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# 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

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).

Carspecken (1996) elaborated the definition by specifying that critical researchers have both a value orientation and a critical epistemology that characterizes their work. To paraphrase (and quote), the value orientation of critical ethnography includes the following:

1. Research is to be used in cultural and social criticism.
2. Researchers are opposed to inequality in all its forms.
3. Research should be used to reveal oppression and to challenge and change it.
4. "All forms of oppression should be studied."
5. Mainstream research contributes to oppression and thus critical epistemology should presuppose equal power relations. (pp. 6-7)

Carspecken then elaborated central points of critical epistemology. Again paraphrasing (and quoting), he listed the following:

1. Critical epistemology must be extremely precise about the relationship of power to research claims, validity claims, culture, and thought.
2. "Critical epistemology must make the fact/value distinction very clear and must have a precise understanding of how the two interact."
3. Critical epistemology must include a theory of how symbols are used to represent reality, how this changes, and how power is implicated in symbolic representation and changes in symbolic representation. (p. 9)

Taken together, then, Carspecken highlighted the centrality of working against power and oppression as key elements of critical ethnography, and for him this acts on two levels. First, the critical ethnographer works against oppression by revealing and critiquing it. Equally important, however, is that critical ethnographers understand that knowledge itself is a social practice interpenetrated with power. To that end, critical ethnographers must explicitly consider how their own acts of studying and representing people and situations are acts of domination even as critical ethnographers reveal the same in what they study. In this, Carspecken asked that critical ethnography turn its value orientation and epistemological understandings back on itself.

These definitional attempts help us understand what may be involved in doing critical ethnography, but this must come with a caution. As Quantz (1992) argued, critical ethnography is not so much a thing in itself as a project within a wider discourse:

> Critical ethnography is one form of an empirical project associated with critical discourse, a form in which a researcher utilizing field methods that

> place the researcher on-site attempts to re-present the "culture," the "consciousness," or the "lived experiences" of people living in asymmetrical power relations. As a "project," critical ethnography is recognized as having conscious political intentions that are oriented toward emancipatory and democratic goals. What is key to this approach is that for ethnography to be considered "critical" it should participate in a larger "critical" dialogue rather than follow any particular set of methods or research techniques. (pp. 448-449)

Quantz recognized that this type of definition favors the critical side over the ethnographic side, but viewed this as appropriate because critical ethnographers refuse to separate theory from method. As we return to later, this also privileges only one of the theories that were part of the origins of critical ethnography. Yet Quantz was quite correct in arguing that to understand critical ethnography, one must place it in both a wider discourse and in the history of that discourse.

Anderson (1989) offered the following account of the origins of critical ethnography in education:

> Critical ethnography in the field of education is the result of the following dialectic: On one hand, critical ethnography has grown out of the dissatisfaction with social accounts of "structures" like class, patriarchy, and racism in which real actors never appear. On the other hand, it has grown out of dissatisfaction with cultural accounts of human actors in which broad structural constraints like class, patriarchy, and racism never appear. Critical theorists in education have tended to view ethnographers as too atheoretical and neutral in their approach to research. Ethnographers have tended to view critical theorists as too theory driven and biased in their research. (p. 249)

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a growing challenge to the dominant positivistic paradigm for educational and social research. The functionalist theory (with its focus on the social functions and systems of social arrangements that contribute to equilibrium) that undergirds positivism was being challenged by Marxist theory that emphasized instead class struggle and conflict as the basis of social arrangements. At the same time, positivistic science was increasingly seen as inappropriately applied to social and cultural life. Although positivism posited a social and cultural life that was objective and deterministic, it was increasingly argued that social life was in many ways subjective and socially constituted. Thus, accounts of real life required a research methodology that could capture the actual nature of social arrangements and cultural beliefs. The challenge itself was situated in a history of positivists using their notions of science and theory to critique other notions of science and theory. Neo-Marxism and ethnography were both under attack by positivists. As neo-Marxists rejected an overly deterministic Marxism in favor of ideology critique, positivists charged that they were idealists and had no methodology for empirical research.

Ethnographers influenced by both interpretivism and the sociology of knowledge were leaving behind functionalism, when positivists then charged that ethnography had no theory and was relativistic. Faced with the dominant paradigm's critiques, and with a shared interest in the less powerful, the union of critical theory and interpretive ethnography proved to be productive.

However, this account is both somewhat ahistorical and acontextual. To understand the progress and predicaments of critical ethnography, it is necessary to historize critical ethnography and to place it in at least three intellectual contexts. First, we review Quantz's (1992) history of critical ethnography. Second, we want to place critical ethnography in the context of the other developments with ethnography and qualitative research in education. Third, Wexler (1987) provided a more contextual and critical history that reframes critical ethnography, and explicated some of the problems experienced by critical ethnography. All these, in turn, help us tether to a reconsideration of the postmodern challenges to critical ethnography and ultimately to the broader possibilities and dimensions of a postcritical ethnography.

Quantz (1992) viewed the discourse of critical ethnography as being primarily based both in Great Britain and the United States. In the United States, deviance studies, most notably the qualitative, symbolic interactionist studies of Becker (1963, 1964) in sociology were a call to take the side of the underdog and to do so by using the perspectives of the underdogs to challenge conventional worldviews. Becker's (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961) study made it clear that even medical students could be understood similarly to be victims of schools and that educational research should be directed away from improving educational efficiency and toward legitimating student perspectives.

Similarly, a symbolic interactionist, social anthropology was developing through a series of case studies of British schools (cf. Hargreaves, 1967). Studies of this type were critiqued as a relativistic romanticism that makes the deviant an exotic and a victim rather than unpacking and attacking the ideology and power that limits the emancipation of the subject. As the British symbolic interactionist studies continued, they became more influenced by continental critical thought which "attempted to get beneath the social consciousness to the material basis for that consciousness" (Quantz, 1992, p. 455). At the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, ethnographic methods were adopted as the methodology of choice for critical studies. There, culture was conceived as having a material base, but was also highly complex and not reducible only to material relations. Quantz discussed the many ethnographies that resulted, including the now classic *Learning to Labor* (Willis, 1977) and *Working Class Girls and the Culture of Femininity* (McRobbie, 1978). These ethnographies inscribed resistance theory and defined a central problematic of resistance theory; resistance as a form of agency that reproduces dominance and ideology (Giroux, 1983).

In the United States, ethnography and field research in education had a long history but remained a minor tradition. In the 1960s, interactionist, phe-

nomenological, and sociolinguistic studies were emerging even as educational anthropology remained rather functionalist and traditional. By the 1970s, ethnography in education was becoming a worthy challenger to the positivist traditions. With the importation of the British critical studies and theoretical work of Michael Apple and Henry Giroux, an American critical ethnography was emerging. Everhart's (1983) *Reading, Writing and Resistance* and the works of Simon and Dippo (1986), and McLaren (1986) from Canada were stimulating and challenging to the more functionalist, interactionist, and linguistic educational ethnographies. The result according to Quantz was that: "the discursive traditions of critical theory have been strengthened by a method to incorporate experience, and the experiential methods of educational ethnography have been deepened by critical discourse" (p. 461).

As Quantz (1992) acknowledged, there is another account of critical ethnography that focuses on the ethnography side of critical ethnography in education. Ethnography in education was written against positivism and has had at least three "moves": importation of method, legitimation of method, and the crisis of representation and objectification.

Ethnography is historically based in anthropology and the study of culture. Although there were qualitative traditions in sociology and other disciplines that contributed to the importation of qualitative research into education, anthropological ethnography was claimed to be the most thorough and rigorous qualitative approach. Other approaches such as case studies and intensive interview studies were seen as valid but only an approximation of ethnography. These claims were part of what was imported with the ethnographic method from anthropology but took on special salience in education because of the dominance of positivism in education. Ethnography was being brought into education as a challenge to this dominance, and the battles were heated and continue to even today (Cizek, 1995). The "imported" ethnography in education was being fashioned as a weapon that was reshaped in reaction to outcomes of the battles. Early qualitative articles and books in education (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) directly accosted positivist claims about knowledge, and studies often took the form of taking a generalization derived from quantitative research and demonstrating how it did not account for what was revealed in an ethnographic study. Ethnography in education soon looked different from the ethnographies of education done by anthropologists, and there were complaints from the anthropologists about the changes being made (Jacob, 1987; Spindler, 1982).

In part, the complaints may have been about anthropology losing control over the method, but there was more to it. Anthropologists worked with ethnography in a context that largely defined ethnography the accepted method, while educational ethnographers were fighting for the acceptance of their methodology. In the latter context, ethnography's form was altered to meet the strategic needs of seeking legitimacy. Yet in the legitimation struggle, it was assumed that ethnography was a superior method. Unfortunately this ignored

ethnography's origins in colonialism. Rosaldo (1989) characterized the ethnography that was to be imported into education: the "Lone Ethnographer" (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 30) left his advanced civilization and traveled in search of a primitive native guided by beliefs in objectivism, monumentalism (accounts that render culture as a museum-like display), timelessness (primitives did not change), and a complicity with imperialism (Geertz, 1988). At the origins of critical ethnography then, neither critique nor ethnography themselves were critiqued.

The legitimacy struggle of ethnography in education took place on many fronts. This required adaptations of the methodology and a broadening of the methodology into a more generalized qualitative research, in which ethnography was but one variant. While the legitimacy struggle took place widely across the fields within education (curriculum studies, social foundations, educational administration, and so on, and is still is engaged in areas such as special education), we focus here on two of the major fronts in which the struggle took different forms: educational evaluation and educational research.

One of the key sites of the legitimacy struggle was in educational evaluation where the press of producing useful knowledge was revealing the limits of quantitative methods. Positivism was unable to respond to the "political inherency" (Greene, 1994) of program evaluation, and was increasingly critiqued as arrogant in the demands for positivistic rigor and irrelevant because it could not situate itself in the real world of decision making (Greene, 1994). The alternatives to positivism were being argued in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Scriven's (1967) argument that evaluation was best understood as a process of valuing, and his argument for a goal-free approach to evaluation (Scriven, 1973) undercut the claims of scientific evaluators that programs should be goal-based. House (1977) made his classic distinction between merit and worth in evaluation, arguing against positivism as he argued for evaluation being based on assessments of worth of various stakeholders. Cronbach (1980), Guba and Lincoln (1981), and many others also contributed to the movement and by the 1980s, the struggle for legitimacy had eased into détente.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) did not, however, limit themselves only to evaluation, and thus were key participants in the legitimacy struggle on other fronts as well. They and others (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982) began to articulate qualitative methods as legitimate in educational research in general. Educational research had been not only positivistic, but largely psychological as well. Qualitative researchers in education countered with appeals to their disciplinary bases in sociology and anthropology. This claim to legitimacy, of course, is somewhat different than the basis wrought in educational evaluation just discussed. Here, the legitimation strategy went beyond the claims that positivism was unable to capture the complexity of education, and in doing so, inadvertently undercut the claim that education could be a discipline of its own. Ironically, the claims to disciplinary basis was being accomplished as the sanctity of disciplines themselves was giving way to "blurred genres" (Geertz, 1973). Although qualitative researchers in education

were also ultimately successful in achieving a form of détente in educational research, they did so by reinforcing positivistic assumptions that methods were to be justified by claims to disciplines outside of education. This also meant that the grounds for legitimation within education were to be essentially methodological.

The result has had a reinscription of positivism's methodological fetish and reproducing it in qualitative methods as well. Scholars worked on analogies for quantitative validity and reliability (Kirk & Miller, 1986; LeCompte & Goetz, 1982), criteria for trustworthiness (Guba, 1981), improved techniques (Krueger, 1988; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mishler, 1986), synthesizing multiple studies (Noblit & Hare, 1988), and paradigm and epistemological justifications (Guba, 1990). This methodological fetish resulted in a burgeoning industry of texts and handbooks, including this one. Much of this work is interesting and provocative to read, but the point is that much of this work has been driven externally by concerns for legitimacy.

Legitimating qualitative research proceeded on other grounds as well. Qualitative research was rhetorically constructed as representing the interests of oppressed peoples. The focus on multiple perspectives did in fact allow qualitative research to represent the interests of those who were not being heard in the wider educational discourse. This alignment led to qualitative research in education being about giving "voice" (Fine, 1994a) to the oppressed. Yet as Fine noted, voice all too easily gave way into ventriloquy, especially as the methodology struggled for legitimacy. The colonialist origins of ethnography, even with all the changes in qualitative methods, were still dominant.

As ethnography and qualitative research were seeking legitimacy in educational research, in part by appealing to discipline heritage, it was being argued that the interpretivist perspective was spreading across the humanities and social sciences, undercutting discipline claims and boundaries. The "blurred genres" (Geertz, 1973) posited that ethnographic accounts were interpretations of interpretations. In many ways, Geertz did not anticipate that this move would both promote qualitative researchers exploring the "linguistic turn" (Toews, 1987, p. 879), semiotics, and postructuralism, and ultimately contribute to a crisis of representation (Marcus & Fischer, 1986) within ethnography.

The crisis of representation meant that qualitative researchers could no longer make a strong claim to realism in their writing. That is, because ethnographers were constructing ethnographies as products of their own culture instead of producing accounts of others' culture, reflexivity, positionality (race, class, gender, actual orientation, and ideology of the researcher) and representation were issues to be addressed in both research and writing. McCadden et al. (1999) argued that representation is actually a derivative of a more substantial crisis of objectification. For them, the real issue is that poststructuralism and postmodernism problematize the idea that social life can be understood and rendered objectively. If objective accounts are impossible, then all accounts, including critical ethnographies, are productive of subjectivity. Without a basis