

## 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-

tions. More recently, Fine (1991), in *Framing Dropouts: Notes on the Politics of an Urban Public High School*, enriched critical reproduction theory by describing the ways in which

low-income schools officially contain rather than explore social and economic contradictions, condone rather than critique prevailing social and economic inequities, and usher children and adolescents into ideologies and ways of interpreting social evidence that legitimate rather than challenge conditions of inequity. (p. 61)

In *Ain't No Makin' It: Aspirations & Attainment in a Low-Income Neighborhood*, MacLeod (1995), through studying two groups of lower income boys, illustrated "how poverty circumscribes the horizons of young people and how, at the societal level, the class structure is reproduced" (p. 10). Yet critical ethnographies, in general, have not been completely successful. Although they have unquestionably enhanced the development of critical "theory," it is patently unclear how successful they have been in their other expressed aim, that is, transforming the lives of oppressed peoples. This is not to say they haven't made an impact in this direction, but based on the way they are written and presented, it is doubtful. Jordan and Yeomans (1995) concurred, suggesting that although critical ethnography "has achieved respectability and is now part of the qualitative tradition within universities, the question remains as to whether it has had any significant impact beyond the seminar room" (p. 399).

There are several challenges that compromise the ability of critical ethnographers to have an impact beyond the academy. These include the questionable relationship between the researchers and the researched, the fact that critical ethnographers seem too theory-driven, and the lack of genuine reflexivity about the research process, product, and its impact. Given the stated goal of social transformation, the role of the research and the researcher is unique in critical ethnography. Particularly, researchers are not in the setting simply to observe, record, and describe, but to interact with the researched in mutually beneficial ways. The goal is not only theoretical development, but also material transformation rooted in social and political action. In theory, both material and theoretical development are held up as equal, yet in practice, it is not obvious that critical ethnographers have actually contributed to material transformation. In part, this can be attributed to the somewhat distanced relationship between the researcher and the researched. Most often, critical ethnographers are highly educated, and thus socially privileged, scholars studying in very marginalized communities. In the research setting, they attempt to develop a dialogue between the lived world of people and the broader social structures they see as constraining, yet too often macro analyses are privileged and researcher expertise takes precedence over local knowledge. "Although critical ethnography purports to present us with a view from the bottom-up, its practitioners nonetheless come from the ivory towers of academia" (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p.

400), and have not yet developed effective ways of reaching both academic audiences and working with local communities. Moreover, "the ethnographers institutional or material standpoint within the everyday world is rarely connected or made problematic in relation to his or her subjects' lived actualities" (Jordan & Yeomans, 1995, p. 393).

Without a more developed sense of what a materially and theoretically efficacious relationship between researchers and the researched would look like, the ability for there to exist a true dialectic between the macro and micro worlds is compromised. The direct consequence is that the researchers' theoretical frame then takes center stage. It is for this reason that critical ethnographies are often criticized, as readers perceive the researchers' agenda and values dictating what they find in the research setting. In the worst case scenario, it is almost as if the data from a field study is forced to fit into a predetermined theoretical box, one whose walls are hermetically established prior to any actual empirical research. Lather (1991) highlighted the largely undialectic role played by theory in most critical ethnographies, proclaiming that "data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectic manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks, but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured" (p. 62). Given the ways in which some critical ethnographies are written, and even more pressing, the way in which critical ethnography in general is written about, it is obvious that the scales are tipped in favor of the a priori theory. This is reflected, for example, in the theoretically dense manner in which critical ethnography is written about; in the calls for critical ethnography to *appropriate* knowledge from more contemporary emancipatory discourses (i.e., liberation theology, feminism), which implies its own theoretical frame remains intact but is simply added to; and in the reference to critical researchers as maieutic agents, which, although suggesting dialogue, is patterned after the Socratic model wherein, rather than being open ended, Plato led his students to the answers he was looking for (e.g., Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 303; McLaren, 1987; Quantz, 1992, p. 475).

At the root of challenges faced by critical ethnography is the issue of reflexivity. Critical ethnographers talk about the importance of being self-reflective and critical about their methods and their presence in the field, but they don't seem to take this critique far enough. What is needed is more than just self-reflection, but reflection on the assumptions and frames brought to the research. As previously mentioned, critical ethnographers are accused of imposing their understandings on situations, as if their theory, for example one that explains social and cultural reproduction, is somehow sacred. Anderson (1994) wrote that "in their attempts at demystification, critical researchers tend to appeal to grand narratives as a basis for critique without acknowledging that these narratives are themselves historical constructs" (p. 234), and therefore they are necessarily open to change. Although critical ethnographers seem aware of this need to avoid reifying their own understandings of the social world, they have not yet, on the whole, fully addressed the implications of this

caution. As a result, they lean toward detached research and writing styles that appeal to academic audiences, but that don't appear to satisfy the demand to make the research have an impact beyond that audience. To meet the expressed goals of both theoretical development and social transformation, a rethinking of critical ethnographic practice is needed.

### A VISION OF POSTCRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Before sketching the elements of a postcritical ethnography, it is important to note that not all people doing critical ethnography fall into the traps previously described. Moreover, it is possible that critical ethnographies have had iterative impacts, that is, people reading them have been inspired to implement reform efforts. However, the promise of critical ethnography is research for social transformation. To live up to this promise, the way it is practiced needs improvements. Primarily, it needs to become more dialectic and less macro theory-driven. As such, postcritical ethnographic research would be more fully dialogic, collaborative, and pedagogical. By pedagogical, I mean that both the researcher and the researched would be learning during the process, as well as developing the tools for making positive social changes that are emergent from local communities, not thrust upon them. There are several research models that critical ethnographers can learn and draw from in developing a postcritical ethnography that holds itself accountable to making a positive difference in the lives of research subjects. These traditions only peripherally intersect with the literature on critical ethnography; they do not claim to be doing critical ethnography nor do critical ethnographers claim them. For the purpose of envisioning a postcritical ethnography, I draw from three such traditions: educative research, emancipatory research, and ethnography of empowerment. After briefly describing each of these, I draw elements from them and conclude by offering some direction for the further development of a postcritical ethnography.

#### **Educative Research**

Educative research grows out of the concern that traditional forms of research, both quantitative and qualitative, elevate the researcher to the privileged position of expert knowledge producer at the expense of the voices of research subjects. Developed by Gitlin (1990) and Gitlin and Russell (1994) for use with classroom teachers, the central goal of educative research is to alter the traditional relationship between the researcher and the researched such that research subjects' voices, problems, and concerns become the focus of the research. Such research builds from the premise that research subjects have legitimacy and authority to produce socially useful knowledge. Methodologically, educa-

tive research involves self-reflection by teachers, reflection on their social context, and dialogue. The bulk of the responsibility for research is in the hands of teachers themselves, who develop "texts" (i.e., written reflections on such things as the structure of their schools, why they became teachers, and their current problems) that are then shared in dialogue with other teachers and university researchers. In this dialogue process, problems are posed to the "texts," common points of struggle are identified, and alternatives to current practice envisioned. The process is fluid, with aims of challenging limiting educational practices, engaging teachers in on-going reflection and critique so that they can gain more control over their environments, and ultimately empowering them to collectively make changes. What is important about this process is that research subjects are not "acted on" but instead are seen as knowledge producers whose voices are pivotal. With researcher support and facilitation, they are empowered to identify problems and collectively work toward solutions.

### **Emancipatory Research**

Like educative research, emancipatory research takes the voices, knowledges, and perceptions of the researched seriously. As described by Lather (1991), it is built on a vision of reciprocity between the researcher and the researched. This "implies give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power" (p. 57). Like critical ethnography, the stated objective is to use research to help people to better understand their social situations so that they can be empowered to change them. The guiding frames of emancipatory research are self-reflection, collaboration, negotiation, and dialogue. Lather (1991) argued that a more shared and truly negotiated approach to inquiry is needed, one where participants are involved with the researcher in a process of dialectical theory building. More so than educative research, Lather (1991) cited the importance of ideological critique as part of emancipatory research, suggesting that the central challenge and paradox of critical theory is that "theory must be grounded in the self-understandings of the dispossessed even as it seeks to enable them to re-evaluate themselves and their situations" (p. 65). Methodologically, emancipatory research is still evolving. Particularly in response to the concern of theoretical imposition, steps include interactive, dialogic interviews; sequential interviewing of both individuals and small groups to facilitate collaboration; and ongoing negotiation of meaning with research subjects in "a collaborative effort to build empirically rooted theory" (p. 61). The goal of emancipatory research is to help participants to develop more critical forms of understanding needed to change their lives. Lather (1991) suggested assessment of its effectiveness in terms of catalytic validity, that is "the degree to which the research process re-orient, focuses and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it" (p. 68).



