchers argue that the hegemony of dominant structures creates a false consciousness in people that disables them from effectively challenging the status quo. Yet, what we have not considered enough are the ways in which many critical researchers substitute one form of hegemony for another. That is, they do not truly problematize their own understanding of the social world, and rather argue for the oppressed to replace their false consciousness with the "critical consciousness" the researcher has. To combat this problem, the first step toward a postcritical ethnography is genuine reflectivity on the part of the critical researcher that allows for a dialectic between macro and micro understandings. In simple terms, this means that critical researchers need to give up the implicit assumption that they know how the world works and power operates, and the researched don't.

The goal of this chapter is to develop a vision for a postcritical ethnography that can better actualize the aim of transformation of the lived world of oppressed peoples, and not simply confirm that critical theorists have it "right." To do this, I begin by briefly describing the location and orienting ideas of critical ethnography to provide context. Second, I describe what is wrong with this picture and detail contemporary challenges. Third, I offer some direction and vision for doing postcritical ethnography. To support this vision, I draw on three traditions that are peripherally related to critical ethnography: educative research, emancipatory research, and ethnography of empowerment. Together, these can help support the development of a postcritical ethnography, one that I envision as critical, reflective, dialogic, collaborative, and ultimately pedagogical. This issue is particularly relevant to educators because it cuts to the heart of questions of epistemology, the purposes of inquiry, and the relationship between theory and the lived realities of people.

WHAT IS CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

Considering current assessments of the field, critical ethnography is in a somewhat celebratory mode. Those reflecting on the field have argued how far the field has come in its evolution and how useful it has been in transforming traditional ethnography into a more socially relevant practice. Before problematizing

its current state, it is important to reappraise the status of the field. A number of overview articles in the last decade have attempted to do just that (Anderson, 1989; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Quantz, 1992). Although there is not the space here to do a more contemporary assessment in depth, it is important to characterize the orienting themes and questions of critical ethnography, to which postcritical ethnography builds from and responds to. Historically, critical ethnography emerges in part as a consequence of the interplay between existent social structures and the possibilities of human agency. Anderson (1989) described this relationship succinctly:

Critical ethnography in the field of education is the result of the following dialectic: On the one hand, critical ethnography has grown out of dissatisfaction with social accounts of "structures" like class, patriarchy, and racism in which real human actors never appear. On the other hand, it has grown out of dissatisfaction with cultural accounts of human actors in which broad social constraints like class, patriarchy, and racism never appear. (p. 249)

The basic concern of critical ethnographers is that by not explicating how the local contexts they study are situated within larger social and historical structures, traditional ethnographers contribute to simply reproducing the status quo, including its constitutive asymmetrical relations of power. Traditional ethnographic practices are thus "generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class, race, and gender oppression" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 291). In response, critical ethnographers begin research with the ethical imperatives to challenge disempowering forms of social reproduction, to expose oppression and repression, and ultimately to make the world a better place. In so doing, they embrace and "reassert the basic aim of the Enlightenment ideal of inquiry; to improve human existence by viewing knowledge for its emancipatory or repressive potential" (McLaren & Giarelli, 1995, p. 2).

Critical ethnographers claim that the central point of research is to develop forms of critical consciousness, both in the researcher and the researched, that can lead to positive social change. Ultimately, they study society in order to transform it for the better. To do this, they argue that ethnographies of local groups or societies need to be situated within a broader discourse of history, politics, economics, and power. This means that the experiences of people cannot be allowed to simply speak for themselves, but must be connected to macro analyses; for example, of the way power operates in society. Thus, critical ethnographers call for a dialectic between micro and macro analyses that can help to unveil how marginalized people are structurally positioned and how through their actions they may unknowingly participate in their own oppression. Without a connection to larger social structures, ethnography cannot support the efforts of local groups to transform their subordinate status and "can too easily

become a romantic display of the exotic life-styles of the marginal, a voyeuristic travel log through the subcultures of society" (Quantz, 1992, p. 461). Critical ethnography aims to counter the colonialistic and voyeuristic tendencies of traditional ethnography by beginning research with conscious political intentions of letting practice inform theory, and theory inform practice, in order that the powerless can be empowered and emancipated.

The explicit goal of critical ethnography is emancipation. Thomas (1993) wrote that such research begins "from a premise that social constraints exist and that research *should* be emancipatory" (p. 21). Hence, the value of research is linked to how useful it is in the development of a critical consciousness that allows people to alter the conditions of their oppression. Research generated knowledge, that builds on the dialectic between macro and micro understandings, is at heart, "utopian and transformative" (Quantz, 1992, p. 462). Such a transformative research practice has multiple goals. First, it aims to let the voices of marginalized groups speak. The purpose of this is for them to help construct, modify, inform, and enhance critical theories for understanding the world, thereby also addressing the absence of human voice and agency in traditional critical social theories. Second, it serves in the reconstruction and representation of their voices in ways that subvert efforts to sustain their powerlessness. In this sense, critical ethnography helps to alter marginalized peoples' limited consciousness about larger social structures and to ensure that the researched "are not naively enthroned" in ways of thinking and acting which hegemonically reproduce their marginalization, and instead disempowering social structures are "systematically and critically unveiled" (Thompson, 1981, p. 43, cited in Anderson, 1989, p. 253). Third, and perhaps overriding, the goal of critical ethnography is to change the material conditions of oppressed peoples' existence in emancipatory and empowering ways. "The source of this emancipatory action involves the researchers' ability to expose the contradictions of the world of appearances accepted by the dominant culture as natural and inviolable" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 292), and then further, to provide vision and direction for more liberatory social practices.

CHALLENGES TO THE TRADITION

Clearly, in some ways critical ethnographers have been successful in their aims. Most notably, they have been able to enrich macro analyses of society by describing how marginalized groups are "positioned in material and symbolic relations" and how they "participate in these relations" (Quantz, 1992, p. 468). The paradigmatic exemplar is Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*, in which he showed how despite working-class boys' seeming understanding of, and resistance to, structural constraints, they nevertheless adopt values and behaviors that reproduce their class posi-

