Reflection Paper # 1: A Tradition, Framework, or Genre

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Critical Ethnography

What is a research tradition/genre? And, what is a research Framework?

In spite of all the informative readings in the class, I, personally still do not have a clear understanding of what a research tradition of genre is or for that matter what a research framework is. What I do understand however is that when conducting a study, one needs to have a research design which dictates what the methods of a particular study ought to be. A research design will help the researcher determine what kind of data would be the most conducive to answering their research questions, how to collect and document that data as well as how to analyze that data. The other most important aspect of designing a research study is determining the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework is crucial as it provides the researcher the lens through which to ask his/her research questions. A theoretical framework helps the research pose the research questions that need to be answered.

Having articulated my own understanding of the role of research design and theoretical framework, I find myself asking the question whether determining the theoretical framework and the research design is a linear process or a more cyclical iterative process. I believe, and common sense dictates, that it is iterative. I believe, that research questions, including the researcher’s theoretical framework, should be open to revisions if the researcher’s environment stipulates.

Keeping that in mind, I will now begin to discuss my own understanding of a research design, which I feel, after much deliberation, fits my research goal. Considering I want to unravel, or appropriately understand what let to the Education Commissions in India to make the educational reform recommendations that they made, I find myself asking questions with socio/cultural and political connotations. In addition, the postcolonial/neocolonial condition of the country, I hypothesize, based on
my preliminary analysis of the data, has quite a significant role to play in fashioning the mental models of the actors and consequently effecting their decisions regarding the recommended reforms. The postcolonial condition, as noted by postcolonial theorists, enables the researchers understand the condition of the “other”. However, when theorists discuss the condition of the “other” they voluntarily, or involuntarily, adopt a more elevated and a rather removed perspective on determining the condition. What is sometimes ignored by the theorists is the condition of the “other” from the perspective of the “other”. And by the perspective of the “other”, I am not implying that the researcher be a part of the “other”, rather how the “other” having perceived himself/herself as the “other” acts and takes decisions based on that. Of course, these thoughts are in their formative stages, and I will have to spend some more time articulating them, perhaps in another reflection paper.

As far as critical ethnography being the appropriate research design for my study is concerned, it serves a significant role as, inherently due to the manner in which it evolved in the 70’s, it helps me address the questions that I seek to get answered. A very interesting and informative article by Gary L. Anderson, titled, “Critical ethnography, in education: Origins, current status, and new direction” traces the history of ethnographic design and addresses the issues that led to formulation of this research design. Rigorous scientific goal based research which had always been heralded as the only kind of research that can be informative was being questioned and aspects of society that cannot be measured or quantified, that were not being taken into account, where posing a serious problem for researchers. What scientific researcher, focusing on variables can do is shed light on “what is happening”; however, it fails to address of “why” of the observed phenomenon. Ethnography or critical ethnography attempts to unravel the sociopolitical and cultural underpinnings of social phenomena. (One aspect that I am a little unclear about, and perhaps need to spend some more time exploring, is the difference between ethnography and critical ethnography.) This aspect is especially crucial in my research, as my goal is to understand why the actors of educational reform recommendations made those said recommendations. In order to
address a social problem, it is crucial that the causes and underlying constructs are made apparent to the researcher and critical ethnography is designed to do just that. Critical ethnography becomes even more relevant in the field of education because education is after all a social construct; a construct of a “civilized” society. It is not a natural phenomenon, such as determining the growth rate of a particular species of flora in the Amazonian rain forest. Education systems were designed by societies and actors within those societies. Actors who are not removed from the sociopolitical or cultural constructs of their environment and therefore, approaching a study in an environment rampant with layers of constructs with a scientific approach attempting to determine the how one singular variable would affect another, will without a doubt, simply not offer a complete picture. In addition, as mentioned earlier, research is an iterative process, especially social research. Based on the challenges faced during the process of conducting the study, the design of the study should be such that certain aspects of it can be altered.

The examples of critical ethnography that I have looked at so far, the one commonality that I have observed is the conspicuous presence of a physical social environment that the researcher becomes a part of in order to observe social and cultural dynamics. I have been hard pressed to find studies that adopt a critical ethnographic approach to historical texts. Perhaps, I am not looking hard enough.

Finally, this reflection paper is simply a culmination of my thoughts based on my initial readings of critical ethnography. I believe I need to explore the topic a little bit more. One of the purpose of this reflection paper, and I want to continue working on this very reflection, is to develop my understanding of critical ethnography as well as develop a bibliography (possibly annotated which will be helpful) of discussions on critical ethnography as well as example studies that have used the design. I have, for the time being simply started the list of citation and I plan to continue to build on it. Due to the time constraint, I have not been able to annotate, but I plan to start doing that soon.
Bibliography


