



Critical Qualitative Inquiry

Histories, Methodologies, and Possibilities

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Abstract This introduction to the special issue does not only introduce the content of the issue, it also generates connections among histories, traditions, theories, thinkers, thoughts, actions, and power. We propose that critical qualitative inquiry that would further expand theoretically informed, engaged activism is of greater importance than ever as we experience unprecedented technological change, violence against living beings that are not labeled human (through experimentation, industrialization, and medicine), the plundering of the Earth, and increasing gaps between the privileged and the marginalized (whether rich/poor, human/nonhuman). Critical qualitative inquiry must be continuously rethought, repurposed, reinvigorated, and envisioned as always already leading to a justice-oriented action.

Keywords: *critical qualitative inquiry, history, methodology, future*

Critical social science, most often performed as critical qualitative research, is not new. Critical scholarship has guided the work of thinkers, activists, political leaders, anarchists, many liberalists, and some qualitative researchers for 35 to 40 years. In the past, this past critical qualitative scholarship has been situated in various epistemological frames. For example, theoretical perspectives employed to facilitate critical research have included, but not been limited to, critical theory, a range of feminisms, poststructuralism, queer theory, and postcolonial/subaltern/indigenous knowledges/ways of being (Cannella, 2015). In the first *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) described “a criticalist as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her or his work as a form of social or cultural criticism” (p. 139) and who is concerned about power relations, views facts as value-laden, recognizes the fluid relationship between signifier and signified, addresses the complexities of oppression and privilege, and acknowledges mainstream research as implicated in the reproduction of oppression. Although a major literature exists, for a few examples of earlier work, see Anderson, 1989; Britzman, 1991; Fine, 1988; Foucault, 1977; Said, 1978.

Most critical researchers are motivated by the notion that their research should be grounded in an ethically responsible agenda. Ethical encounters, moral scholarship, justice, promotion of culturally situated well-being, and advancement of democracy matter. This agenda might also include wanting, as well as getting, critiques to be heard and acted upon by policy makers, literally using inquiry to reveal sites for change and activism toward a more just world and inquiry that changes the researchers' lives and serves as a model for change more broadly (Bloom & Sawin, 2009; Denzin, 2015). Many examples illustrate how critical and activist agendas might be carried out. See the following edited volumes for an illustration of the broad range of work that can be considered critical qualitative inquiry, inquiry that would attempt to transform and work for/with the people: Cannella, Pérez, and Pasque (2015); Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith (2008); Steinberg and Cannella (2012).

Various forms of critique have also produced changes in understandings (as an example, related to the lives of young children that are now being used by parents and teachers to support diversity; Burman, 1994; Cannella, 1997; MacNaughton, 2005; Viruru, 2001) and provided challenges to concepts such as normality, gender, and even the notion of evidence in ways that have expanded the knowledge base and actions in particular fields and broadened public discourses and acceptance of diverse lives (Foucault, 1978; Silin, 1995; Wall, 2008). Even in current spaces of neoliberal higher education, many scholars teach courses that are critical, engaging students with diverse perspectives and qualitative research that address power. As one ultimate form of resistance to neoliberalism, students and faculty (who are often struggling to survive in places of market-driven decision making and reductionism) are still conducting and publishing critical qualitative research that makes a difference at national and global levels.

However, far too often, even though critical inquiry has been embraced, as well as philosophically and conceptually developed, critical actions have been challenging if not impossible to carry out. More than 25 years ago, Ellsworth (1989) asked regarding critical pedagogy (and research): "Why does this not feel empowering?" as she described the patriarchal embeddedness of critical practice. More recently, Cannella and Lincoln (2015) have proposed that critical scholarship has not led to more just societal transformations as often as hoped for a range of complex reasons. First, these impediments include the power orientations of any form of research, whether traditional, constructivist, critical, or even recent forms of thinking with feminist new materialisms. Additionally, academic practices broadly tend to isolate the public from research because we scholars spend much of our time and efforts attempting to satisfy the rest of the academic community rather than learning how to

communicate and act within our lived and local communities and as specifically related to public policy. Also, political forces that are designed to directly counter and discredit critical work have been/are being strategically employed. Horowitz (2006) and the National Research Council (2002) are examples of such counter activities, while Lincoln and Cannella (2004) provide a broad discussion of such counter actions across fields. Further, while some scholars are criticizing critique as negative and resulting in little transformation, others contend that the "critique of critique" oversimplifies the range of critical work, masks the political nature of human endeavor, and perpetuates conservative anti-intellectualism. Finally, and perhaps more important than academic disagreements, the effects of neoliberal hypercapitalism on higher education and society broadly (Foucault, 2008) that have resulted in increased poverty, redeployment of resources, and narrowing/limiting of public policy (See Saltman, 2007; Washburn, 2005 for specific examples) create an environment in which all human endeavor is evaluated based on competition and a judgment of individual value that is based on the ability to generate capital. This condition both counters possibilities for transformation and facilitates an environment that would reterritorialize critical work for neoliberal, capitalist purposes.

Relatedly, even as calls for critical social science (and critical qualitative inquiry) have placed issues of justice and power at the forefront and the field of qualitative inquiry broadly conceptualized has expanded in all philosophical and methodological directions, in this contemporary neoliberal context, qualitative research has taken on an entrepreneurial character especially to better meet the demands of "easily digestible," sellable, and widely marketable scholarship. Although not a characteristic of the broad-based academic field, qualitative research as initial practice or complex ontological challenge has been oversimplified in a range of ways (e.g., as teachable by anyone who reads one of the many qualitative texts, as classifiable with the many new forms of software, or as an ahistorical entrepreneurial practice of the self). This simplification has also been effectively marketed to methodological consumers (in/through everything from simplified workshops, to international software corporations, to ahistorical "new" knowledge publications). Many qualitative scholars have commonly been asked to write a qualitative research textbook that could be labeled "accessible," that would be easy for graduate students to understand, that would sell.

Within this context and these capitalist discursive and material practices, a more radicalized, action-oriented, critical qualitative inquiry is required. This critical qualitative inquiry that would further expand theoretically informed, engaged activism is of greater importance than ever as we experience unprecedented technological change, violence against living beings that are not labeled human (through experimentation,

industrialization, and medicine), the plundering of the Earth, and increasing gaps between the privileged and the marginalized (whether rich/poor, human/nonhuman). Critical qualitative inquiry must be continuously rethought, repurposed, reinvigorated, and envisioned as always already leading to a justice-oriented action.

*What are ethical imperatives for critical
qualitative inquiry?*

The concepts of *critical* inquiry and *qualitative* research can, and have, come together in various ways. For example, Cannella and Lincoln (2015) vision the intersection of critical and qualitative as a kind of collective and alliance-building power move that acknowledges and deconstructs power in order to “plumb the archaeology of taken-for-granted perspectives to understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be reified as historical ‘givens’” (p. 244). This postmodern analysis of power (critical) addresses hidden structures, spoken and unspoken discourses, race, gender, and socioeconomic status elements as well as colonial, neocolonial, and postcolonial practices in people’s everyday lives (qualitative). Cannella and Lincoln propose that critical researchers construct forms of nonviolent revolutionary ethics.

A revolutionary, nonviolent radical ethical consciousness speaks to the political commitment and ethical responsibility often felt and lived by critical qualitative researchers. For example, Denzin (2015) is concerned about the ethicality of critical scholarship and the moral criteria guiding this kind of work. He encourages critical qualitative inquiry that places the voices of the oppressed at the center of inquiry, reveals sites for change, promotes change in people’s lives, and has the potential to affect policy. As such, critical qualitative inquiry is always already ethical and moral practices that cannot be separated from values, prejudices, inequalities, and many discriminatory assumptions and beliefs that people (including scholars) carry with them.

Critical qualitative inquiry is also a moral epistemological project to think about knowledge, truth, and human relations with/to their environments differently. Many scholars who engage in these epistemological projects are morally committed to social critique, posthuman inter- and intraactions, ecological, and beyond anthropocentric relations in the world. Further, just as qualitative research allows for emergence of the unexpected and the unthought, we agree with MacLure (2016), who proposed that critical qualitative inquiry must always be immanent, becoming, and in flux. Critical qualitative inquiry can be responsive to continuous changing environments, policies, and practices when outcomes are not assumed.

What are critical methodological obligations? How are these obligations interconnected with ethics?

And

How do critical scholars function as organic intellectuals?

Denzin and Giardina (2016) ask whether critical qualitative inquiry would be better off by turning away from methodology altogether. Maybe critical qualitative scholars could think about methodologies without methodologies (Koro-Ljungberg, 2016), methodologies under erasure (Derrida, 1997), and methodologies where theories turn back to themselves. Following the spirit of continuous reinvention, questioning, and rethinking, Denzin and Giardina (2016) would like to see more of reborn critical theories, where theory might reread itself in relation to the biographical, historical, cultural, political, and ideological.

Further, critical qualitative scholars need to respond to the past and current criticisms with a well-thought-out ethical stance. A form of this responsiveness could be organic. For example, Apple (2009) sees the task of the critical scholar/activist as organic, as bearing witness in their local communities as well as in the dominant academic environment. Critical scholars have tended to act on research by making direct scholarly movements toward justice (e.g., teaching content, support for student and junior faculty research, working in public schools); however, organic intellectuals would even more vigorously, and continuously, integrate activism on the ground with inquiry. Critical researchers could further locate, create, and foster spaces for re-creation and counterhegemonic action. At times, organic intellectuals learn and change simultaneously, drawing from the needs and wants of particular social groups. Actions could take the form of generating and circulating oppositional ideals through social movements and local activism. Furthermore, Apple cautions (critical qualitative) scholars to be attentive to reinscription, reductionism, and essentialisms because “isms” often serve the residue or precursors of redistribution and restructuring. Instead, Apple encourages organic intellectuals and scholars to supportively critique historical, political, cultural, (and methodological) traditions, aligning with the struggles of the marginalized.

Further, critical qualitative scholars have civic responsibilities toward more democratic society and equitable ways to inquire. Rancière (2009) explains how knowledge of the inversion belongs to the inverted world and epistemology of subjection to discourses and practices of the subjection, a common interpretation of the awareness of dominant power by those who are subjects of that power (as discussed in both feminist and postcolonial/subaltern/indigenous literatures). Rancière also proposes

that a “genuine ‘critique of critique’ cannot be a further inversion of its logic. It takes the form of a re-examination of its concepts and its procedures, their genealogy and the way in which they become intertwined with the logic of social emancipation” (p. 45). Critical thought might assume that the “unskilled” are “skilled,” impossible is possible, and those who have been labeled “incapable” in dominant discourses are “capable.” In the logic of a humble, collaborative social emancipation, there are no fatal reality transformation mechanisms but rather unforeseen and unexpected possibilities for change. As Rancière notes, “every situation can be cracked open from the inside, reconfigured in a different regime of perception and signification” (p. 49).

As a result of these ethical and contemporary considerations/perspectives/concerns, we propose further questions for critical qualitative researchers as we work through our scholarly agendas and individual/collective actions:

- What is/are the needed (re)conceptualizations and purposes of critical qualitative research from within this contemporary historical context, and thus the purposes of data, researcher, etc.?
- How do we study in ways that speak to our critical research goals and collaborations around justice, difference, ethics, and equity?
- What does all this have to do with our definitions of, and tools/strategies/practices used within, critical qualitative inquiry?
- How might traditional methodologies be modified and used in critical ways?
- How can we break free from neopositivist, colonizing, and/or oversimplified methodological practices, as well as uncritical forms of interpretation?
- How do critical scholars avoid creating researcher power for themselves as the more “advanced/progressive” voice for justice, equity, and decolonization whether using traditional, reconceptualized, or “new” methodologies?
- How do critical methodologies address contemporary power contexts/material circumstances/lives and the immediate need for just transformations (and direct action)?
- Are/how are forms of human privilege reinscribed within the particular data practices/acknowledgements/wants/entanglements historically?
- Is it possible to decenter the human in research without creating an environment of post responsibility for justice socially, environmentally, and to the more-than-human Other?

The authors in this special issue address these questions in a range of ways through the rethinking of methodology, the continued use and mixing of theories, and acknowledging critical work as always a form of political engagement.

Rethinking (Methodological) Relationality

Even within qualitative and critical qualitative research, methodology is often considered separate from research contents and contexts. We may discuss interviewing, participation, ethnographic methods, even poststructural methodologies, that address archaeologies of knowledge or genealogies of power. Further, some critical scholars would contend that isolated understandings of the “basics” of traditional methodologies are necessary (e.g., being able to interview a participant so the person actually feels comfortable sharing their ideas, opinions, knowledge). However, these “basics” have to do with researcher knowledge and skills as an inquirer, and as such can serve a necessary prerequisite, but the interconnection, even infusion and comingling, of methodology and content and methodology and power required for critical work as ongoing struggle is often not acknowledged or explored. The authors in this section demonstrate that methods might not be separated from content, performance, context, needs, or beliefs, resulting in methodological axes that cannot be considered as detached linear functions. Methodology is likely always and already entangled with, even produced by and producing, anticipated relations, ongoing struggle, multiplicity, and becoming (of the researcher and the research), language and ethnicity, and community circumstance and context, as well as emergent and unthought relations.

In “becoming cyborg: Activist Filmmaker and Camera,” M. Francyne Huckaby explores the chimeric hybridity of portable camera, sound recorder, filmmaker, and audience as research and activist cyborg weaving. Situating filmmaking in critical qualitative, ethnographic, and sociological traditions, she describes becoming woman and machine—cine-eye-ear—in the struggle for continued access to public education. Throughout, she deemphasizes the importance of the individualized human in cyborg connection.

In “Learning Black Language Matters: Humanizing Research as Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy,” April Baker-Bell, Django Paris, and Davena Jackson begin with the question: How can, and must, critical qualitative inquiry be part of ongoing struggles for cultural and educational justice with the communities of our work? The authors explore this question by reflecting on their collaborative research on asset pedagogies centered in the study of African American Language (AAL). Building on the core humanizing research notion of dialogic consciousness-raising between researchers and participants, they describe coming to deepened knowledge about the role of AAL in their lives as well as the lives of high school students. Further, the authors use a culturally sustaining pedagogy framework with high school students, the ability to

participate *in* AAL, research-based knowledge *about* AAL, and critical collaborative research *on* AAL as they combine reciprocal inquiry with teaching and learning to center the value of Black language and Black lives within a schooling and research enterprise.

In “Food, Water, Shelter, Justice, Love: Methodological Axes for Critical Qualitative Inquiry,” Jasmine B. Ulmer encourages scholars to reconsider issues of need within research. Her purpose is to move toward a critical qualitative inquiry that realizes its transformative potential. Through the lens of an urban city, this article first analyzes spatial texts related to food, water, shelter, justice, and love. These needs are presented as methodological axes and potential agendas for critical research. Next, creative responses to local need are read through the spatial theories of critical geographers Lefebvre, Harvey, and Soja. These authors’ writings on heterotopic space and spatial justice then are used to suggest a critical needs framework for qualitative research. Importantly, spatial theorists offer methodological openings in the cityscape for a critical qualitative inquiry that directly responds to, and participates in, issues of local need.

In “Thinking Critically With Children of the Anthropocene,” Margaret Somerville addresses the need for a reconceptualized critical qualitative inquiry within the context of advanced capitalism and increased recognition of human-induced changes in the planet’s biosphere. Justice is understood in relation to the more-than-human world and its entangled children born into the 21st century. She adopts the more-than-human (in this case, water) to think methodologically with children in experimentation designed to explore intra-action. The paper concludes that following children in their playful encounters opens a space where matter and meaning, time and space, and the being of the adult researcher is reshaped into an entangled material world.

Working Through and Mixing Theories

For some time, scholars who attempt to practice critical inquiry have also combined and juxtaposed diverse perspectives to work through complexities of experience, world, and relations. Critical work has recognized the commonalities across scholarship from diverse locations that has been concerned about power, oppression, and justice. The work of researchers who have integrated feminisms with poststructural inquiry is a broad-based example (see Collins, 2000; Sawicki, 1991 for illustrations). Others have worked through various critical perspectives such as queer theory, postcolonial critique, or black feminist thought as the theoretical focus for particular

investigations (see Pinar, 2001; Cannella & Viruru, 2004; Pérez & Cannella, 2011, respectively, for examples). The following authors continue this tradition of juxtaposition, mixing, and using theoretical perspectives to expand each other to create possibilities for unthought critical qualitative inquiry.

In “(Re)mixing Foucault and Deleuze: Power Games in Critical Qualitative Research,” David L. Carlson and Mirka Koro-Ljungberg explore the expansion of possibilities when Foucauldian poststructural perspectives and conceptions of power are remixed using the Deleuzian theoretical toolbox to address diverse notions of power in critical qualitative science inquiry. Their article experiments with Foucauldian power/knowledge by using the metaphors of capoeira and the Deleuzian machine to propose that critical qualitative science can maintain a social justice focus while acknowledging some limitations of postmodern conceptualizations of power and its historical critique of modernism and modernist power. The authors illustrate how capoeira can function as a conceptual frame for shifting the onto-epistemologies of critical qualitative science inquiry.

In “Affirmative Critique as Minor Qualitative Critical Inquiry,” Camilla Eline Andersen demonstrates research that is generative yet both retrospective and forward-looking. Her practice of inquiry is a performance of her questioning of self, specifically regarding *what to do* with a political questioning of how to perform qualitative research *and* with ephemeral real bodily experiences, working against colonial ways of knowing in research and toward knowledge creation that is justice-oriented. Labeled by the author as a *minor critical inquiry*, the study was/is inspired by the emerging interests in bringing the material to the forefront of some versions of feminist work, especially using Deleuze and Guattari’s (1977, 1987) philosophy of desire. The self-study performs a “reality-philosophy driven curiosity of race” in relation to professionalism in early childhood education in a Nordic landscape through a tracing of a white early childhood pedagogue’s (the author’s) race-becomings with a real social landscape.

Political Engagements

Any practice of critical social science includes political engagement as a (perhaps “the”) necessary component because critical scholarship is embedded in concerns for justice, equity, and issues of power/privilege, oppression/harm. Within historical postmodern challenges to dualism and universals, (a) recognition of the complexities of just transformations, as well as (b) acknowledgement of the personal (and social) as political and the multiplicities of knowledges, ways of being/living, and (c)

experiences within intersecting performances of power have been/are centered within critical qualitative research. However, the complexities and multiplicities do not easily align with dominant forms of research, and critical scholarship still is often not accepted within the mainstream of scientific practice. Continual exploration with diverse knowledges and ways of experiencing the world, as well as inquiry into how to place these knowledges/discourses/ways of being at the center, remains of utmost importance for critical qualitative scholarship. The authors in the political engagement section provide further perspectives from which to approach, research, and respond to injustice and inequity.

In “Chicana/Latina Feminist Critical Qualitative Inquiry,” Cinthya M. Saavedra and Michelle Salazar Pérez take the reader along a journey that reexamines Chicana/Latina educational research (with emphasis on American Chicana feminism) to reveal new possibilities for critical qualitative inquiry. A brief overview of key concepts is provided. Chicana educational researchers as writers from within rather than about is described as a decolonial turn. Finally, the authors venture into spiritual imaginaries to pose new questions that they hope could lead to global *feminista* solidarity, using land and spirit as the location for this solidarity that would reconnect the broken pieces of the self.

In “Diverse Complexities, Complex Diversities: Critical Qualitative Educational Research in Aotearoa (New Zealand),” Jenny Ritchie begins with an overview of the complex diversities and diverse complexities of her research context: early childhood care and education in Aotearoa (New Zealand). She then moves on to discuss researcher positionality and research design in relation to the context and to the ethical responsiveness required in a location with such a colonial legacy. Ritchie draws upon the work of Professor Russell Bishop and several other indigenous scholars in offering some thoughts as to pathways for navigating the diverse complexities encountered in Aotearoa.

Visions of/for Critical Qualitative Inquiry

Following Egon Guba (1990), Norman Denzin (2015) has reminded us on a variety of occasions that we must regularly come together, share our diverse perspectives, and learn/act in ways that acknowledge multiple interpretive communities. A demonstration of the importance of this perspective is the success of the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) and the multiple critical research groups within that practice both single-focused and cross-disciplinary critical qualitative inquiry. The last article in this special issue is a transcript of a panel conducted by

critical qualitative scholars at the Coalition for Critical Qualitative Inquiry, a special interest group within ICQI. The reader will note that the perspectives and visions are diverse, embodying the very nature of critical qualitative inquiry that would always and already support multiplicity and possibilities, engaging with both diverse knowledges and the unthought, for more just transformations.

Finally, we close this introduction with the hope that readers of this special issue are challenged to dream, hope, and envision a world that values multiple forms of collaboration; uses critical historical, diverse forms of knowledge(s); and constructs inquiry that continues to be transformative. While we might add that our neoliberal condition requires critical research, radical activism, and a contemporary awareness of human privilege, the words of Kincheloe and McLaren (1994) more than 20 years ago remain important and even poignant:

To engage in critical postmodern research is to take part in a process of critical world making, guided by the shadowed outline of a dream of a world less conditioned by misery, suffering, and the politics of deceit. It is, in short, a pragmatics of hope in an age of cynical reason. (p. 154)

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