

## Promising Rhetoric for Postcritical Ethnography

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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-

raphy, Willis (1977/1981) contended that the "lads" in his study articulated a social critique that penetrates the dominant social structure. He uses their words in the text to show how consciousness of their oppression leads to adaptive behaviors and attitudes that make them better able to negotiate the culture of the shop floor when they leave school and join the working-class labor force. Willis sought to use empirical evidence to articulate a scientific explanation of a social phenomenon (the phenomenon of working-class youths getting working-class jobs). His primary aim was to postulate an explanation, the most reasonable explanation among alternatives.

Whether Willis (1977/1981) was justified in his analysis is another matter. It seems that alongside his aim of explaining a social phenomenon, Willis also had the aim of representing the voices of the working-class youth. One could argue that this aim was as important to Willis' project as the aim of explanation. Two critics of the ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Walker, 1985) took Willis to task for lending too much credence to the voices of the lads. In particular, they charged Willis with identifying too closely with the tougher youth, ignoring or downplaying the voices of the acquiescent working class youth (the *ear'oles*—Willis uses the lads' term), and accepting the lads' social critique uncritically. Particularly significant for Walker is that Willis (1985) did consider alternative explanations. Walker argues that Willis confused the lads' being recusant with their being resistant and that their critiques may not be valid if one considers that the youths are "schooled" in a controlling environment rather than "educated" in a more tolerant one. Instead, Willis privileged the lads' voices as examples of resistance. This seems to indicate a conflict between the two research aims.

The conflict occurred when Willis incorporated theory because critical theory takes prominence. Similarly to the hierarchical model of conventional research that philosopher of science Laudan (1984) criticized as being outdated, the theory grounds the selection of methods and the articulation of knowledge claims, but without the methods and knowledge having an impact on the theory itself. The theory remains static, in contrast to Laudan's contention that methods should constrain theory and aims should harmonize with theories.

The privileging of voice calls into question the ways in which knowledge claims are grounded by different cultural groups and in different cultural contexts. Willis (1977/1981) could assert that the voices of the lads carry more epistemological warrant because of their standpoint. It does seem that this stance would support Willis' privileging of their voices. This stance is not articulated, however. It would indeed be the case, however, if one were to accept a priori a privileged standpoint for the youth, for instance, if it could be shown that they had achieved a Marxist class consciousness, such that their perspective was one tied more closely to reality (Haraway, 1988). For Willis, this seems to be his implicit assumption, and so it gives (for him at least) the epistemological warrant to privilege the lads' voices. The question remains, however, whether their voices represent class consciousness.

In their critical ethnographies, Fine (1991) and MacLeod (1987/1995) also centered the voices and critiques of youth who are on the fringes of dominant culture. In one passage, Fine asked herself by jotting in her fieldnotes: "have I merely reversed the traditions of privilege, now privileging the voices of those silenced rather than the voices of those already privileged?" (p. 8). After Willis, the self-criticism is appropriate and refreshing. To justify the privileging of voice, Fine relied on a general notion that the voices of the dropouts are systematically silenced in the school and that her research would aim to recapture the silenced voices. This possibly reflects an epistemological argument for extra warrant for the silenced voices.

In his review of *Framing Dropouts*, Pallas (1993) faulted Fine (1991) for selecting iterative analysis for her text instead of more complete presentation of the data, or thick description. The result is that the voices of the dropouts, other students, parents, and teachers appear in an artificial context. The context is Fine's analytical categorization rather than an extensive context of the respondents' experience. As such, the aim of social critique takes prominence over the aim of bringing oppressed voices to the fore, although presumably the work could be made more consistent with elaborate contextualization of the voices.

As Dunwoody (1997) and Royster (1996) suggested in their critiques of *Ain't No Makin' It*, MacLeod (1987/1995) faced similar limitations to Willis (1977/1981). Specifically, MacLeod was susceptible to criticism that he privileged the voices and critiques of the "Hallway Hangers," the group of hyper-masculine, mostly White youth with low aspirations and low attainment. This was at the expense of the voices of women (excluded from the study) and the "Brothers," the group of mostly Black youth who have high aspirations but low attainment. Dunwoody argued that MacLeod granted greater importance to the material and class aspirations of the White youth, as opposed to the familial aspirations of the Black youth. The attainment of the Black youth was deemed less successful, despite evidence in the text to the contrary. MacLeod's emphasis of data serves to support his theory, although alternative perspectives are suggested in the data itself but remain unexplored. This critique suggests that the aim of privileging voice entails a notion of consistency that expands beyond one voice or the voice of one group of persons. MacLeod links resistance with violence and masculinity, but he does not challenge the male-centered theories he uses to analyze his data. More successfully than Fine (1991), MacLeod provides thick description and multiple voices, so that the reader may form alternative theoretical explanations.

Lather and Smithies' (1997) work, *Troubling the Angels: Women Living with HIV/AIDS*, makes the case for multiple voices more forcefully. In this ethnography of women diagnosed with HIV and AIDS, Lather and Smithies separated their own analysis from the voices of the women respondents. Lather and Smithies provided multiple descriptions of context in the text, and the women's stories are presented often exactly as delivered during interviews or

support group meetings. The effect is startling in its centering of voice. Significantly, the work is not explicitly a critical ethnography, certainly not in the definition stipulated here. As might be expected, the aims are different. Lather and Smithies did not aim (as I contend the other authors mentioned have) at providing the best theory among alternatives. Instead, they had several purposes. One was communicating the stories of women living with HIV/AIDS to multiple audiences. Another was providing crucial information about AIDS, particularly the risks for women. A third was exploration of the disease as a sociocultural phenomenon, particularly as it is tied to fears and prejudices about homosexuals, intravenous drug users, and women in general. With this third purpose, it could be argued that the work is indeed a critical ethnography, or at least that it takes on critical aspects. The work itself defies categorization, however, because in its representation it is unlike any research that has come before. Whether the work is a critical ethnography or not, it is significant for this discussion, because for Lather and Smithies (1997), voice and critique are co-existent aims. It takes on multiple purposes at the same time and seemingly serves multiple audiences. The authors took on several tasks to serve explicitly those to whom they have made a moral commitment.

The authors articulated well the reasons for presenting the women's voices as they do, but is the use of voice epistemologically justified? The question can only be asked if there is some knowledge claim associated with the use of voice. Perhaps Lather and Smithies (1997) claimed that the voices of the women amount to knowledge claims, or alternatively, Lather and Smithies may have suggested that the women's voices provide justification for knowledge claims that they as authors make. It does seem that the answer is both, but with qualifications. Lather and Smithies respected the voices of the women, giving their voices airing out of respect for the various theories of knowledge that may ground their own knowledge claims. At times, the voices present knowledge claims, and at other times, they would be best described by other constructs such as belief, superstition, opinion, or even deceit. It is what ethnographers usually refer to as *data*. Rarely do ethnographers present data in such a raw form, however.

Lather (1991) stated that she is less interested in elucidating existing theory than engaging in praxis. Lather cautioned that, with neo-Marxist research, often the aim is not to generate theory from data but to use data to confirm theory. Such a research aim—confirming *a priori* theory—may be a defensible research aim by itself. For a critical ethnographer, however, it may come into conflict with other promises, notably privileging of voice. Lather noted that the opportunity to develop new theory is lost in the process of confirmation or disputation. A researcher using ethnographic methods that involve the intersubjective development of theory should be open to critiques that contradict prior theory. The task then would not be to confirm *a priori* theory but critique it through the voices of others.

This approach may conflict with Quantz (1992), who characterized critical ethnographers as linking the research situation with "a wider discourse of history and power" (p. 471). The difficulties in this linkage result from deciding which parts of the wider discourse to link to and the relationship between the critique by the researcher and the critique by the researched.

The stress on social critique above all else (and by connection to prior theory) seems to maintain a force of its own, independent of the emancipation aim. It seems to be, as in McLaren's (1987) review of Peshkin's (1986) work perhaps, a moral conviction arising from a belief in the truthfulness of the theory. To do so, however, is to attribute absolute truth to prior theory and moral imperative to absolute truth. There is something appealing about that, in that it makes one's knowledge claims not only true but also morally right and may serve to ground actions that might otherwise come into conflict with others' knowledge claims and notions of what is right. It is appealing because it is powerful. It is also rather conventional ethically and epistemologically, however, entailing an ethic of control (Welch, 1990) and a Cartesian approach to knowledge. Moreover, the approach contradicts the aim to privilege voice and the aim to overcome differential power relations.

At this point, the distinction Thomas (1993) made between speaking *for* others and speaking *on behalf of* others does not seem as meaningful. It would be more appropriate if researchers were able to facilitate others speaking *on their own behalf*. Researchers do not necessarily communicate in the voice of others. This is more likely to be the case if the others' critique is shared with the reader explicitly, particularly if the researcher has taken the critique as a critique of his or her own experience or culture.

#### A FIFTH PROMISE: SELF-REFLEXIVITY

To temper and balance the promises of privileging voice and connecting lived experience to social critique, I argue that critical ethnographers need to make the additional promise of being self-reflexive. The risk is reinscribing power. Feminist social theorist Jane Flax (1995) would perhaps portray this tension as a holdover from Enlightenment self-deception about truth and knowledge and how they operate in Western culture. Flax sees all truth claims as political and connected to desire. As such, anyone making knowledge claims needs to take responsibility for those claims and understand the ways in which the claim to knowledge and truth serve political interest and achieve desire.

If the link between theory and the research situation is seen this way, MacLeod's (1987/1995) inclusion of data that supports alternative analysis does not absolve him of responsibility for his theory. To do so, MacLeod would need to acknowledge explicitly his role in allowing the theory to construct his explanations at the expense of alternative explanations. To MacLeod's credit, in a



supplement, published in the second edition of the book in 1995, he tackled some of these issues, explaining how reading reproduction theory influenced the way he interpreted his data.

Including self-reflexivity as a promise is in some way an appropriation of feminist theologian Welch's (1990) notion of mutual critique. Also, it is necessary to move from a hierarchical relationship between theory and aims and theory and methods (as advocated by Laudan, 1984). Part of this strengthening is methodological. In *Taking Control*, Haig-Brown's (1995) critical ethnography of a First Nations adult education center in western Canada, the data itself provides the arguments necessary to make social critique. This is so most probably because the evidence of neglect is so clear, and the argument for First Nations self-control of education is so defensible. Haig-Brown also interrogated her epistemological and ethical relationship, as a White woman, with the First Nations people she studies.

In *Tangled Up in School*, Nespore (1997) made the school his entry point for studying youth instead of the only unit of study. His attention to the multiple factors in students' lives, as well as the multiple layers affecting school practice, serves to ground his analysis in a way a more limited focus would have precluded. Significantly, Nespore allowed the research to proceed slowly, with the result that he learned the issues that were most important to those he was studying, rather than imposing his own agenda (although, as he admitted, he certainly tried). This self-reflexivity allows Nespore to engage more deeply and consult cultural explanations with greater confidence.

Tempering critique with self-reflexivity is similar to Marcus' (1995) concern for anthropology. Marcus is responding to the critique of anthropology's rhetoric—that it is able because of its method to provide the most accurate description of a particular culture. Marcus argued that anthropological fieldwork is best characterized as a method for critiquing the dominant culture, typically the culture of the anthropologist. Instead of the kind of social critique that critical ethnographers usually do, Marcus advocated the juxtaposition of different ideas. Juxtaposition allows consideration of alternative possibilities.

To follow the Marcus (1995) advice, in juxtaposing the various promises of critical ethnography, it is important for critical ethnographers to be open to alternative aims that arise in the field. Sometimes, social critique may not be quite the aim that is called for. Sometimes what McLaren (1987) dismissed as "descriptive privilege" may be called for, particularly if the author's aim is not social critique (i.e., Peshkin, 1986). Of course, there is no defensible reason why all research needs to be critical and ethnographic. Additionally, it is not necessary for all four aims to be present for one of them to succeed. Other tasks need to be done as well to serve the other purposes (Flax, 1995). As Collins (1991) argued, at times it may be more important for researchers to elucidate the various perspectives and epistemologies of a particular population (i.e., diasporan Black women) before expending the energy to translate this experience for others of different epistemological traditions. At various points,

these women may work with others from different backgrounds and standpoints to communicate experiences and foster mutual critique.

### PROMISING POWER AND AGENCY

Additional suggestions arise in consideration of the power and agency promises. The promise of uncovering differential power is tied to a notion that the critical ethnographer works to overcome oppression. Locating agency in the oppressed is a dramatic development of the combination of critical theory and ethnography, particularly from the perspective of structural theorists, who had been criticized for or felt limited by structural determination. For them, the notion of resistance, particularly as described in Willis' (1977/1981) critical ethnography, offered a way to transcend power. Combining these two promises highlights the political project of emancipation and demonstrates a tension that critical ethnographers purport to resolve.

Because the theoretical background of critical ethnography is in critical theory, identifying how power influences the research situation is essential for researchers intending to explain the social causes for oppression. Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) are clear that research without an explicit emancipatory political agenda serves only to perpetuate oppression.

Likewise, Quantz (1992) contended that critical ethnographers should do more to explain the multiple ways in which power works to influence social relations. He and Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) warned against nihilist views toward meaning that make power (and representation) fatal to meaning. Quantz turned to feminist theory, in the form of Nancy Hartsock, in which the exposition of the dominance of power does not preclude action toward emancipation. Quantz said:

Hartsock calls for a feminist theory of power that reconstitutes the subject in history, reclaims the possibility of transformation, and locates understanding of the world in practical daily activity. A postmodern feminism such as Hartsock's repositions the discourse of power within ethnography by requiring that it maintain its transformative possibility even while acknowledging its cultural dispersion. (p. 482)

For Quantz, echoing Hartsock, critical ethnography retains its ethical commitment as a necessary component.

An additional consideration is adopting a poststructural notion of power, arising from foundational critiques of power. Quantz (1992) contended that more should be done in critical ethnography to understand the multiple ways in which power works to influence social relations. Quantz acknowledges the challenges that the work of Foucault brings to social science research:

