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Critical Ethnography

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In recent years, critical ethnography has become an increasingly popular perspective.

However, how scholars from different disciplines have tailored it by using different theoretical or paradigmatic approaches has created a diverse range of applications that result in labeling any form of cultural criticism as *critical ethnography.* Therefore, it may be less important to define critical ethnography than to identify a few fundamental constituent elements.

Reducing critical ethnography simply to social criticism distorts and oversimplifies the critical ethnographic project. At its simplest, critical ethnography is a way of applying a subversive worldview to more conventional narratives of cultural inquiry. It does not necessarily stand in opposition to conventional ETHNOGRAPHY or even to conventional social science. Rather, it offers a more reflective style of thinking about the relationship between knowledge, society, and freedom from unnecessary forms of social domination.

What distinguishes critical ethnography from the other kind is not so much an act of criticism but an act of critique. *Criticism*, a complaint we make when our eggs are undercooked, generally connotes dissatisfaction with a given state of affairs but does not necessarily carry with it an obligation to dig beneath surface appearances to identify fundamental social processes and challenge them.

Critique, by contrast, assesses “how things are” with an added premise that “things could be better” if we examine the underlying sources of conditions, including the values on which our own complaints are based.

Critical ethnography is not a theory because it does not, in itself, generate a set of testable propositions or lawlike statements. Rather, it is a perspective that provides fundamental images, metaphors, and understandings about our social world. It also provides value premises around which to ask questions and suggest ways to change society. It is a methodology that “strives to unmask hegemony and address oppressive forces” (Crotty, 1998, p. 12). Critical researchers begin from the premise that all cultural life is in constant tension between control and resistance. This tension is reflected in behavior, interaction rituals, normative systems, and social structure, all of which

are visible in the rules, communication systems, and artifacts that comprise a given culture. Critical ethnography takes seemingly mundane events, even repulsive ones, and reproduces them in a way that exposes broader social processes of control, power imbalance, and the symbolic mechanisms that impose one set of preferred meanings or behaviors over others. Although not all critical ethnographers are equally comfortable with issues such as GENERALIZABILITY, RELIABILITY, VALIDITY, and VERIFICATION, critical ethnography is quite compatible with the conventions of "empirical science" by which the credibility of empirical claims can be evaluated (Maines, 2001).

Two examples illustrate the diversity of critical ethnography. First, Bosworth's (1999) critical ethnography of culture in three English women's prisons identifies a paradox: The conventional idealized images of heterosexual femininity that function as part of the punishment process also become a means for women to resist control and survive their prison experience. She argues that, although an idealized notion of femininity underlies much of the daily routine of women's prisons, it possesses the contradictory and ironic outcome of producing the possibility for resistance (Bosworth, 1999, p. 107). This type of critique helps soften the jagged edges of the gender gap in criminal justice scholarship by reversing the longstanding tradition of looking at women's prison culture through the prism of male prisoners and male scholars.

Ferrell and Hamm (1998) provide a collection of insightful examples that further demonstrate the utility of critical ethnography. By looking at marginalized populations such as pimps, marijuana users, phone sex workers, and domestic terrorists, the contributors challenge the reader to recast conventional, comfortable assumptions and images about crime, deviance, and social control. This, in turn, challenges us to examine more fully the asymmetrical power relations that create and sustain sociocultural power imbalances.

There are, of course, problems with critical ethnography (Thomas, 1992). But science —and critique is part of the scientific project—is self-correcting. One task of those engaged in ethnographic critique lies in balancing the occasionally conflicting tasks of a priori conceptual analysis, interpretive narration, empirical rigor, and theory building, taking care not to reject such **[p. 217 ↓]** tasks as POSITIVIST lest we substitute one intellectual dogma with another. This means that we must continually reassess our own

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project with the same rigor that we assess our foci of analysis, always bearing in mind that things are never what they seem and that social justice is not simply a goal but a vocation to which all scholars ought strive with verifiable critique.

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