School Critical Ethnography:
Reading Power Through Narrative
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Student Guide

Introduction

Critical ethnographers are interested in exploring and exposing how power operates in both subtle and overt ways in different social and cultural contexts. At the heart of this work is a concern with social justice (Madison, 2012); paying attention to issues of equity and the micro-politics of power is a key part of the methodology. This data exemplar is intended to illustrate how issues of power can be attended to through the creation of narratives that capture particular moments. In this case, the moments are in classes at high school. Data in this exemplar are provided by Associate Professor Katie Fitzpatrick from the University of Auckland and come from research she conducted with diverse youth in urban schools in New Zealand. The aims of the research project were to document how young people navigate schooling at the intersection of gender, ethnicity, social class and place. Particular attention was given to the subjects of health and physical education. This exemplar will help you to think about how seemingly “usual” or banal moments in the field might highlight issues of power between participants and highlight wider cultural and political issues. In this case, the teacher is purposely attempting to address these issues and to get students to think. Included are three short narratives about the classes, and discussion of how you might approach analysis.

Critical Ethnography as Narrative

Narrative offers a particular mode of representation for research data. McDrury
and Alterio (2003, p. 31) argue that “story telling is a uniquely human experience that enables us to convey, through the language of words, aspects of ourselves and others, and the worlds, real or imagined, that we inhabit”. Using narrative to tell stories has multiple advantages. It can enable the reader access to the context of the research in ways that academic prose might not convey. Narrative is an accessible format that can communicate emotion. While narratives are a (re)construction of events, they can be evocative accounts of people’s lives and perspectives. As Clandinin and Connolly (2000) argue, narrative is a powerful way to both represent and understand human experience. It links with traditions of storytelling in many cultures and is a compelling form of communication. Well-written narratives contain what Denzin (1997) calls verisimilitude – the sense that what is relayed is authentic, without making claims to truth. Well-written and considered narrative can, therefore, prove useful in centralizing the voices and experiences of participants. However, it is important to keep in mind that narratives written by the researcher can also reflect his or her viewpoint while potentially obscuring the writing process. It is important that the narratives are recognizable to the participants and written in collaboration with them (Blumenreich, 2004).

Data Exemplar: Health Education in New Zealand Schools

The data consists of ethnographic fieldnotes constructed into narratives by Katie following her participation in classes at a school in New Zealand. The school is located in a community with a very low socioeconomic status and is attended by students from Māori (indigenous) and Pasifika (migrant communities from the Pacific Islands) backgrounds. The data concern how a particular teacher, Dan, went about teaching aspects of leadership, gender and sexuality and body image in his class on health education. Dan is a teacher of health education and physical education at the school. He is Pakeha (New Zealand European) and so has a different cultural background from the students he teaches. Dan’s teaching is of particular interest in this study because he consciously disrupts racial and
gender stereotypes in his practices. This work is part of a larger study (see Fitzpatrick, 2013) where Katie spent an entire year in a secondary school in 2007, attending classes with students and talking with young people and teachers about health, physicality and other issues connected to body, place, gender sexuality and ethnicity.

Analysis

Here, Katie picks out some interesting themes from the narratives she has provided as being worthy for further interrogation. She begins, though, by explaining how important context is to ethnography and to analysis.

Critical ethnography requires researchers to attend to the wider political and cultural concerns of the research site, both in relation to how individuals within the context are positioned in relation to others, and how the site itself is positioned socially in relation to other sites or places (Thomas, 1993). Interesting in this regard is that the school itself is seen as a “poor school” in a “poor” part of town. The community the students live in is frequently stereotyped in the news media and in popular opinion as a place of gangs, crime and poverty. This wider context is important because it frames how students engage with school; how they see themselves and others, and the possibilities they have for challenging how their community is positioned. Context such as this provides the background to the analysis.

During this research project, I wrote narratives based on my experiences, observations, and conversations with students and teachers. I wrote parts at the time of observation or later recalled my experiences and stitched together different moments from notes, memories, recorded conversations. I had to redraft each of these several times and I checked them with the students and with Dan (the teacher) to make sure that the feel and tone seemed right to them, that they recognized themselves in the stories. Now I turn my attention to analysing the
Analysing the Narratives

In relation to these three narratives, there are several points of entry for the analysis. Obviously the teacher’s approach is of interest in that he consciously attempts to challenge stereotypes and power relations which exist: between teachers and students; at the intersection of gender-sexuality-ethnicity; and how particular forms of media reproduce certain ideas about the body and beauty. His ability to name power relations and to question students’ ideas whilst also engaging them personally and respecting their views is aligned with work in the fields of critical pedagogy, critical inquiry and critical studies in education. These fields highlight the importance of context, making space for students’ voices and explicit teaching about issues of power and wider politics (see for example, Hooks, 2010; Kincheloe, 2008; Kincheloe & Hayes, 2007; May & Sleeter, 2010; Steinberg, 2010). This is important in that power relations in school settings are made visible and assumptions about students are challenged. For example, the students in this study are from very low socioeconomic and non-white cultural backgrounds. Understanding how schooling contexts reinforce their social marginality and the (incorrect) assumptions about their schooling performance is important. It is also interesting, with regard to this dataset, to see how teachers can interrupt the dominant stereotypes about these students in school. This dataset shows how trusting and democratic collaborations between students and teachers can expose relations of power.

The students’ responses to the discussion are also very interesting. They are anything but passive in these lessons; rather, they are highly engaged with the content and also contesting the ideas, making jokes and sharing their views. Analysis here could centre on the politics of schooling and curriculum, how classroom discussions can engage with students and challenge notions of docility.
However, there are also interesting and problematic notions expressed by the students: some of their comments are homophobic and there are particular embodied expressions of power (such as flexing muscles etc.) that occur during classes. Analysis could therefore productively explore the intersections of body and physicality with ethnic and gender identities and youth cultures. For example, analysis could focus on how students embody social class and/or ethnicity and/or gender. Likewise, students’ localised enactments of global youth cultures could be explored.

Context is, of course, important to consider, along with how the narratives are a result of a particular methodological approach in a time and place. This data is not neutral and it is not possible to simply pick up these ethnographic “moments” and work with them as if they reflect an objective reality. I constructed these stories about classes, based on my participation in Dan’s classes over a whole year and my interactions with students in and outside of classes. These stories represent a range of experiences and lessons. While these kinds of lessons might occur anywhere, they would look and feel and sound different according to cultural context, time and place. Analysis could focus on how specific narratives are similar or different to those produced under different cultural, historical and economic circumstances. A researcher might, for example, ask: what is universal and what is particular about these narratives? How does the culture and ethnicity of the researcher affect what is possible to see or not see? What can another reader (who has not been involved in this ethnographic work) not know about this context and these students?

That said, curriculum and assessment, connected to wider issues of education policy, could form part of the analysis. These students are in senior high school classes and they are engaged in learning connected to high-stakes assessment and national qualifications. In many ways, achieving in this system is very important for them to gain access to higher education or careers. Many of them
already work part time in order to contribute to the (low) family incomes. Their parents and families have high hopes for them to have “better” life chances and more opportunities via education. In some countries, the kind of political content in Dan’s classes might distract from achieving but, in this case, this learning is directly connected to the assessments in the national qualifications in health and physical education (in New Zealand), which are informed by critical, sociological and political perspectives. An analysis of this broader assessment and curriculum policy framework would be interesting; for example, exploring the complex relations between global education policy moves and this local context or analysing these practices against national curriculum policy documents.

Other productive ways to analyse these narratives could concern the value of teacher/student relationships, the place of sexuality education in schools, or issues of gender in the classroom. The notion of teacher power and voice (or pedagogic authority) versus student power and voice would also be another angle to explore. Maxine Greene (2009) noted that “we can not negate the fact of power. But we can undertake a resistance, a reaching out toward becoming persons among other persons….To engage with our students as persons is to affirm our own incompleteness (p. 95).

Overall

In summary, this dataset has provided “food for thought” about the place of narrative, ethnographic fieldwork and critical analysis in research. While schools have been the focus of this example, the approach here could be taken to any site of fieldwork. Crucial in understanding and accessing this dataset is an acknowledgement that data are not neutral; data are always produced within particular social, political and geographical contexts.

Reflective Questions
1. The narratives here were constructed from Katie’s participation in lessons alongside the students. How did the decision to represent these classroom moments as stories affect the kinds of analysis possible?

2. How did the decision to write narratives affect how (and by whom) the data might be read?

3. Why is context so important in ethnographic work?

Further Reading


