Review of Educational Research
Fall 1989, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 249–270

Critical Ethnography in Education: Origins, Current Status, and New Directions

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Interpretivist movements in anthropology and sociology have recently merged with neo-Marxist and feminist theory to produce a unique genre of research in the field of education known as "critical ethnography." Critical ethnographers seek research accounts sensitive to the dialectical relationship between the social structural constraints on human actors and the relative autonomy of human agency. Unlike other interpretivist research, the overriding goal of critical ethnography is to free individuals from sources of domination and repression. This review traces the development of critical ethnography in education, including a brief discussion of its view of validity; discusses its current status as a research genre; and describes criticisms and suggests new directions.

Critical ethnography in the field of education is the result of the following dialectic: On 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 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. And so it goes.

This methodological and theoretical debate in the field of education parallels a reassessment of dominant ideas and methodologies under way in the social sciences and humanities. Geertz's (1983) phrase "blurred genres" characterizes the fluid borrowing that has occurred across disciplines, bringing with it new perspectives and new debates in educational research. In this review I trace the development of critical ethnography in the field of education, including a brief discussion of its view of validity; discuss its current status as a research genre; and describe criticisms and suggest new directions.

In the social sciences, the political and intellectual ferment of the 1960s challenged the grand theories and methodological orthodoxy of a previous generation. In sociology the Parsonian notions of function and system equilibrium have been viewed by many as too ahistorical and apolitical to do justice to the richness and diversity of social life. In anthropology, analysis shifted away from taxonomic descriptions of behavior and social structure toward thick descriptions and interpretations of symbol and meaning. And, everywhere, research methods tied to the

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The author wishes to thank Ann Nihlen, Paul Pohland, and the reviewers for their suggestions.

assumptions of a positivism borrowed from the natural sciences are increasingly viewed as incapable of providing conceptually sophisticated accounts of social reality.

In most accounts by historians of science, a new paradigm challenges the dominant paradigm in the field. What characterizes the present postpositivist world of the social sciences is a continued attack on positivism with no single clearly conceived alternative. Within disciplines and fields generally, broad paradigms and grand theories are increasingly found lacking in their ability to provide guidance in asking and answering persistent and seemingly intractable social questions. In periods when grand theories are in disarray, attention turns to epistemological issues and modes of representation. According to Marcus and Fischer (1986),

> The most interesting theoretical debates in a number of fields have shifted from the level of substantive theoretical issues to the level of method, to problems of epistemology, interpretation, and discursive forms of representation themselves. (p. 9)

Thus, the current situation, although chaotic, is also full of opportunity. Current theoretical and methodological dissatisfaction has led to a resurgence of interest in intellectual traditions such as phenomenology, hermeneutics, feminism, and Marxism. Critical ethnography as a form of representation and interpretation of social reality is one of the many methodological experiments that have grown out of the ferment.

Critical Ethnography and Education

In the field of education, critical ethnography is the result of the convergence of two largely independent trends in epistemology and social theory. The epistemological movement was the result of a shift in research paradigms within the field of education that reflected an attempt to "break out of the conceptual cul-de-sac of quantitative methods" (Rist, 1980, p. 8). Of all the qualitative research traditions available, ethnography most captured the imagination of researchers in the field of education (Atkinson, Delamont, & Hammersley, 1988; Jacob, 1987). Although ethnographies of schooling have been done by a small group of anthropologists for some time, the ethnography "movement" began in the field of education during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The works of Cusick (1973), Henry (1963), Jackson (1968), Ogbu (1974), Rist (1973), Smith and Geoffrey (1968), Smith and Keith (1971), Wolcott (1973), and others provided examples of the genre that later educational ethnographers would emulate.

Critical ethnography also owes a great debt to interpretive movements in the fields of anthropology and sociology. Influenced by phenomenology, structuralism, semiotics, hermeneutics, and linguistics, interpretive ethnographers in anthropology raised fundamental questions about both the practice of ethnography and the nature of culture. Tracing their lineage to Malinowski's (1922) concern with "the native's point of view," they engaged in discussions of the nature of "local knowledge" and viewed social life as consisting of negotiated meanings (Geertz, 1973, 1983). While interpretivists in anthropology were shifting their attention from the functionalist notions of systems maintenance and equilibrium to what Geertz (1983) called "the analysis of symbol systems" (p. 34), qualitative sociologists were intensifying their epistemological attack on the pervasiveness of positivist assump-

tions in their field. In sociology the traditions of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology provided legitimation for ethnographic methods. Both interactionists and ethnomethodologists were concerned with social interaction as a means of negotiating meanings in context. The result of the interpretivist movements in both disciplines was to highlight the importance of symbolic action and "to place human actors and their interpretive and negotiating capacities at the centre of analysis" (Angus, 1986a, p. 61).

At the same time the ethnography "movement" was beginning in education, "neo-Marxist" and feminist social theorists in other disciplines were producing works that soon would make their way into American educational discourse (Althusser, 1971; Bernstein, 1971; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Braverman, 1974; Chodorow, 1978; de Beauvoir, 1953; Foucault, 1972; Freire, 1971; Genovese, 1974; Giddens, 1979; Gramsci, 1971; Habermas, 1975; Horkheimer, 1972; Jameson, 1971; Lacan, 1977; Lukacs, 1971; Marcuse, 1964; Millet, 1970; Oakley, 1972; Poulantzas, 1975; Williams, 1961). This "critical" thrust would raise serious questions about the role of schools in the social and cultural reproduction of social classes, gender roles, and racial and ethnic prejudice.

The interpretivists' focus on human agency and local knowledge appealed greatly to many neo-Marxists and feminists who were trapped in the theoretical cul-de-sac of overdeterminism. Analyses of economic and patriarchal determinism were increasingly viewed as inadequate social explanations for persistent social class, race, and gender inequities. Bowles and Gintis's (1976) impressive structuralist account of the role of American schooling in social reproduction and the theoretical and epistemological critiques that followed it (Cohen & Rosenberg, 1977; Cole, 1983) were a watershed. They accelerated the search for representations of social reality capable of providing social explanations sensitive to the complex relationship between human agency and social structure.

The British "new sociology" had already produced several prototypes for a dialectical representation of social structure and human agency (McRobbie & Garber, 1976; Sharp & Green, 1975; Willis, 1977). Also, Orthodox Marxist conceptions of false consciousness and economic determinism had long been under attack by the Frankfort School critical theorists, but the methodological implications of their critique were generally left unclear. Willis (1977) described how ethnography provides a methodological vehicle for theoretical advances in Marxism.

> The ethnographic account, without always knowing how, can allow a degree of the activity, creativity and human agency within the object of study to come through into the analysis and the reader's experience. This is vital to my purposes where I view the cultural, not simply as a set of transferred internal structures (as in the usual notions of socialization) nor as the passive result of the action of dominant ideology downwards (as in certain kinds of Marxism), but at least in part as the product of collective human praxis. (pp. 3–4)

Thus, ethnography allowed Willis to view the working-class adolescents who were his cultural informants as more than victims of "false consciousness": He viewed them as rational social actors who understood or "penetrated" the structural constraints on their social class but who nevertheless, through their very resistance to the dominant school culture, adopted the attitudes that condemned them to a

life of factory labor. The resulting theory of resistance or cultural production and the emphasis on human "agency" or "praxis" is echoed by critical feminists:

> Insofar as a deterministic emphasis served to underscore the larger structural facticity of women's oppression by demonstrating how women's personalities, ambitions, attitudes, behaviors and role acquisitions are products of patriarchal culture and patriarchal institutions, it was extremely significant. Nonetheless, it is now time to move beyond such models to explore more critically the relationship between macrostructural conditions and the immediate, concrete realities which women and men create and share, albeit differentially.... A critical feminism will attempt to overcome the aforementioned inadequacies of gender-role research in two primary ways. Metatheoretically, it will seek to eliminate assumptions of a micro-macro dualism in its analysis of social arrangements and social life by focusing analysis upon the interpenetration of structure and consciousness in the situations and relationships of everyday life. Epistemologically and methodologically, it will replace the positivistic methods of conventional sociology with those of a critical ethnography which attempts...to probe the lived-realities of human actors and the conditions informing both the construction and possible transformation of these realities. (DiIorio, 1982, pp. 22–23)

As the 1980s began, ethnographic methods, as well as critical theory and critical feminism,[1] were well entrenched among a small segment of American educational researchers. This uneasy alliance raised serious questions about the compatibility of theory-driven social agendas on one hand and phenomenological research methods on the other. To many, their marriage seemed, at once, both an epistemological contradiction and an inevitability.

Critical Ethnography and the Issue of Validity

Throughout the development of critical ethnography as a research genre, perhaps its most serious methodological challenge has been the "validity issue." Educational researchers using qualitative methods have, over the years, had to work hard to legitimate their methods to the educational research establishment. The longstanding practice of ethnography in anthropology has provided many educational researchers with a legitimate methodological tradition. Ironically, however, while anthropologists have been moving in the direction of experimentation with more "literary" approaches to ethnography (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Van Maanen, 1988), educational researchers have been moving to systematize ethnographic research in an attempt to make it more scientific, often even invoking the language of positivism to do so (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981; Kirk & Miller, 1985). The elaborate data analysis procedures of ethnographic semantics (Spradley, 1979, 1980) and microethnography (Green & Wallet, 1981) have been particularly popular in education because they lend legitimacy to ethnographic accounts and protect educational ethnographers from accusations of mere "story telling." To the extent that these procedures provide the reader with a record of the decision-making process that produced the final analysis, they are valuable. To the extent that they suggest that the final analysis is more the result of methodological rigor than the creative act of researcher interpretation, they are attempts to fit ethnography into a positivistic framework.

Critical ethnographers are in a double bind. They are often viewed with skepticism not only by the educational research establishment, but also by fellow

ethnographers who have taken care to build procedures for "objectivity" into their work (see the critique of Willis by Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; the critique of Everhart by Cusick, 1985a, 1985b; and the critique of Anyon by Ramsey, 1983). Critical ethnography is, after all, what Lather (1986a) called "openly ideological research." The apparent contradiction of such value-based research with traditional definitions of validity has left critical ethnography open to criticism from both within and outside of the ethnographic tradition.

Of course, critical ethnographers engage in standard practices associated with what Lincoln and Guba (1985) called the "trustworthiness" of ethnographic research, such as member checking and triangulation of data sources and methods. Nevertheless, their agenda of social critique, their attempt to locate their respondents' meanings in larger impersonal systems of political economy, and the resulting conceptual "front-endedness" of much of their research raises validity issues beyond those of mainstream naturalistic research. (For a more complete discussion of these issues than will be found in this review, see Angus, 1986a; Comstock, 1982; Lather, 1986a, 1986b; Masemann, 1982; Reynolds, 1980–1981; Simon & Dippo, 1986; Thomas, 1983; and West, 1984.)

Like other ethnographers—particularly those who define themselves as interpretivists—critical ethnographers aim to generate insights, to explain events, and to seek understanding. They also share with interpretivist ethnographers the view that the cultural informant's perceptions of social reality are themselves theoretical constructs. That is, although the informant's constructs are, to use Geertz's (1973) expression, more "experience-near" than the researcher's, they are, themselves, reconstructions of social reality.

Where critical ethnographers differ is in their claim that informant reconstructions are often permeated with meanings that sustain powerlessness and that people's conscious models exist to perpetuate, as much as to explain, social phenomena. Critical ethnographers, therefore, attempt to ensure that participants in research "are not naively enthroned, but systematically and critically unveiled" (Thompson, 1981, p. 143). This view is not limited to cultural informants but is also applied to the social science constructs employed by ethnographers. Analytic categories commonly used to build theory in sociology and anthropology, categories such as "family," "property," "stratification," "political," "economic," and so forth, "can be seen not as concepts designed for the analytic description of what surrounds us, but as concepts which are themselves part of that process which is the reproduction of our own social form" (Barnett & Silverman, 1979, p. 13).

Thus, according to critical ethnographers, analytic categories that are not viewed wholistically become ideological in that they lead to the reproduction of a particular set of social relationships.

> In order to deal critically with our categories of analysis, we must have an analysis of them: an analysis which, if it does not relate them to a world larger than those categories, can be accused of merely participating in the reproduction of this social form. (Barnett & Silverman, 1979, p. 13)

Thus, critical ethnographers in education do not view such categories as "giftedness," "dropouts," "management," "public relations," "effective" schools, or even "education" as nonproblematic. Rather, by placing them in a more wholistic social context, they are able to highlight their ideological aspects and the interests that benefit from the maintenance of current definitions.

For critical ethnographers wholism involves more than simply documenting those outside forces and macrostructural elements that impinge on the local cultural unit under analysis. A critical wholism recognizes that "the 'outside forces' are an integral part of the construction and constitution of the 'inside,' the cultural unit itself, and must be so registered, even at the most intimate levels of cultural process. . ." (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 77). For the critical ethnographer, the cultural construction of meaning is inherently a matter of political and economic interests. According to critical ethnographers, the ideological nature of knowledge resides in the embeddedness of commonsense knowledge (and social science knowledge as well) in political and economic interests.

The critical ethnographer's concern with unmasking dominant social constructions and the interests they represent, studying society with the goal of transforming it, and freeing individuals from sources of domination and repression continues to make any discussion of validity, as defined by both positivist and interpretivist researchers, difficult. The most thorough attempt to address this problem has been Lather's (1986a) reformulations of construct and face validity and the addition of what she refers to as catalytic validity or "the degree to which the research process re-orients, focuses, and energizes participants in what Freire (1973) terms 'conscientization' " (p. 67). Catalytic validity has been achieved, according to Lather, if respondents further self-understanding and, ideally, self-determination through their participation in the research. Erickson (1989) has also recently attempted to define what he called "critical validity": "I have come to see that relativist ethnography is itself evaluative when it reports absences, for example, 'neutrally' as absence rather than critically as the result of silencing" (p. 6).

Lather (1986b) summed up the tension that an "openly ideological" critical ethnography must resolve.

> Building empirically grounded theory requires a reciprocal relationship between data and theory. Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical 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. 267)

Critical Reflexivity

Perhaps the most pressing issue facing critical ethnographers today with respect to the validity or trustworthiness of their accounts is the exploration of reflexivity, that is, self-reflective processes that keep their critical framework from becoming the container into which the data are poured. Of course, the notion of reflexivity in ethnographic research is not new. In fact, unless ethnography is viewed as mere naturalistic description, the issue of reflexivity is at the center of any discussion of ethnographic method. Most discussions of reflexivity include reflection on the relationship between theory and data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and the effects of the researcher's presence on the data collected (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The critical ethnographer also attempts to integrate and systematize two other forms of reflection—self-reflection (i.e., reflection on the researcher's biases) and reflection on the dialectical relationship between structural/historical forces and human agency. Reflexivity in critical ethnography, then, involves a dialectical process among (a) the researcher's constructs, (b) the informants' commonsense constructs, (c) the research data, (d) the researcher's ideological

biases, and (e) the structural and historical forces that informed the social construction under study.

Noblit (1989) suggested yet another kind of reflexivity that takes into account the reader of ethnographic accounts. According to Noblit, readers create their own text from the ethnography, and this text represents a new signification. The reader's text is the result of cumulative reflexivity: "All prior reading gives a context to all future reading. Moreover, one's perspective is not simply one's own. It derives from social interaction" (p. 14). In this way readers draw on perspectives available to them in their interpretive communities. (For an example of an interpretive standoff based on differing interpretive communities, see the exchange of critiques by Everhart, 1985a, 1985b, and Cusick, 1985a, 1985b.)

Little progress has been made in exploring methods that promote the kind of reflexivity required of the critical ethnographer. Collaborative and action research methods (Brown & Tandon, 1983; Carr & Kemmis, 1983) and the negotiation of research outcomes between the researcher and the researched (Anderson & Kelley, 1987; Kushner & Norris, 1980–1981) provide the beginnings of a better understanding of reflexivity among researchers, data, and informants. However, with few exceptions (see Reinharz, 1983; Westheimer, Stewart, & Reich, 1989), the potential of systematic self-reflexivity in critical research has yet to be explored in depth.

Current Status of Critical Ethnography

Although still in their infancy, critical ethnographies have been written in a number of educational subfields and, although the following discussion will be limited to those written in English, in a number of languages. The following review represents the outline of a research program that explores schools as sites of social and cultural reproduction mediated through human agency by various forms of resistance and accommodation.

The emergence of critical ethnography in education occurred in England, following on the heels of the emergence of the British "new sociology" (Young, 1971). The 1970s in both Britain and the United States saw the cross-fertilization of sociological phenomenology (particularly the works of Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Garfinkel, 1967; and Shutz, 1962) and Marxian social analysis. The tension between the phenomenological and the structural is evident in the introduction to one of the earliest critical ethnographies.

> In the same way that Marx was against starting his analyses of society and history at the level of consciousness but rather sought for the basic societal structures which regulate interindividual action, so we need to develop some conceptualization of the situations that individuals find themselves in, in terms of the structure of opportunities the situations make available to them and the kinds of constraints they impose. (Sharp & Green, 1975, p. 22)

Alarmed by what they saw in Britain as a rush to phenomenology, Sharp and Green (1975) wished to warn researchers of the dangers of losing sight entirely of the structural.

Others, like Willis, came to critical ethnography with the opposite concern. Viewing ethnography as an antidote to structuralism, they were reacting to the absence of human agency in so many Marxist social accounts. Early British critical ethnographers, then, attempted to achieve a balance between the phenomenological concern with human agency and the Marxian conception of social structure.

American critical ethnographers, influenced greatly by Willis (1977) and Bowles and Gintis (1976), also viewed ethnographic methods as a way out of what many saw as structural overdeterminism. Following Marx, Bowles and Gintis's (1976) "correspondence principle" argued that there was a correspondence between schooling and the social relations of production in the work place.

> The structure of social relations in education not only inures the student to the discipline of the work place, but develops the types of personal demeanor, modes of self-presentation, self-image, and social-class identifications which are the crucial ingredients of job adequacy. (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 131)

If the correspondence principle were true, then schools—whether wittingly or unwittingly—were serving a social reproductive function. That is, they served to reproduce a stratified work force whose members were taught to accept their class position. Early American critical ethnographers set out to empirically document, through field study, the nature of this correspondence. Perhaps the most impressive attempt was Anyon's (1980, 1981) case study of classrooms in five different schools, each serving students from different social class backgrounds. Anyon documented the differences in curriculum knowledge and educational experience that students from different social class backgrounds received.

Although serving to lend credence to the correspondence principle, this use of ethnography did little to peer inside the black box of how people let themselves get reproduced, or as Willis (1977) put it:

> The difficult thing to explain about how middle class kids get middle class jobs is why other kids let them. The difficult thing to explain about how working class kids get working class jobs is why they let themselves. (p. 1)

American critical ethnographers, drawing on theoretical and methodological critiques of a correspondence approach to social reproduction (Apple, 1982; Giroux, 1983), turned to theories of social production that view the process of social and cultural reproduction as one filled with complex forms of resistance and accommodation (see Weiler, 1988, for a cogent discussion of the social production/reproduction distinction).

Willis's (1977) work introduced a grounded version of resistance theory and became the standard for critical ethnographies written during the 1980s. In Willis's analysis of the behavior and attitudes of the "lads" who participated in the school's counterculture, he showed that the "lads" did partially penetrate the system that oppressed them and that their "inappropriate" behavior was a form of resistance. Although Willis and Anyon emphasized social class in their accounts, they were acutely aware of the need to understand the ways in which race and gender intersect with social class to reproduce structures of domination in society. In fact, Anyon's later work focuses on forms of resistance and accommodation and the relationship between gender and class.

Weis (1985) extended these categories to black students in an urban community college. Weis portrayed the ways urban black students are caught between the world of the dominant culture of the institution and the subordinate culture of the black urban underclass. This subordinate culture was not portrayed as inferior—on the contrary, it has many superior characteristics. For example, the cooperative nature of the urban black community was illustrated through the tolerance shown for women who bring their children to class.

> While children are often disruptive in the classroom, students do not complain. . . . They understand only too well that tomorrow *they* might have to bring their children to class for similar reasons. Male students, while not the primary caretakers of children, know that their nieces, nephews, sons, daughters or children of friends may also be there. (Weis, 1985, p. 113)

Weis described this subculture as in dialectical opposition to the dominant culture and showed how, in Genovese's (1974) words,

> [Blacks] have developed their own values as a force for cohesion and survival, but in so doing, they widened the cultural gap and exposed themselves to even harder blows from a white nation that could neither understand their behavior nor respect its moral foundations. (cited in Weis, 1985, p. 156)

In another attempt to understand the implications of resistance theory in a multiracial American context, McLeod (1987) studied two groups—one white and one black—of male adolescent "hall hangers" in a Boston housing project. McLeod found that it was the white group rather than the black group that was most alienated from school and that engaged in resistance. McLeod used this finding to explore resistance theory and the complex interactions of race and social class. Other studies that have explored the dynamics of race, gender, and class in student subcultures include those of Angus, 1986b; Aggleton, 1987; Aggleton and Whitty, 1985; Brah and Minhas, 1985; Corrigan, 1979; Humphries, 1981; Jenkins, 1983; and Macpherson, 1983.

A persistent criticism of educational critical theory is its tendency toward social critique without developing a theory of action that educational practitioners can draw upon to develop a "counter-hegemonic" practice in which dominant structures of classroom and organizational meaning are challenged. As Yates (1986) has pointed out,

> Because such theories have been confined to what not to do, or to forms of action outside the situation of teachers, teachers have developed their own forms of action, ranging from trying to tell students what is wrong with society, to trying to avoid controlling students, to emphasizing participation and nice relationships. (p. 128)

Although many critical ethnographies have attempted to address implications for practitioners (for example, see Willis, 1977, Chap. 9, "Monday Morning and the Millenium"), few have taken critical practitioners as objects of study. One of the advantages of ethnographic case study research has been its ability to study outliers. In some research programs the outliers are of more interest to the researcher than those cases that fall within a normal distribution. Some critical ethnographers are beginning to seek examples of practitioners who are attempting to put critical theory into practice (Comstock, 1982).

An example of this trend is Weiler's (1988) study of feminist teachers and administrators. Through the use of female practitioners' life histories and classroom observation, Weiler explored the beliefs and practices of teachers and administrators as they attempted to create what she called "feminist counter-hegemony" in schools. She attempted to unravel the complex interrelationships of administrators, teachers, and students as they negotiated and mediated meaning in schools and classrooms. Through her study of what she referred to as the "gendered discourse of the classroom" (p. 136), Weiler showed how teachers' meaning is both affirmed and

contested by different students and how, therefore, the possibilities of and obstacles to counter-hegemonic teaching are revealed.

More generally, an impressive critical ethnographic research program of gender and schooling has been developing (Amos & Parmar, 1981; Eder & Parker, 1987; Fuller, 1980; Gaskell, 1985; Kelly & Nihlen, 1982; Kessler, Ashenden, Connell, & Dowsett, 1985; McRobbie & Garber, 1976; McRobbie, 1978; Nihlen & Bailey, 1988; Okazawa-Rey, 1987; Smith, 1987; Thomas, 1980; Wilson, 1978).

In the field of teacher education several critical ethnographers have explored the social reproduction of teachers' roles and have found evidence of teacher resistance. Goodman (1985) and Ginsburg and Newman (1985) studied preservice teacher education and explored the processes through which teachers take on their professional roles. Their studies emphasized the contested nature of occupational socialization and implications for teacher education programs. Aber (1986); Bullough, Gitlin, and Goldstein (1984); Ginsburg and Chaturvedi (1988); Kanpol (1988); Sears (1984); and Smyth (in press) described various forms of teacher resistance within a school context. All of these studies illustrate the extent to which commonsense conceptions of teacher roles inhibit teacher resistance.

> As role becomes less taken-for-granted, less ideologically embedded, and as teachers begin to evaluate how they might create more humane and educative life spaces within schools, resistance becomes those acts that press up against role boundaries. (Bullough, et al., 1984, p. 342)

Although critical ethnographies have focused on students and teachers both in and out of classrooms, administrators have received less attention. Critical perspectives on administration are largely theoretical (see Anderson, 1989; Bates, 1984; Foster, 1986; Sirotnik & Oakes, 1986; Smyth, 1989). The few critical studies that have been conducted have explored the cognitive politics of the management of meaning (Anderson, 1988, in press; Gronn, 1984; Rosenbrock, 1987). These studies have portrayed administrators as the managers of organizational meaning, the custodians of organizational legitimacy, and the definers of organizational and social reality.

Besides administration, other areas in which critical ethnographies remain sparse, but in which some groundwork has been laid, are curriculum (Anyon, 1980, 1981; Bennett & Sola, 1985; Everhart, 1983; Mikel, 1987), early childhood (Miller, 1986), vocational education (Simon, 1983; Valli, 1986), parent and community role in schooling (Anderson Brantlinger, 1985; Connell, Ashenden, Kessler, & Dowsett, 1982; Ogbu, 1974), comparative education (Arias-Godinez, 1984; Wexler, 1979), higher education (Gumport, 1987; Pazmino-Farias, 1986), counseling (Roberts-Oppold, 1984), private schools (Angus, 1988; McLaren, 1986), tracking and dropouts (Fine, 1986; Oakes, 1985), and policy (Everhart, 1985c, 1988).

Criticisms and New Directions

The purpose of the following section is not to merely reveal the shortcomings of critical ethnography but to draw together and disseminate models from other disciplines and criticisms from within education to lay a groundwork for further theoretical and methodological advancement. A new generation of critical ethnographers will have to move beyond theories of social production/reproduction within schools to other methodological approaches and levels of analysis. As critical

ethnographers turn their attention to subfields such as administration, special education, and teacher education, the theoretical framework that grew out of the study of student subcultures will be inadequate for the study of other areas of education.

The following discussion of criticisms and new directions will be divided into the following areas: (a) expanding and shifting the locus of analysis, (b) empowering informants, and (c) critiquing ideology.

Expanding and Shifting the Locus of Analysis

According to Wexler (1987), there have been major changes in U.S. social institutions that critical ethnography, as it is currently practiced, is unable to capture. He argued that critical ethnographic accounts fail to focus on broad social transformations (e.g., postindustrialism and poststructuralism) and social movements, as well as "historically specific 'local' institutional reorganizations" (p. 12). This is, in Wexler's view, due in part to a division of labor that has developed among academics who are increasingly specialized and compartmentalized across, as well as within, fields and disciplines. It is also due in part to a result of the lack of a sense of historicity capable of analyzing broad shifts in social institutions. Critical ethnography, Wexler argued, is ahistorical in that its preoccupation with education's role in social and cultural reproduction keeps it from analyzing much greater and broader changes in social and cultural forms.

Similarly, Wexler (1987) argued that the locus of analysis of critical ethnography is too site specific. In spite of its claim to wholism and its reliance on abstract social theories and categories such as "class" and "state," critical ethnography "languishes within the school institution, outside of social history," leading to the "omission of politically interested social analyses of the infrastructure of education and of its social institutional dynamics" (Wexler, 1987, p. 55). Thus, critical ethnographers are accused of ignoring "questions of finance, political regulation, governance, organizational dynamics, and specific historical, inter-institutional relations" (Wexler, 1987, p. 55).

Wexler perceived this lack of wholism as more than simply a "levels of analysis" issue. Schools, he believes, are no longer the primary educational institutions and, therefore, no longer the primary locus of analysis. Rather, at this historical juncture

> the relation between mass discourse and individual formation and motivation is the emergent educational relation. Where the forces of production become informational/communicational, semiotic, and the formation of the subject occurs significantly through mass discourse, then it is that relation which is the educational one. The mass communications/individual relation now already better exemplifies the educational relation than does the school, which as we know it, with all its structural imitations of industrial and, later, corporate productive organization, is being surpassed, as new modes of education develop. (Wexler, 1987, p. 174)

No examples of the type of critical analysis Wexler called for exist in education, although studies of the effects of mass communication on culture were reported in Hall (1980) and ethnographies of political economy were reviewed by Marcus and Fisher (1986). Also, Feinberg's (1983) broader definition of social reproduction may help a new generation of critical ethnographers to rethink current narrower views of the process.

Empowering Informants

The term *empowerment* has entered the mainstream of educational discourse and, consequently, its radical currency has been devalued. In a radical sense, however, empowerment occurs through "conscientizacao," which makes humans subjects rather than objects of history (Freire, 1971). "Subjects" are those who know and act; "objects" are those who are known and acted upon. According to Freire (1971),

> Doubt regarding the possible effects of *conscientizacao* implies a premise which the doubter does not always make explicit: It is better for the victims of injustice not to recognize themselves as such. In fact, however, conscientizacao does not lead men [*sic*] to "destructive fanaticism." On the contrary, by making it possible for men [*sic*] to enter the historical process as responsible subjects, conscientizacao enrolls them in the search for self-affirmation and thus avoids fanaticism. (p. 20)

Several research strategies are available to the critical ethnographer concerned about informant empowerment. Those discussed below are oral history methods, use of informant narratives, and collaborative research.

Oral history methods. Wexler (1987) made a connection between empowering research methods and the restoration of historicity to research accounts.

> The practice of oral history counters the elite assumption of the unreflected silence of ordinary people and makes their self-representing expressions authoritative. Where traditional history plays a role in social legitimation, the life history movement works to disperse authority.... Life history research offers as a model of social relations in education not system reproduction and resistance, but hermeneutic conversation. As research, it refuses to separate research and practice. It aims to amplify the capacity for intentional and historical memory. (p. 95)

Not only is oral history offering a challenge "to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritative judgement inherent in its tradition" (Thompson, 1978), but it also represents a longstanding methodological tradition in the field of anthropology. With few exceptions (see Weiler, 1988), life history methods have been ignored by critical ethnographers.

Use of informant narratives. Other attempts to empower informant understandings can be found in the use of informant "accounts" (Gilbert & Abell, 1983) and "narratives" (Mischler, 1986). According to Mischler, most current research methods do not give voice to the concerns of social actors and the ways they construct meaning. He argued that research interviewers have tended to code the responses of informants as if they existed independent of the contexts that produced them. He also argued that researchers, instead of viewing the stories that respondents tell about their experiences as digressions from the topic at hand, should, in fact, elicit such stories. These stories can then be submitted to close narrative analysis in much the same way that a literary critic might approach a text.

> The effort to empower respondents and the study of their responses as narratives are closely linked. They are connected through the assumption...that one of the significant ways through which individuals make sense of and give meaning to their experiences is to organize them in a narrative form. As we shall see, various attempts to restructure the interviewee-interviewer relationship so as to empower respondents are designed to encourage them to find and speak in their own "voices." (Mischler, 1986, p. 118)

Mischler went on to cite several examples of studies in which respondents such as battered women and flood victims were encouraged to become more active participants in discourse with researchers. He also suggested a link to social action.

> There is, however, an additional implication of empowerment. Through their narratives people may be moved beyond the text to the possibilities of action. That is, to be empowered is not only to speak in one's own voice and to tell one's own story, but to apply the understanding arrived at to action in accord with one's own interests. (p. 119)

Another related attempt to empower the voice of informants and to restore its historicity can be found in the work of Soviet literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Quantz and O'Connor (1988) argued cogently that through the concepts of "dialogue" and "multivoicedness," Bakhtin provides a framework for examining cultural continuity and change. According to Quantz and O'Connor,

> His (Bakhtin's) ideas show us that culture should be seen as a collection of historical events laden with a range of possibilities and shaped by the power resources of the individuals present.... In trying to understand human behavior, we must be cognizant that some voices are legitimated by the community and, therefore, vocalized, while others are nonlegitimated and therefore, unspoken.... Thus, the multiple voices within the individual and within the community struggle to control the direction of the acceptable dialogue, ideological expressions may be reinforced, reinterpreted, or rejected.... By recognizing and recording the multiple voices occurring within communities, we should be able to analyze the specific factors which affect the formation in historical situations of legitimated collusions and subsequent social actions. (1988, pp. 98–99)

What makes the concepts of multivoicedness and legitimated and nonlegitimated voice so powerful is Bakhtin's view that inward speech that becomes outwardly vocalized is probably that which is most compatible with the socially organized ideology. Multiple voices within the individual and within the community are in a constant struggle for legitimacy. Thus, neither a unified individual nor a consensual society is possible because both inward and outward speech are dialogical and social. Wexler's appeal to life history method and Mischler's advocacy of informant narratives may, in fact, represent means of access to the informant's inner dialogue.

Collaborative research. Concerns with informant empowerment are also evident in the increasing use of collaborative action research, which owes much to Freire's (1971) work, in which the empowerment of the powerless and the eradication of their "culture of silence" becomes the goal. It also owes much to feminist researchers who have critiqued the aloofness and distancing methods of traditional male-oriented research, whether quantitative or qualitative. An example of critical feminist work is the much-cited action study done by Mies (1983). Because she is both a researcher and a member of an action group establishing a house for battered women, her research and action agendas merge into a study of women's life histories aimed at "mobilizing the public at large about the problem" (p. 133).

This more activist research, with its emphasis on the application of critical theory to practice and its effort at researcher/practitioner collaboration, also responds to recent criticisms from within critical research. For example, Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) decried the negativism of critical researchers who hold out little practical advice or hope for change to practitioners. They called for a "language of possibility" and an emphasis on "counter-hegemony" through which the dominant social

assumptions that permeate everyday life are challenged. Wexler (1987) has criticized critical ethnographers for acting like voyeurs, viewing their research subjects' lives with the detachment characteristic of television viewing. There is an increasing awareness among critical ethnographers that if educational critical ethnography shares with applied educational research the goal of social and educational change, then it must address its impact on educational practitioners. According to Willis, there is an immobilizing tautology implicit in most critical research—"nothing can be done until the basic structures of society are changed, but the structures prevent us making any changes" (p. 186).

Erickson (1986) has criticized radical research that views teachers and students as victims of structural inequality for just this reason. Following Edmonds (1979), he pointed out that differences in student achievement between classrooms with similar socioeconomic backgrounds indicate that teachers and principals can make a difference in student achievement. Cazden (1983) made a similar point:

> Social change of all kinds—from nuclear disarmament and removal of toxic wastes from the environment to more effective education in individual schools—requires some combination of the technical and the political. Asserting the importance of one does not negate the necessity of the other. (p. 39)

Unless critical ethnographers can provide an approach to educational and social change that includes both the technical and the political, that is, both sound techniques within the school and an effective political program outside the school, even critical practitioners may succumb to either hopelessness or lowered expectations.

Although top-down, outside-in approaches to critical ethnography are still the rule, the tendency toward collaborative action research and the negotiation of research outcomes with informants indicate a growing willingness among researchers to truly ground their critical analyses in the "trenches" of educational practice.

Critiquing Ideology

Although techniques of ethnomethodology and discourse analysis as a critique of ideology have been used extensively by critical feminists (Harding, 1987; Smith, 1987), critical sociolinguists (Fowler & Kress, 1979; Kress & Hodge, 1979), and other social theorists (Habermas, 1970), there has been little evidence in practice of a recognition by critical ethnographers in education that language is a social phenomenon that is enmeshed in relations of power and processes of social change. This may be in part because critical ethnographers have tended to favor macroanalysis, insisting that the lack of a wholistic approach to ethnography by microethnographers renders them incapable of revealing the broader social forces that inform the lives of social actors in specific social settings. They have further criticized microethnography for its tendency "to direct the attention of policymakers toward personal change without structural change" (Ogbu, 1981, p. 13).

Although the attribution of methodological "narrowness" to microethnography and discourse analysis may have been justified at one time, this no longer seems to be the case. Theoretical advances in multilevel analysis (Knorr-Cetina & Cicourel, 1981) and discourse analysis (Thompson, 1984) make a critical approach to the ethnography of communication, both at the level of microsocial interaction and

mass communication, not only plausible but imperative. As Thompson (1984) pointed out, a longstanding interest among discourse analysts is that of

> the relations between linguistic and *non-linguistic activity*. Traditionally such an interest was expressed in terms of the links between language and perception, language and thought, language and culture; but in recent years, discourse analysts have paid increasing attention to the ways in which language is used in specific social contexts and thereby serves as a medium of power and control. It is this increasingly sociological turn which has rendered discourse analysis relevant to, though by no means neatly integrated with, some of the principal tasks in the study of ideology. For if the language of everyday life is regarded as the very *locus* of ideology, then it is of the very utmost importance to examine the methods which have been elaborated for the analysis of ordinary discourse. (p. 99)

Critical educational theorists have appropriated many of the theoretical aspects of the work of such linguists as Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein. Categories like "cultural capital" and "symbolic violence" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) or "elaborated" and "restricted" codes (Bernstein, 1971) turn up frequently in critical educational discourse. However, critical ethnographers in education, with few exceptions (see Collins, 1987), seem to underestimate in their own work the potential of sociolinguistic analysis to systematically explore how relations of domination are sustained through the mobilization of meaning.

Conclusion

Lather (1986a) divided critical research into three overlapping traditions: feminist research, neo-Marxist critical ethnography, and Freirian empowering research.[2] I have combined these under the critical ethnography rubric to emphasize the commonalities in their research programs and to highlight those areas where they can learn from each other. The largely phallocentric, distancing tendencies of much neo-Marxist ethnography are increasingly challenged by the merging, collaborative tendencies of feminist research. Likewise, critical feminists, drawing on neo-Marxist theory, are struggling with the ways patriarchy intersects with social class and race in women's oppression. Issues of gender equity and social equality become inseparable in critical feminist research. Freire's work has inspired critical pedagogists, if not critical ethnographers, to explore the relevance of emancipatory approaches to educational settings in the U.S. (Finlay & Faith, 1980; Fiore & Elsasser, 1982).

Although there is a growing body of epistemological and methodological analysis in the writing on critical ethnography, there is as yet little practical advice. Critical ethnographers need to begin sharing insights from their research on such concepts as how to write a reflective journal, how to negotiate outcomes with informants, how to gain and maintain site access when doing controversial research, and how to systematize reflexivity. I have tried to capture some of the tensions in this marriage of critical social theory and ethnographic methods. The future of the marriage will depend on an ongoing dialogue between social theory and the day-to-day experience of the critical ethnographer in the field.

Notes

[1] The theoretical debates within feminism are complex. Glazer (1987) provided some flavor of the current theoretical positions.

> Liberal feminists believe that oppression results from socialization processes and the legal system, while radical feminists believe it results from women's biology and history and men's need and power to dominate. Marxist feminists, on the other hand, believe oppression results from capitalists' subordination of women in the interests of capital accumulation and profit and maintaining control over the means of production. (p. 298)

Without entering into the radical versus Marxist feminist debate, what critical feminist ethnographies in education have in common is a concern with understanding the ways social class, race, and patriarchy intersect to reproduce current social relations. Although there may be some advantage to retaining a separate category for critical feminist ethnography, ideally all critical ethnography is interested in the intersection of class, race, and gender.

[2] In the "origins" section of this article, I have included Freire's work under a broad neo-Marxist umbrella.

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