

## Promising Rhetoric for Postcritical Ethnography

Michael G. Gunzenhauser  
Oklahoma State University

Using a research practice that combines critical social theory with a methodological orientation influenced by anthropology and sociology (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), critical ethnographers aim to explore the experiences of the oppressed and expose the underlying social practices that contribute to their oppression. One intended result is that researchers may learn about the everyday cultural experience of the oppressed and bring their lives to the attention of the general public—or at least to those who would read the written version of critical ethnographers' research. Furthermore, through their analysis or actions in the field, critical ethnographers hope to free the oppressed or at least to contribute in some way to their emancipation.

In this chapter, I define *critical ethnography* as entailing four promises—giving voice, uncovering power, identifying agency, and connecting analysis to cultural critique—that pervade the practice of and literature about critical ethnography (Anderson, 1989, 1994; Carspecken, 1996; Goodman, 1998; Jordan & Yeomans, 1995; Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994; Quantz, 1992; Thomas, 1993). I explain the promises more fully and identify limitations in their application. I argue that these promises frequently come into conflict with each other, resulting in a conflicted and inconsistent research practice that overwhelms the critical ethnographers' ethical commitment to the oppressed. For

imagining a postcritical ethnographic practice, I suggest that researchers refine the existing promises of critical ethnography and adopt two additional promises, that of self-reflexivity and nonexploitation, to temper the original four promises and maintain a defensible ethical commitment.

#### **CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY AS THE ARTICULATION OF FOUR PROMISES**

My definition of critical ethnography combines definitions from recent descriptions of practice (just noted) with Patton's (1990) description of symbolic interactionism. As a combined practice, critical ethnography appropriates the field methods of ethnography, notably participant observation, to concentrate on questions of symbolic interactionism, notably the search for explanations of how persons live their lives within the constraints of social life, and analyzes them within the theoretical framework of critical theory. Critical ethnography is interdisciplinary, and the crossing of academic genres and theoretical traditions is strategic in that the various strengths of these genres are combined to some extent to correct or augment the deficiencies of a single research tradition. Critical ethnographers do not necessarily adopt all of the methodological assumptions of ethnography as practiced by anthropologists, and because so many practices may "count" as critical ethnography, some practitioners lean more toward one tradition rather than another. They tend to borrow particular methods and appropriate from other qualitative forms of inquiry, such as oral history.

The practice is linked more by its aims than by methodological specificity. The aims of critical ethnography are presented here as a series of rhetorical "promises," not to be cynical about the aims of critical ethnography but to step back from the aims and question how they may be achieved. As anthropologist George Marcus (1995) argued, ethnography within the realm of anthropological practice operates with a multifaceted, historically and socially situated rhetoric that should be under constant scrutiny and critique. From recent conceptualizations of critical ethnography, it is evident that its proponents think of their research as succeeding insofar as it accomplishes four things. Critical ethnography is a political project in which a social science researcher appropriates the tools of ethnography and promises to communicate the voice of the oppressed, uncover differential power relations, discover agency, and connect particular experience to social critique. This is a rather heady collection of promises, and all critical ethnographers do not necessarily share them. Many do however, and the definition is consistent with researchers who have described their practice (Fine, 1991; Haig-Brown, 1995; Lather & Smithies, 1997; MacLeod, 1987/1995; Nespor, 1997; Roman, 1993; Willis, 1977/1981).

As Goodman (1998) observed, the term *critical ethnography* is somewhat of an oxymoron. He said, "After all, many critical scholars in education view ethnography as too atheoretical in their approach to research while ethnographers see critical scholars as too ideological" (p. 51). The rhetoric of the combined practice promises a balance. However, each promise is rather difficult to keep, and together, they make the success of critical ethnography even more problematic. In the following, I explain the four promises in greater detail, pulling examples from critical ethnographies and similar studies, and I suggest augmentations and additions. I analyze them in pairs to highlight some of the contradictions between them.

### PROMISING VOICE AND SOCIAL CRITIQUE

In critical ethnographic practice, the promises of giving voice to the oppressed and linking lived experience to social critique come together at times, and at other times they are in conflict. Among all of the rhetorical promises of critical ethnography, theorists are in close agreement that the use of ethnographic methods allows researchers to give voice to their research subjects. Critical ethnographers borrow the rhetorical weight of voice from ethnography, ground voice in structure, and use voice for political transformation. These three aspects compare roughly to the three aspects of voice identified by Fine (1994): ventriloquy, "voices," and activism. Critical ethnographers claim voice as access to the lives of the oppressed, such that the words of the oppressed are described, but they go further (Thomas, 1993). They claim different aims for the use of voice. As Thomas argued:

Conventional ethnographers generally speak *for* their subjects, usually to an audience of other researchers. Critical ethnographers, by contrast, accept an added research task of 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)

From this excerpt alone, it is not clear that there is a meaningful distinction between "speaking for" and "speaking on behalf of." In the context of his argument, Thomas' use of "for" in the first sentence seems intended to mean "in place of." The phrase "on behalf of" implies a greater commitment. For Thomas, the project of critical ethnography is to use theoretical constructs to describe others' experience in relation to a larger social context, specifically (oppressive) social structures, so that critical ethnographers may work politically on behalf of the oppressed.

There are many examples of giving voice to respondents in critical ethnographies. This is not surprising considering that traditional ethnography

has been structured to do this as well. The distinction here, following Thomas (1993), is how the voices of the oppressed may be used for their own benefit. Much of Fine's (1991) analysis in *Framing Dropouts* is intended to show how the school in her study systematically silences resistant and alternative voices. Part of her project is to reclaim the voices of her respondents. It serves her critical purposes because she interprets the voices themselves to be critical. The voices seem to criticize the school and dominant culture in much the same way Fine would.

As is often the case in critical ethnography, the privileged voices carry the social critique in *Framing Dropouts*. The link between data and social critique, the second promise addressed here, is an issue around which authors of qualitative research texts have defined critical research (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 1990). For Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) and Carspecken (1996), the link to social critique is one of two main characteristics of critical ethnography, the first being politics. Critical ethnographers see social theory as an important lens through which they analyze data. McLaren (1987) advocated this fervently elsewhere, and it is noted as a distinction throughout the critical ethnography literature.

Without analysis that focuses on power relations, Quantz (1992) maintained, social research serves no political project and instead maintains the status quo. Significantly, Quantz described this orientation toward power as being a reflection of a value system. He said:

Critical ethnographers impose a value system that requires the researcher to place any culture into a wider discourse of history and power, which serves an emancipatory interest, whereas other ethnographers impose a value system that requires the researcher to treat every culture as if it were independent of or, at most, interactive with history and power. From a critical perspective, these studies ultimately serve the interest of the status quo. (p. 471)

This value system may be a system of nonmoral values, in other words, principles of good research practice. I argue, moreover, that Quantz's argument for the importance of power amounts to a value system that incorporates moral values as well. In other words, critical ethnographers not only see their research practice as good research in terms of quality, but they see it as morally appropriate as well. This suggests that Quantz may imagine a connection between the ethical commitment to use research for emancipatory purposes and the process in which researchers acquire and interpret data. It is in many ways an interest in emancipatory knowledge (Habermas, 1972/1978), with the methodological difficulties associated with communicative action.

Most early critical ethnographers acquire, interpret, and present voices to support social critique, but the linkage is far more tenuous than that imagined in the ideal speech situation (Habermas, 1981/1984). In an early critical ethnog-

