



Positive social transformation in critical qualitative research in education

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Abstract

The notion critical is one of the most frequent and yet contested qualifiers of empirical studies in education. A tremendous body of research has been conducted under the banner of the *critical* all with differing attributions to the term and the nature of the study in general. This study seeks to understand the constructions of “criticality” and the strategies of positive social transformation sought in critical qualitative research in education. It also problematizes contemporary portrayals of the “critical” in regards to the question of referentiality and bordering and the associations between critique and critical, while examining architecture of the critical in the field of educational research. Towards this end, it sets out to map theoretical and practical variations across critical researches in an attempt to reconstruct the implications that such variations may have for the field of education.

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Introduction

The state of the notion *critical* in theory and research is open to a yawning discussion. The political challenges that critical scholars have taken up are usually accompanied by methodological frameworks that have been appropriated to fit the nature of their critical enterprise. Some interpret this methodological appropriation to specific political assumptions and value orientations as research that is partisan and biased (Hammersley, 2000). On the other side of the aisle, those who question the premises on which the “traditional research” is established insist that research should open up possibilities towards positive social change rather than contribute to only academic/scholarly conversations (Carspecken, 1996; McLaren & Kincheloe, 1994). And yet, the notion *critical* is one of the most frequent and yet contested qualifiers of empirical studies in education. A tremendous body of research has been conducted under the banner of the *critical* all with differing attributions to the term and the nature of the study in general. Depending on content analysis of the education and educational research journals, this study seeks to understand the strategies of positive social transformation sought in critical qualitative research in education. Towards this end, it sets out to map theoretical and practical variations across critical researches in an attempt to reconstruct the implications that such variations may have for the field of education. It aspires to help advance both theoretical and practical conversations circumscribing critical qualitative research in education, giving a brief but an important glance to the current portraiture of critical qualitative research in education.

Background

Although differences exist within the critical enterprise, critical qualitative research is generally located at the nexus of power and oppression. According to Therborn (2007), for example, for critical research, “[a] major reason for studying the present is to understand the power that it exercises, and critiques of it are largely, if not absolutely, dependent on the hope of a possible different world (p.65).” Therefore, studies that have been informed by this juxtaposition predominantly focus on revealing how power operates (Carspecken, 1996; McLaren & Kincheloe, 1994; Anderson, 1989), and how it consequently perpetuates social inequalities.

There are many approaches with regard to what warrants a research study to be identified as critical. But in a general and loose sense, critical research is described as

significantly different from other research studies by its epistemological principles and philosophical assumptions (Anderson, 1989). Carspecken (1996), for example, notes that “criticalists” share a value orientation as a common ground: they are all “concerned about social inequalities and direct their work toward positive social change” (p.3). However, this political and methodological stance, according to Michael Apple (2000), sometimes fails to come to terms with the needed material, social and political transformations in society, and becomes instead a “romantic possibilitarian” rhetoric, “in which the language of possibility substitutes for a consistent tactical analysis of what the balance of forces actually is and what is necessary to change it” (p.225). In this sense, positive social transformation, one of the most important qualifiers of critical research, is sometimes constructed rhetorically.

Historical roots of critical research in education, in terms of practice, date back to the late 1960s, at least with reference to the development of the (critical) mindset aligned with the Civil Rights movements in the USA that set out to challenge the deterministic frameworks of positivism. By breaking away from the prevalence of the structural-functionalist legacy (the adage “schools are neutral places”) educational research took a historical turn during the 1960s by bracketing and de-provincializing matters of history, social class, race, and gender within the intimate and essential links of these to the schooling processes (Karabel and Halsey, 1977 Blackledge & Hunt, 1985; Majoribank, 1985). Under the blueprint of the Coleman’s Report, published in 1966, research on social asymmetries associated with and enforced through education, therefore, began to occupy a prestigious position in the field with particular attention to the subjects who had been traditionally located at the periphery of social life, such as women, minorities, racial and ethnic groups, and children (Aries, 1966; Collins, 1965). This interest in the periphery led to the development of a class of researchers who were giving particular attention to the transformative function of educational research towards social justice and the impact this would have on approaching the relation with the subjects of research and engagement with methodology. These researchers have come to occupy a central position in the field and its aspects of theory and practice (Weis & Fine, 2004). One has to underline, however, that these early attempts did not put forth a solid critical agenda for educational researchers.

The process of schooling as social engagement – both for those involved in it and those who are investigating its specifics for the sake of research and knowledge production – has increasingly gained momentum as the field of education in the US in general, and that of sociology of education in particular, has come to pay a greater attention to the issue of

inequality. Academic attempts to redress some of the conditions of inequality through research, have eventually impacted the emergence of a line of critical researchers whose identity/stance is expressed through their research practices (Ladwig, 1996). Such clustering may echo Hiller's claim on intellectuals: "intellectuals to be understood not as 'members of certain profession' but as 'representatives of a certain characterological type'" (Benjamin, 1970: 2). The idea that (the outcomes of) qualitative research could be used for the purposes of social transformation, social justice, or emancipation was not equally welcomed by everybody as it would be expected. This "new stance" (or researcher identity) towards research epistemology, methodology and practice became a target of critiques, and rekindled new discussions on the role of the researcher, particularly in qualitative studies. At many times, criticism came in the disguise of certain problematics assigned to the nature of qualitative research, such as "objectivity," "generalizability," and "validity," or to the other political tenets of "practicing science with attitudes/values" (Hammersley, 2000; Wexler, 1987).

Therefore, grounding its major knots within the discussion of these issues in the literature, this study problematizes the transformation strategies that are sought in critical research. Literature shows that one of the main common tenets of contemporary critical research is its focus on disadvantaged groups with emancipatory and transformative interests. Although there are many excellent studies providing historical and conceptual trajectory for critical research, they tend to remain in the realm of either idiosyncratic explorations on the one hand (e.g., how the researcher understands critical and how s/he reflects on his/her work), or the normative formulations of conducting critical research, on the other (e.g., how critical research should be conducted; what are the appropriate methods, analyses, etc.).

Method

I applied the *cluster random sampling* technique for text selection. "The selection of groups, or clusters, of subjects rather than individuals is known as cluster random sampling (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2006: 95)." I used *Social Science Citation Index Database* as the main source for data collection, as it includes the most influential educational journals in the field. Scientific journals are the primary venues where various discussions in education have taken place. I examined the contents of 15% of the Index's journals for the period 1996 – 2007, since it is almost impossible to explore every single journal on the Index. I used the journal

citation report system to determine the most influential journals the database had. This report system, which has been constructed through the “Journal Impact Factor algorithm” – developed by Eugene Garfield, ranks more than 6500 scientific and social scientific journals annually based on the number of citations of the articles they publish.

After determining the most impactful journals under the section of Education & Educational Research of Social Sciences Citation Index Database, I read through the publishing policies and key subject matters for the top journals. I eliminated the journals that qualitative research articles did not find a place for, that only focus on policy research, that only publish review articles, that are purely theoretical, and so on. In other words, I selected the journals that mainly allocate their pages for field research, particularly qualitative research. This procedure yielded the following ~%15 of Education & Educational Research Journals: American Educational Research Journal, Reading Research Quarterly, Education and Urban Society, Phi Delta Kappan, Sociology of Education, Harvard Educational Review, American Journal of Education, Anthropology and Education Quarterly, Journal of Educational Research, Curriculum Inquiry, Educational Studies, Teachers College Record, Educational Research, Urban Education, Gender and Education

I assigned 4 keywords for searching suitable articles within the 15 journals that I mentioned above: social class, race, gender, and ethnicity. These searches yielded 446 articles published between the years 1996 and 2007. Each search was saved to *My Endnote Web Library* and organized under a matching classification. I read the abstracts of 446 articles in an attempt to eliminate theoretical and quantitative studies. After this elimination, I read the remaining articles with particular attention to the critical aspects of the research. When the process was completed there were 60 articles left after this initial elimination, which represented approximately 14% percent of the total number of articles located. All articles were exported into the qualitative data analysis program *Nvivo*. The first step was to code the articles under the following categories: Methodology, Theoretical Background, Approaches to Subjects, Political Claims, Emancipatory Interests, Transformations and Reflexivity.

In the last stage of the content analysis, I clustered the characteristics of transformative scholarship in critical qualitative research in education. It is important to mention that these clusters should be thought of within the disciplinary borders of education. The purpose of this analysis was to theorize and discuss the overall findings of content analysis.

Data Analysis

Although the amount of data collected from content analysis is immense and may have significant implications for the different practices of the critical qualitative research, for the purposes of this study, I will confine the discussion to data that have the potential of revealing how transformation strategies are searched, invented, and constructed. Therefore, the main focus of the content analysis is to explore transformation strategies in critical qualitative research in education. Here, I attempted to group together transformation-bound critical scholarship through hierarchical cluster analysis. The levels of proximity among research cases are used to organize them into different clusters. These clusters are then examined to construct general patterns of transformation strategies.

Clustering Transformative Act

In this segment, I explored where transformative acts, in light of above attributions, converge into clusters. Towards this purpose, I quantified all the attributions and their anchoring nodes. (For example, Historical Account, symbolized with H, given=1 not given=0) This was done in association with the names of the researchers (or cases). With the help of a computer program, *Matlab*, all attributions were compared in regard to articles' subscription to each. The computer program converted the outcomes of this comparison into visual schema which is called a *dendrogram*.

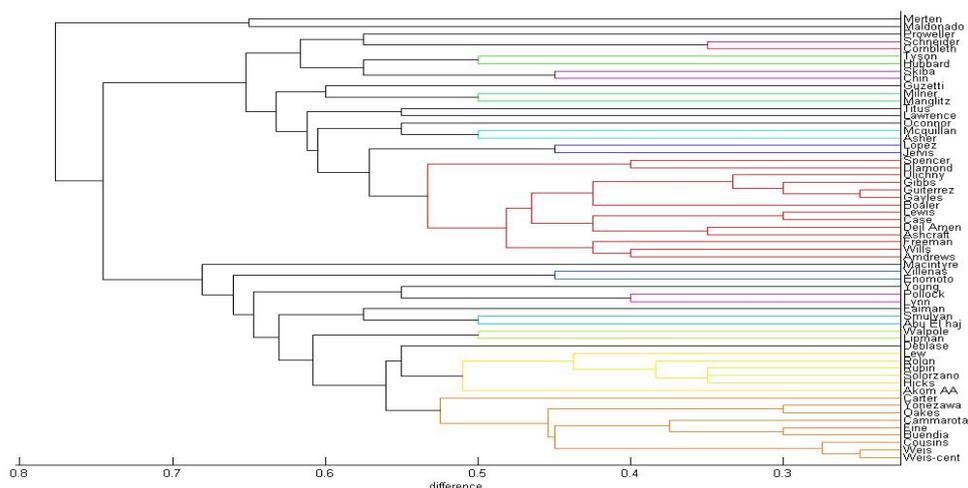


Figure 1: Clusters of Articles

I used the method of hierarchical clustering which works through grouping data objects into a tree of clusters. There are two major hierarchical clustering techniques:

“Agglomerative hierarchical clustering: This bottom-up strategy starts by placing each object in its own cluster and then merges these atomic clusters into larger and larger clusters, until all of the objects are in a single cluster or until certain termination conditions are satisfied. Most hierarchical clustering methods belong to this category.

Divisive hierarchical clustering: This top-down strategy does reverse of agglomerative hierarchical clustering by starting with all objects in one cluster. It subdivides the cluster into smaller and smaller pieces, until each object forms a cluster on its own or until it satisfies certain termination conditions, such as a desired number of clusters is obtained or the distance between the two closest clusters is above a certain distance” (Han & Kanber, 2001: 335).

I used the agglomerative clustering method to create the dendrogram above, from a single article to clusters. The schema below illustrates how this process works.

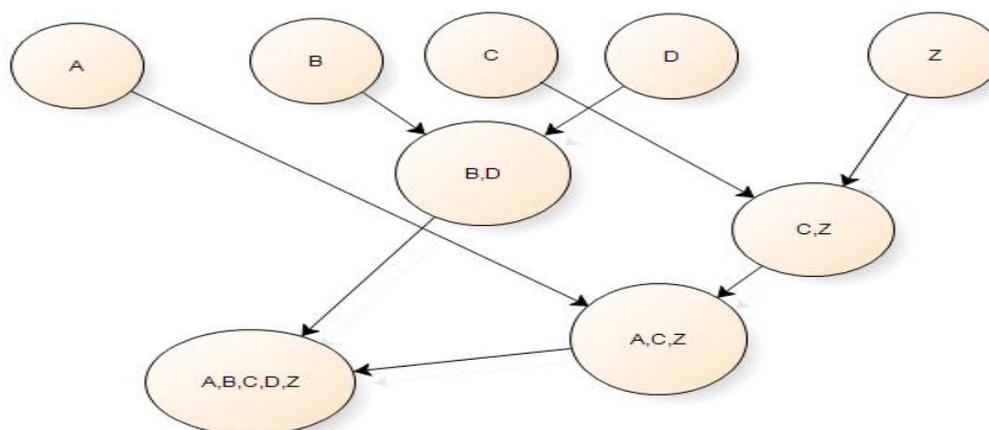


Figure 1: Clustering

When I cut the proximities at the difference level 0.5 (see, nexus of difference in the dendrogram) in order to get better visual information, I saw that there are 5 major clusters. These clusters are not homogenous in that they contain different number of articles. I re-read all the articles within each cluster to see where researches cut each other in terms of transformation act and how other nodes contribute to them. In the end, I came up with 5 major characteristics for the transformative act that researchers implied and/or subscribed:

- 1- Educational Proselytizing: From Pedagogical to Political
- 2- Debilitating Power
- 3- Creating Oppositional Projects
- 4- Working with Reference Points
- 5- Opening up New Theoretical Spaces

This clustering attempt is geared towards theorizing the findings of content analysis. Since the attributions and nodes assigned to each research case are not “quantitative” in nature from the beginning but constructed later as dummy variables, the borders of clusters or categories cannot be drawn thick and opaque. On the contrary, they are very permeable and illustrated insecurely allowing, even sometimes encouraging, ins and outs. Put it differently, some researches may belong to more than one category or pass beyond all of them as the categorization crisis is one of the biggest problematics of qualitative research embedded into its foundations.

Findings and Discussion

Educational Proselytizing: From Pedagogical to Political

Critical scholars have long been known for their advocacy for understanding education and schooling in political terms. Education “is ‘political’ in that education informs how the polity is run and translates ideology into more or less controversial practice. Second, education is political in the way that it is a service, the provision of which has to be negotiated with different parties, particularly the providers, governmental agencies, and the users, pressure groups, trade unions, and so on (Broadfoot et al., 1981: 7).” And lastly, it is political because of its role in the formation of social layers.

The manifestations of advocacy towards thinking education in political terms are solidified in some researches as an attempt to convert the meaning sets of education and educational processes from the neutral, apolitical realm of “traditional” and “conventional” interpretations to a political domain in which the attachments to such processes are constantly problematized. The assumption is that, once we disrupt conventional significations, the phenomena they refer to could be transformed. In other words, it is a war on concepts and how they should be understood. For example, in *Rogue States*, Chomsky (2000) contends that

“[W]hen they talk about lifting constraints on wage flexibility, they mean flexibility down, not flexibility up. The talk about labor mobility doesn’t mean the right of people to move anywhere they want, as has been required by free market theory ever since Adam Smith, but rather the right to fire employees at will. And, under the current investor-based version of globalization, capital and corporations must be free to move, but not people, because their rights are secondary, incidental” (2000:203)

Chomsky, thus, retrieves “labor mobility” and “wage flexibility” from their conventional grounds of signification and underlines their political nature by means of redefining them as functions of power and its implications.

Along similar lines, and with reference to what I am calling a process of proselytizing in education, a phenomenon usually seen as only pedagogical leaves its habitual, conceptual dwelling grounds and the language with which it has become associated, and migrates into a political realm whose connections to race, ethnicity, social class, economy, militarization, etc., are both more explicit and novel. While doing this, the phenomenon in question also loses some of its functions – mostly those associated with power asymmetries. This migration, however, happens within the same territories. In fact, it is very similar to the act of changing one’s religion: although the content (doctrine, rituals, symbology) changes, the anathema remains the same, i.e., the same function of servitude, but to a different deity and with different demands. This is partly because the term political invokes different meanings and people are not always open about what they refer to with the notion “political”. My preference to use the term proselytizing has to do with my analysis of the scholarship that identifies its enterprise as “critical”: the claims, demands and transformative mechanisms of such endeavor suggest, I think, an authoritative voice – “authority not to dictate, rule, diminish or dominate but to transform” and “as a viable tool in the struggle against, oppressive governing systems of order, appropriation and exclusion, just as it can help [open] up democratic possibilities and assist in reestablishing a network of non-commodified public spheres (Weiner, 2001: 4-6).” In this sense, authority in critical scholarship is geared towards the transformative act (Burbules, 2000).

The idea that education and educational institutions cannot be separated from ideology, beliefs, values, political ideas, and social goals seems to have become a driving force for such proselytizing efforts. Hegemonic or oppressive projects – developed by the powerful (in many cases the dominant ruling class), and exercised through education, either in the form of attachments to the procedures or embedded into the curriculum discursively-attract the most attention from critical researchers. Departing from these connections, the researcher challenges the pedagogical notions of teaching, learning, instruction, curriculum, etc., and, in the process, reifies them under different meaning sets as tangible daily life experiences of research subjects rather than pure philosophical concepts. Particularly, failures are considered and discussed on the political grounds that are established through

critique of the conflict inherent in the pedagogical messages and how these interact with the different the social, cultural, and historical backgrounds of students.

Debilitating Power

One important and distinguished characteristic of a transformative act in critical qualitative research in education that emerges from cluster analysis is the tendency to debilitate power by means of probing some ways to take away its weapons of domination. It is an act of “debilitation” because the purpose of the transformative act is to erode rather than clear off power and domination altogether. In other words, researchers locate the mechanisms or tools that are employed for constructing and maintaining power relations at the center of research, and then carry out their critique over those mechanisms or tools.

Domination shows cyclic characteristics that are perpetuated through various means (Anyon, 1981; Bourdieu, 1977). Disturbing such cycles is a challenging task, as they are deeply embedded into the social, psychological, structural, and institutional foundations of society. Instead of dealing with power itself, researchers look for ways to de-weaponize it in an attempt to weaken the impact and hegemony that it imposes through its instruments. Weapons of power are almost always specific to the context under study. The purpose of this inclination seems to cut the major arteries of domination that maintain power’s replenishment and reproduction. In other words, the debilitation of power is a political process of hijacking instruments of power rather than attacking it directly, a battle which may end up with what Paul Willis (1977) calls “pyrrhic victories”.

This has been achieved through various ways. Some researchers, for example, struggle to put an end to the idea of “essentiality of standards” for betterment through problematizing the political nature of standardization. They usually investigate how standards construct hegemonic centers that marginalize every “deviance” towards the periphery. Differential distribution of knowledge, wealth, health, and so on are constructed around these hegemonic centers, and are organized through the distance they maintain with the standards. Similarly, Lee (1996) suggests that

“Whiteness was simultaneously normalized and rendered invisible (and thus above criticism), and culture was understood to be something located solely within the nonwhite other. As the children of immigrants of color, Hmong Americans found themselves cast as the other within this framework. Hmong Americas students were seen either as culturally different (i.e., foreign) or culturally deficient (i.e., not like whites). Both characterizations served to reflect and preserve the normative nature of whiteness and maintain the existing racial hierarchy. Located as outsiders, many Hmong

American students were academically and socially marginalized at the school (p. 144). ... In short, whiteness set the standards by which students were made either insiders or outsiders at UHS” (1996:136).

She contends that whiteness serves as an archetype and is thus standard, in a Weberian sense, in drawing perceptual borders for other races, borders that determine who belongs to where in the social hierarchy in accordance with their intersections with whiteness. Likewise, IQ tests, as another standardization knot to deal with, have attracted much attention from critical qualitative researchers. Once scholars realized that the distribution of IQ scores (bell curve), matches exactly the distribution of wealth, health, education etc. in society, they engaged in research practices that were directed towards mapping the reasons of such distribution so that power would not use IQ test scores for the purposes of sorting, as well as legitimating such an act. For example, in their controversial book, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*, Herrnstein & Murray (1996) attempted to locate academic failure of African-American students in their genetic predispositions and explained their test scores from this angle, proposing that inequalities emerge from this biological inferiority and society should learn to live with this “scientific fact”. The major contestation coming from critical camp addressed the politics of standardization and the very nature of standard tests that were established on premises favorable to White social and cultural codes (Delpit, 1988). At least with reference to academia, these latter researchers were able to take away this tool for legitimating inequalities in society, and the book has remained one of the most controversial, albeit unsuccessful, attempts at Social Darwinism in the last decades of the last century.

In short, standardization is a tool that is employed to construct and maintain power and domination. And the assumption is that, once broken or disturbed, domination will lose a domain that is established through this tool.

Many researchers pave their transformative path onto similar terrains through problematizing tools of domination(s) including but not limited to: stereotypes, tracking, differential distribution of knowledge, structural deficiencies, expectations, geographical exclusions etc.

Creating Oppositional Projects

The notions of opposition and dissidence are among the concepts that power and authority continuously try to circumvent. This is because they see in such notions a persistent

destructive potential aimed at their own precincts of privilege and domination (Scott, 1992). In order to effectively deal with these threats to their existence, power and authority usually tend to abnormalize these threats at the individual level. Examples are abundant: pacification of women through Valium, numbing down kids by Ritalin, etc. On the similar isle, poverty, for example, could be explained through laziness and lack of motivation.

One of the most common oppositional projects is created through dragging the personal to sociological and political level. In this sense, people who find themselves in similar material and social conditions realize that it is not only their personal life trajectories but also socio-political forces forming their life opportunities. Such realization always has the potential of turning into a tool of resistance and thus dissidence.

Creating oppositional projects is parallel to the act of “debilitating power”. But this time the act does not intend to take away the weapons of power; rather, it aims to provide the disadvantaged with weapons to defend themselves against power. Oppositional projects are constructed at two levels: engaging in the field through engagement with the research subjects, and launching these projects after the research ends through utilizing research outcomes beyond the imperatives of academic benefits.

Researchers, at the first level, construct their research with an appropriate methodology that allows the research subjects to be equipped with the necessary weapons that they can use against power and domination. For example, researchers provide a digital video camera as an alternative way of expression and an alternative learning tool, so that students can incorporate their social and cultural backgrounds into the learning processes. Digital video composing is thus turned into powerful tools for social critique in the hands of students as well (Miller, 2007). Similarly, new contact zones created, vis-à-vis power’s tendency to sort out and exclude people, could be considered as an oppositional project in the sense that people from different gender, race, ethnic, social and cultural backgrounds come together and engage in an unprecedented conversation.

The second level can be approximated through oppositional projects developed against the standardization efforts in education. After documenting detrimental effects of standardization in curriculum, instruction, testing, etc., researchers produce counter projects that challenge the test-doctrine. Socially responsible pedagogies are the most common examples of these oppositional projects.

Working with Points of Reference

Anchoring bias is a cognitive process that makes us stick to given reference points, particularly during decision-making processes – points that usually serve us to understand who we are. However, sometimes these reference points could be irrelevant and yet could make us blind to other possibilities. The sociological match of this term would be ‘false consciousness,’ which “refers straightforwardly to the perverse fact that in many situations the people who suffer either blame themselves for their troubles or otherwise account for their suffering by referring to almost anything *but* the actual [social] cause” (Lemert, 2005: 16). In Marxist terminology, false consciousness has been used to explain the behavior of working class people who adopt bourgeois ideology. Anchoring at the individual level, and false consciousness at the collective plain, are both important nodes for the critical researcher to deal with.

Some researchers work with these reference points, departing from the assumption that some of them are socially constructed and work to perpetuate social inequalities. They may operate differently in relation to one’s position in social hierarchy. For example,

“When they [poor] fail at legitimate work because they lack the training, they usually also fail to provide for their families. With rare exception, most of them soon begin to feel ugly about themselves. The feeling that one is a worthless person is psychological, but the reality of the causes and effects of the feeling is sociological. When the economy offers fewer and fewer jobs only for the more highly skilled workers, this is a failure in the larger structure of social things that causes impossible troubles for millions of individuals” (Lemert, 2005: 16).

Likewise, Fine & Burns (2004) suggest that “punitive ideology” -past mistakes predict the negative future outcomes- creates one of the most damaging results for the well-being of urban youth. In other words, “these youths have committed what psychologists would call a “characterological personal attribution” or “fundamental attribution error” for past mistakes (p. 2210).”

On the other side of the isle, these reference points may create what is called “narcissistic entitlements” for affluent students, a feeling that one deserves special treatment because of his or her superiority and “they will receive an inheritance the world is expected to provide (Harvot & Antonio, 1999: 324)”. This feeling is usually boosted through social institutions (Cookson & Persell, 1991), whereas “poor children, especially poor children and youth of color, in contrast, tend to be held personally accountable for “mistakes” for which other children are given “second chances” with potentially dire consequences (Fine et al.

2004: 2210).” Foster (2004) claim that actually these two states of mind are connected to each other.

“Oppressors are dependent upon the oppressed, and their supposed inferiority, for their self-image of superiority. The second issue refers to consequences for the oppressor; they may differ in form, but there are at least three areas implicating psychological patterns. One area suggests a Nero complex involving obsessions with establishing legitimacy and self-satisfaction (Moane, 1999). This may involve self-delusions, arrogance, narcissism and a sense of entitlement. A second area involves processes of dehumanization and objectification, a form of emotional blunting, if you like. Oppressor lose feelings and empathy for the disadvantaged, and transform this into discourses of victim-blaming (the poor are idle, lazy and indolent), and frequently advocate further punitive treatment for those labeled as inferior, Oppressor lose a sense of justice and fairness” (2004: 31).

If we consider these reference points as mirrors, through which we see ourselves and inform our behaviors accordingly, the task of the critical researcher becomes to break these looking-glasses in order to set new reference points that would not reinforce social asymmetries. This leads to transformation because the researcher provides his/her own mirrors instead to convey who one really is, albeit authoritatively. In this type of research construction, transformation happens for both psychological and sociological ends: emancipation from psychological assumptions that power provides, and emancipation from holding one’s self responsible in lieu of social causes. This is different from what is called “mirroring approach” in the sense that the major purpose of critical research is more of a replacement project that would mobilize people to look for other points of references. This is notwithstanding that critical researchers in most cases are the ones who provide these alternative reference points. This is not only to show people “who they are”, but to also make them recognize their diversity and how their expectations, attitudes, etc. affect other peoples’ lives. Some researchers accomplish this through having the powerful or simply authority holders keep diaries. These diaries transform into mirrors, a conversation with the self and have a strong impact on recognition of the “true self”.

Opening up New Theoretical Spaces

Conceptualizations of different phenomena have been challenged throughout the history of the social sciences. Changing material and social conditions, whether on a global or a local scale, visibly manifest onto people’s lives in multilateral ways that cannot be predicted with previous knowledge about them (i.e., effects of the Vietnam War on Asian-American identity construction). Coupled with the dynamic character of personal and group

histories that are open to influence in various degrees and at different levels, research has been obliged to adopt a flexible temperament in order to capture new circumstances in the field. It may be because of this reason researchers still continue to look at similar issues over and over again. Similarly, the same phenomena are explored and theorized in many different contexts, even sometimes with contradictory outcomes. By the same token, some research challenges the methodologies or conceptualizations of other researches and claims that there needs to be more appropriate ways of understanding the phenomena or there should be some other components that need to be taken into account. Researchers find these theoretical constructs either insufficient and unconvincing or contributing to perpetuate domination, power relations and so on. Carspecken (1996: 3) states that “[Critical scholars] use [their] research, in fact, to refine social theory rather than merely describe social life.” It should also be noted that many groundbreaking researches have opened up new theoretical spaces without a direct intention to do so.

Social class, for example, sits on one of the most contested theoretical spaces in education. Conceptualization of working class as bound to history opens up many categories for class discussions. Weis (2004) challenges both Willis’ (1977) conceptualization and other conventional theorizations of working class, suggesting that the changing relationship with labor made it impossible to write off working class.

“Arguing that we cannot write off working class simply because white men no longer have access to well paying laboring jobs in the primary labor market jobs, that spawned a distinctive place for labor in the capital-labor accord, I track and theorize the remaking of this group as a distinct class fraction, both discursively and behaviorally inside radical, globally-based economic restructuring” (2004: 2).

Ellsworth (1989) contested the foundations of critical pedagogy through her research in her classroom and did not find them as much empowering as initially anticipated. She underlined the absence of woman in the field of theory as one of the major weaknesses. Davies (1996) challenged conceptualizations of resistance in schools and suggested that connecting students’ background to resistance patterns is problematic.

Conclusion

This study is a systematic effort of understanding how critical qualitative researches are grounded and produced. Particular attention is given the transformative aspect of critical qualitative research practice. More specifically, the primary intent of the content analysis

was to reconstruct implicit assumptions, constructions, and mechanisms of transformations in an effort to see connections among them embedded into critical qualitative research articles. Transformation strategies were explored through systematic analysis of targets of transformation, agents of transformation, and tools of transformation. After quantification of each node, they were compared in an effort to see intersections. Finally, cluster analysis revealed five major characteristics of transformative act.

Content analysis did not yield any logical pattern that could be linked to the epistemological or philosophical foundations of critical enterprise as it was described in the literature. Instead, it made visible that the common denominators of critical qualitative research have to do more with mechanistic aspects of the research practices such as possible research subjects and determining research sites, invoking certain theoretical body without direct application. Likewise, overall readings of the research articles and other literature suggest that concept sets of studies dealing with similar issues show great similarities. This may not seem as a surprising finding at first glance. However, closer examination of those similarities revealed that many of them are also mechanistic in nature, meaning that connections with social theory are established through those concepts, but almost always in similar manners without taking into consideration the peculiarities of socio-cultural contexts, historical moment and other field specific realities. Therefore, in one sense, this would be a contribution to Carspecken's claim that critical qualitative research has to do more with the social theory and epistemology. But, paradoxically, I found that the ways in which such connections are established with social theory and epistemology (that is why I found them mechanistic) hold more importance than the connection itself (or what qualifies such connection).

Utilization of "critical frameworks" gained momentum during the 1980s, with a content that was politically 'heavy' inspired in the US by the works of scholars such as Michael Apple, Peter McLaren and Jean Anyon. However, it seems that this political content got thinned out during the 1990s, and discussions were shifted to "institutionalized" concepts such as reproduction, social-cultural capital and resistance, which were coined to in the 70s and 80s. Even, according to Carspecken (2003), "critical ethnography" is articulated by Peter McLaren for the first time in early 1980s. Analysis of the research articles reveals that those concepts are still in charge informing similar research questions, indicating that critical qualitative research in education lost its momentum for the time being at least in terms of its transformative aspect.

It is also clear that researchers are having hard time in creating common grounds for a struggle towards just society, grounds on which political statements expressing consensus over injustices could be located. In other words, there is almost no “call” for coming together around bigger political projects transcending individual practices to transform injustices. And, I think that this fragmentation in political struggles has great impacts on answering to the foundational question of critical enterprise as to whether the purpose of research is to show us how we are oppressed or stop oppression. It seems that the answer is gearing towards more descriptive side, a tendency towards leaving transformation job to the “others” (i.e., show them what is wrong and let them find their own way). Of course, I am not suggesting that researchers should take up the role of “savior” or in similar manner, look for the ways to emancipate their research subjects. But I think that such methodological and ethical dilemmas in regards to the role and the positionality of researcher contribute to what Bourdieu calls “symbolic forms of domination”. By pulling the issues of “social responsibility, values, justice and the like” into the domain of “colonial research practices” through academization, many researchers tend to stay in the “comfort zones” of academic necessities. In relation to this, articles, for example, do not clarify the point that how one can transform structural and social circumstances without gathering around bigger political projects. In other words, although researchers show their fidelity towards the concept sets and frameworks of critical enterprise through reflexivity, normative claims, emancipatory interests, tools of transformation, targets of transformations etc., many of them do not pass beyond what Michael Apple call “possibilitarian rhetoric” with generic categories of critique such as neo-liberalism, institutional racism, and stereotypes.

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