

# Postcritical Ethnography: An Introduction

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Critical ethnography is at a crossroads. The crossroads is a product of its multiple origins. The origins were a complex and shifting synthesis. Marxist ideas had been shifting away from the deterministic scientific positivism of the "late" Marx, and toward the "early" humanistic Marx who wrote of alienation as a product of capitalism. This was exemplified in the critical social theory of the Frankfurt School. Critical theory, however, was largely philosophical and lacked a methodology to allow it to expand into the social sciences. At the same time, interpretive ethnography was expanding beyond anthropology and symbolic interactionist sociology, revitalized by the sociology of knowledge, especially Berger and Luckmann's synthesis of Schutz and Mannheim and the work of Geertz (1973, 1983, 1988). Interpretive ethnography, was beleaguered by charges of relativism, and largely relegated to the status of a "micro" theory. It was seen by many as useful at the level of social interaction, but lacking a theoretical base to also be a "macro" institutional and sociocultural approach. What both perspectives shared was a leftist orientation, albeit of rather different kinds, and a need for what the other could offer. The wedding was first seen as creating a "new" sociology of education, which gave way to a critical ethnography as educational anthropology expanded in numbers of scholars and significance of their studies. The marriage has been extremely productive, but has also

revealed that marriages do not always redress the problems that each partner had prior to the union.

In this volume, we articulate what seems to be ahead in critical ethnography. The marriage of critical theory and interpretative ethnography is troubled. Critique is increasingly understood as giving interpretive and political powers to the critic. As the critique of women and people of color have repeatedly demonstrated, critique usurps and appropriates the rights of representation even as it seeks to emancipate. Ethnography has been reconceptualized as well. Ethnography was construed in the context of colonialism, and realization has reoriented who and what is being represented and whose interests are being served. The outside ethnographer model is in many places giving way to "native ethnographers" (Benard & Pedruza, 1989; Jennings, 1999). Yet, native ethnography has its own problems, as Villenas (1996) so aptly demonstrated in her account of her work as an expression of the "colonizer/colonized" dilemma.

This book is one of the products of the "postcritical working group." We literally, have spent years reading, thinking, discussing, and writing about "where we are" in critical ethnography. We admittedly began approaching the project theoretically, and then as members of the group did their own studies we began to see that some of the possibilities are what might be called a *postcritical ethnography*. For us, postcritical ethnography is not one single thing, rather it is many. It is less about unity and more about difference. The emphasis on critique remains and is in fact expanded as it addresses objectification (McCadden, Dempsey, & Adkins, 1999), representation (Givens, 1999), and positionality (Murillo, 1999a).

We are also not claiming that we are in fact doing something absolutely new here. Rather, we see it as our efforts to think through in different ways, the concerns we had trying to work in the current context of changing ideas about critique and ethnography. We are learning a lot from both the new experiments with ethnography, as well as the efforts of critical theorists who are trying to push similar ground, but in different ways.

Postcritical ethnography also signals our recognition that critical ethnography is being challenged by ideas of postmodernists and post-structuralists (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). The "post" then signals not a new "stage," but rather its absence. Things are changing, but we are not sure they are moving toward a new idea. Indeed, this book expresses the working group's commitment to not promote an idea. Rather we are promoting the broader possibilities and dimensions offered by multiple ideas.

We also think that it is necessary for us to account for how we got to here. We do this in a few ways. First, we present how the marriage has gone since the wedding, offering a historical narrative of the ideas, as now we see them. Second, we describe the process that the working group went through to get to these writings. Yet we want to be clear. There were as many stories as participants in the process. We emphasize this by presenting a story in this introduction, albeit a multivoiced analysis, and not a generalized account. Third,

we each situate our work in our texts. We discuss the contributions that follow as a way of introducing the reader to our work and collective project. Yet for us, the focus should be less on where we came from, but where we are, and what we are struggling with after critical ethnography.

We embark with an understanding that postcritical ethnography is neither a rejection of critique nor of ethnography. Rather, the many different postcritical ethnographies are reinscriptions of critique in ethnography. They are products of the marriage of critical theory and interpretive ethnography, as well as a reflection of the struggle and work of women and people of color to be heard in this family.

In this introduction, we examine how the marriage has gone since the wedding. It is a story of mutual benefit and of heady and provocative accomplishments, all built on a difference that, although repeatedly spoken, could not be directly addressed without dissolving the union. The difference is critical theory's claims to "objective reality and its determinate representation" (Hollinger, 1994, p. 81) and interpretive ethnography's claim that all knowledge, including critical theory, is socially constructed. The former accepted the latter's view to the extent that it embraced "situated knowledge" (Mirón, 1996); the latter accepted the former's view to the extent that it accepted the centrality of power and ideology in social constructions.

There is a larger point to this chapter, however, that anyone interested in research methodology, whether quantitative or qualitative, should consider. Research methods and theory are all too often taught separately and implicitly portrayed as having different natures. Theory is taught as attempts to understand the world they have a history and thus are tentative, historically specific, and ultimately subject to the results of continued research. It is this latter step that helps to frame how research methods are to be understood. Research methods are often characterized as the arbiters of theory. As such, students are often left with the understanding that methods are different from theory. When research is taught as a series of techniques, students learn that there are right and wrong ways to do whatever methodology being taught. The implicit and often explicit lesson is that research methods are not like ideas. When taught as arbiters of ideas, methods have a higher status than theory and have an explicit aesthetic that separates good from bad ways to know. Students are smart. They learn this message.

Unfortunately, qualitative researchers are often as guilty as quantitative researchers in this, but the point of this chapter is that methods are ideas and theories in themselves. They have histories, are best understood as tentative, and are not separate from the theories they are used to test or explore. We argue that method and theory are linked by people in concrete historical and ideational contexts. When ideas are joined in paradigmatically new ways, they produce an exciting program of "normal science" (Kuhn, 1970, p. 10), that over time reveals the problematic assumptions of the paradigm. This is the case with critical ethnography, as we posit. Yet we do not want readers to interpret this point

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fatalistically. We are at a crossroads, and this gives us new possibilities. We should not approach the crossroads thinking we are forced to choose one of the existing roads. We should not choose between critical theory and ethnography. Instead, we see that researchers are cutting new paths to reinscribing critique in ethnography.

Our approach, put too simply, is to turn the tools of ideology critique on critical ethnography itself, and to suggest a new future for critical ethnography. We call this future (and its present manifestations) *postcritical ethnography*.

### CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Critical ethnography has a history of some 30 years. It emerged following what was seen as a crisis in social science (Gouldner, 1970) when discipline boundaries were fraying (Geertz, 1973), and when many Western democracies were being challenged by emancipatory social movements. Marxism was instrumental in challenging dominant social theories, but was in transition itself to a neo-Marxism (and now post-Marxism) that was less deterministic and less associated with the Soviet Union. Hall (1986) characterized it as "Marxism without guarantees." As it has developed, critical ethnography has spanned disciplines and nations. Clearly, it does not have a unitary history but rather a set of histories (some of which we discuss later) demarcated by the lives of individual scholars and sets of scholars and how these lives interpenetrated the many ideas that we now describe as critical ethnography.

One of the central ideas guiding critical ethnography is that social life is constructed in contexts of power. Thus, the histories we offer here must be understood as our social construction. We encourage readers to seek other views, other inscriptions.

There are many different definitions of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996). In part, this is because critical ethnography is embedded in the expansion of qualitative research methods and because its origins were multiple. Indeed, Quantz (1992) argued that "no answer is likely to satisfy critical ethnographers themselves, because to define the term is to assume an epistemological stance in which the social world can be precisely defined—a position that is not very critical" (p. 448). Nonetheless, many authors have struggled through this multiplicity of definitions with the goal of conceptual clarity. Thomas (1993) offered a distinction between conventional ethnography and critical ethnography: "Conventional ethnography describes what is; critical ethnography asks what could be" (p. 4). That is, "critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose." As he explained, critical ethnographers are "raising their voice to speak *to* an audience *on behalf* of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving more authority to the subjects' voice" (p. 4).

