



Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. Phil Francis Carspecken. New York: Routledge, 1996. 223 pp.

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Phil Carspecken's *Critical Ethnography in Educational Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide* is the latest addition to Routledge's Critical Social Thought series edited by Michael Apple. This interwoven discussion of critical social theory, epistemology, and research methodology is appropriately situated within the series, as it shares an interest in social inequalities and work directed toward positive social change.

The author's declared purpose is "to construct a tight methodological theory by making use of various insights from critical social theory" (p. 3). He sequentially introduces and describes each stage of a five-stage methodological model for doing critical qualitative research. In a parallel discussion, Carspecken articulates a critical epistemological theory, one that defines a notion of truth and standards of validity for all stages of the research process. He critiques relativism and the traditional truth claims that are based on perception models, arguing instead that "perception itself is structured communicatively" (p. 19). For him, truth and validity are based on "holistic modes of human experience and their relationships to communicative structure," and he argues that "for all kinds of truth claims it is the consent given by a group of people, potentially universal in membership, that validates the claim" (pp. 19-21). Carspecken instantiates these concepts throughout the book by drawing upon American pragmatist philosophy, Jürgen Habermas's work on validity, and theories of power relations. From beginning to end the book is a project to identify the methodological conditions through which to enhance the validity or "soundness" of critically oriented qualitative research.

This is a clearly written, logically argued, and well-illustrated text that weaves together three strands. One strand is his five stages of critical research: compiling the primary record; preliminary reconstructive analysis; dialogical data generation; describing system relations; and system relations as explanations of findings. In a second strand, his own "Project TRUST" study, as well as other well-known ethnographies such as Paul Willis's *Learning to Labor* (1977), are used to illustrate methodological strategies and social theory. A critical social theory and epistemology is increasingly elaborated as a third strand throughout the book. As a text, this volume weaves a tightly and neatly constructed braid: the "how to do" fieldwork and data analysis guide, a critical philosophical and theoretical rationale, and some illustrative case study examples.



The chapters describing methodological stages one through three, the "how-to" of doing fieldwork and analysis within a social site, seem written for those with little research experience. They illustrate how to observe, take field notes, and interview by using low and then increasingly higher levels of inference; how to generate monological and dialogical data; and how to do "reconstructive analysis" to get the insiders' points of view. Carspecken suggests that these methods are universally appropriate to any qualitative researcher, critically or not critically oriented.

What Carspecken claims is particular and necessary to doing *critical* qualitative research and, thus, I would presume to be of most interest to readers of this book, he describes in stages four and five. The purpose of stage four is "to discover system relations between specific sites" (p. 206); the purpose of stage five is "to consider one's findings in relation to general theories of society, both to help explain what has been discovered in stages one through four and to alter, challenge, and refine macrosociological theories themselves" (p. 172). Compared to the practical elaborations of stages one through three, Carspecken's treatment of stages four and five is shorter, less prescriptive, and more suggestive. This dichotomy probably reflects the field, however, as it seems easier to conduct and talk about low-inference, descriptive fieldwork than it is to do, or convey to others how to do, high-inference, analytical theory construction.

In many ways the text itself is isomorphic with some aspects of the critical method Carspecken advocates. Both the text and the research method are rational accounts, logically and linearly developed; both are descriptively thick and theoretically grounded; and both feel quite prescriptive. In other ways, like a hidden and unintended curriculum, the text seems to contradict the explicit critical values espoused. While a critical epistemology assumes that valid knowledge is obtained in part through shared understandings, reflexivity, sensitivity to insiders' (Others') points of view, deprivileging the researcher/author voice, and the consensual basis of truth claims, this text's form (tightly and unambiguously argued) and rhetorical style seemed too definitive and closed to stimulate these processes. If, as Carspecken theorizes in his discussion of communicative structures/power, valid arguments are conditioned through consensus derived in equal power relationships, then how might our texts themselves condition such relationships? How can their form and rhetorical style model communicative forms that are basic to consensus building and thus validity claims within our research community?

Carspecken is to be commended for the scholarship and precision through which he has crafted this text. The text comprehensively responds to three important questions: "What makes critical ethnography critical?"; "What makes critical ethnography



valid?"; and "How do I do critical research?" Therefore, I believe that graduate students who are looking for a research model, critical theorists who are looking for more empirically based grounding, and ethnographers who are looking for ways to theorize their descriptive level work will all find practical substance in his specific prescriptions, but they will also find major points of departure from contemporary feminist and postmodernist discussions. Ethnographers might critique Carspecken for his thin conceptions of culture, feminists may find his model too rational, linear, and inattentive to relationships, and postmodernists may have problems with the prescriptive and definitive nature of its form. For me, the book is like a sharply focused lens through which to look at and review my own praxis. To the degree Carspecken's book can on occasion open conversation and self-reflection within our research community, he will have made a substantive contribution.

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