Critical ethnography: extending attention to bias and reinforcement of dominant power relations

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Abstract

**Aim** Many forms of critical theory shape nursing research. One approach that is gaining popularity is Carspecken’s critical ethnography. This methodology was designed to help researchers understand power relations by merging a critical stance with a complex and dynamic qualitative strategy of inquiry. Despite the appeal of this approach, we argue Carspecken does not adequately address how researchers can minimise researcher biases and dominance when studying power relations. The purpose of this article is to critique Carspecken’s implementation of critical theory from the standpoint of lack of attention to bias and reinforcement of oppression.

**Discussion** The authors explain how greater attention to reflexivity, relationality and reciprocity could reduce opportunities for researcher bias and the potential for oppressive structures and dominant power relations to be reinforced.

**Implications for research** Researchers can better address bias and reinforcement of power relations through reflexivity. Bias can be reduced by making explicit values that may privilege particular decisions and observations throughout the research process. Researchers can also reduce bias via relationality or giving participants equal power in decision making and taking action towards social justice. When researchers engage in reciprocity they encourage participants to contribute to all stages of the research process and therein equalise power relations.

**Keywords** Critical theory, critical ethnography, nursing philosophy, nursing research, nursing

CRITICAL THEORY is a complex and dynamic philosophical paradigm that is increasingly being used to guide nursing research. There are many forms and interpretations of critical theory. Some interpretations are based on writings of a particular author, such as Habermas, Foucault or Bourdieu (Hyde and Murray 2005, Lynam et al 2007, Aléx and Hammarström 2008), while others represent ‘critical theory’ more generally (Kincheloe and McLaren 1994, 2000, 2005, Morrow and Brown 1994, Browne 2000, Mill et al 2001).

The commonality in these interpretations is their use of critical theory to understand power relationships, social structures, oppression and social justice (Browne 2000, Manías and Street 2001, Kirkham and Browne 2006, Lynam et al 2007, Bathum 2009).

**Aim**

In nursing, Carspecken’s (1996) critical ethnography is becoming a popular way for researchers to use critical theory in practice. Critical ethnography is intended to help researchers understand relations of power by merging a critical stance with a complex and dynamic qualitative strategy of enquiry. The purpose of this paper is to critique Carspecken’s critical ethnography from a standpoint that addresses the influence of biases and reinforcement of oppression. In addition, we argue that critical
ethnographers must confront researcher biases with participants by using reflexivity, rationality and reciprocity throughout the research process. The use of these techniques has the potential to avoid reinforcing dominant power relations.

**Assumptions underpinning Carspecken's critical ethnography** Carspecken (1996) characterised critical theorists as questioning the nature of society and seeking change in the form of the empowerment or emancipation of particular groups. He argued critical theorists view society as structured into privileged and oppressed social groups. Over time, this privilege and oppression are viewed as stable and natural, despite being dynamic and only virtually real (Guba and Lincoln 1994). He aimed to study and challenge oppression to expose domination and displace inequalities that are taken for granted.

Carspecken suggested critical theorists believe in a single objective reality; however, he argued critical theorists only understand this reality through communicative acts that rely on social consensus. Thus, critical researchers neither claim to have the exact ‘truth’ nor do they believe that there are multiple ‘truths’ – critical researchers believe they can only obtain particular representations of the ‘truth’, depending on the social consensus of the group studied. However, it is this idea of ‘truth’ based on social consensus that can often inadvertently foster the reinforcement of dominant power relations. We argue that critical researchers must be particularly wary of their reconstructions of ‘truth’ because socially accepted ideals can be used and misused to maintain oppression.

Carspecken regarded language, often in the form of social labels, as vital to the critical theorist. Examining labels or ‘communicative structures’ allows people to make sense of the world. Because power structures drive all communication, including subjective (personal feelings), objective (objects and events) and normative-evaluative (agreements on what is right or appropriate) claims about truth, Carspecken believed critical researchers must strive to understand how social truth claims are constructed and for what purpose. Through careful examination of these claims, researchers can explain how domination and oppression are manifested. For example, the critical researcher might examine why a particular group, such as one labelled ‘undergraduate students’, invokes different characterisations to one labelled ‘doctoral students’. We argue Carspecken is unclear about how communicative structures can be critiqued while minimising reinforcement of dominant power structures. It is possible the construction of claims about social truth by dominant groups would be accepted, without adequate critique of the purpose of those claims.

Carspecken did acknowledge that ‘observation involves perception, not just reception’ (Wainwright 1997): in other words, all research is value-driven and cannot be completed from a ‘neutral’ standpoint in the traditional sense. He also recognised research outcomes are influenced by the interactions between researchers and participants. As a result, he encouraged critical researchers to express value orientations before and throughout the research project. Such expression allows readers to question research findings and perhaps understand the values that have been used to guide the analysis. He did not include participants as part of this reflection, though he clearly believed participants are important contributors to the construction of research data.

**Avoiding bias**

Carspecken suggested researchers complete member checks and peer debriefing, and use multiple sources of data to avoid researcher bias; however, he only referred to those events following reconstructive analysis. In situations where oppressive power relations are operating, study ‘subjects’ can lack a sense of confidence and freedom to disagree with researcher reconstructions. Moreover, peers who ‘debrief’ the researcher can share and reinforce assumptions, rather than question researchers’ perspectives. It is investigators who decide what data to privilege and incorporate in research studies – multiple sources of data do not necessarily prevent researcher bias. Carspecken has neither provided clear assurances about participants’ equal opportunities to question dominant power structures through research processes nor acknowledged the difficulty of contradicting dominant discourses when careers and lives can be put at stake.

Carspecken approached the avoidance of reinforcing dominant power structures in two ways. He encouraged critical researchers to avoid bias by appraising all claims about truth equally. In other words, researchers must critique all such claims by attempting to understand how they function in particular social and historical contexts. Through those techniques, researchers can identify biases that favour some groups and disadvantage others. Unfortunately, he did not discuss particular mechanisms for researchers to equalise power in their practices to more carefully critique oppression.

The second way Carspecken recommended researchers evade reinforcement of domination is by addressing all forms of oppression to avoid
favouring some critiques at the expense of others. Again, he did not offer clear guidance about how to prevent researchers from inadvertently reinforcing some types of oppression.

In the following section, we build on our critique of Carspecken’s attempts to reduce bias by evaluating his approach to producing research questions, as well as collecting and analysing data. We also offer suggestions for researchers to avoid researcher bias, while simultaneously minimising the reinforcement of dominant power relations.

Method

Brief description of Carspecken’s critical ethnography In his description of critical ethnography, Carspecken (1996) recommended critical ethnographers not focus on one research question, but create a list of comprehensive, flexible questions related to a particular social group, problem or place and addressing the contextual factors – historical, social or political – that may contribute to the understanding of power relations. For example, if researchers wished to study the socialisation of doctoral students into academia, they might ask:

- How are doctoral students socialised in academia?
- What helps or hinders their socialisation?
- How might broader social, political, historical or institutional factors influence their academic socialisation?
- How are doctoral students described and categorised in academia?
- Who is included or excluded from doctoral socialisation in academia?

In this case, highlighting factors that influence success or failure in the socialisation of doctoral students into academia may expose the taken-for-granted assumptions about what makes a ‘good’ academic. Carspecken believed exposing assumptions allows researchers to understand how power infiltrates and influences experiences.

We find it curious that he does not mention how researchers can avoid questions that could further reinforce dominant power structures or ignore significant oppression. For example, dominant power structures could be reinforced by a question framed as: ‘How does having English as a second language affect doctoral students’ success at socialisation?’

Carspecken recommended that researchers then create a list of the possible sources of data for answering the research questions. Although many sources of data are possible, he suggested researchers include a combination of interviews, observations, and documents to decrease bias through data triangulation. He regarded multiple sources of data as revealing important discrepancies or contradictions in the data, providing insight about power structures, and alerting researchers to areas that may require further inspection. Unfortunately, he discussed neither how researchers might address such contradictions nor how researchers’ biases can influence ‘discovery’ of such discrepancies.

An important strength of his approach was his recommendation that researchers discuss and reflect on personal beliefs and values before data collection – for example, by discussing expected results and being interviewed about beliefs and values by the research team. He claimed reflection could increase sensitivity to personal biases and encourage frankness about the influence of beliefs on study results. On the other hand, he recommended researchers limit the involvement of participants during the initial reflections and planning of the study.

We argue that involving participants in the very early stages of planning helps researchers question their assumptions and critique more subtle forms of domination.

Stage one: compiling the primary record

Carspecken suggested researchers compile the primary record or observation data from their own standpoints; researchers ‘passively’ observe the social group or site until little new information is captured (Carspecken 1996, Cook 2005, Smyth and Holmes 2005, Hardcastle et al 2006). To obtain an in-depth description of the social site, Carspecken encouraged researchers to change the focus of observation from individuals to groups and then to behaviours, such as posture and eye movements. Observation data are intended to result in thick description of the social group or site from the researchers’ perspective.

Although the primary record is vital for use as a comparison for data collected in stages three, four and five, he did not say how researchers can address bias in what they decide to observe and which behaviours they document. Failure to attend to these elements can reinforce dominant power relations. Including participants in the observation process could avoid imposing researchers’ biases. Explanations about researchers’ processes allow decisions to be examined that could contribute to dominant power relations.

Stage two: preliminary reconstructive analysis

Carspecken (1996) used Habermas’s theory of communicative action to analyse data from the primary record to describe subjective (personal feelings) and normative beliefs (agreements on what
is right or appropriate) that guide participants’ behaviour. Moreover, Carspecken viewed the purpose of this as reconstructing the ‘background horizon’ or foundation of shared values, assumptions, beliefs, skills and routines shaping participants’ behaviour. This returns to the concept of communicative acts relying on social consensus.

Low-level coding is aimed at describing actions, behaviours, or events. Based on low-level coding, researchers begin higher-level coding by making inferences about the meaning of actions or events. Carspecken provided an example of observations of body language and inferred meanings from field notes about ‘defeated’ subjective states and ‘negative’ self-views.

Power relationships are inferred through analysis of the interactive power (power-guiding actions) and cultural power (associated with race, gender and so on). The list of raw codes created from this process is intended for use in later analysis, but there is no mention of reflexivity related to how behaviours are represented by the researcher in field notes and analysis.

Carspecken suggested checking observations with peers or verifying data with participants to avoid bias in stage two. He did not acknowledge participants’ potential difficulties with engaging at this stage of the research process in an equitable way. Encouraging equal involvement is particularly difficult when researchers are in a position of power or when disagreement with dominant power relations could jeopardise participants in some way. Researchers are more likely to foster meaningful and trusting partnerships with participants by involving them in decisions about the study from the beginning and throughout the project.

Stage three: dialogical data generation In this stage, Carspecken aimed to collect data that represented viewpoints of participants through individual and group interviews (Carspecken 1996, Smyth and Holmes 2005). Carefully crafted interview guides are necessary for semi-structured interviews and he recommended guides be based on previous observation data to confirm, clarify and check the previous data.

Explicit suggestions about how researchers should handle bias throughout this process would be useful. For example, Carspecken might have recommended researchers be clear about how they construct interview guides and why particular questions are privileged. Such clarity can enhance discussion about ways the interview guides might reinforce pre-existing values and dominant power relations.

Once data were collected, Carspecken (1996) compared interview data with data from the primary record. He offered no comment about how questions derived from the primary record might privilege particular positions and reinforce oppressive relationships. He also regarded careful examination of similarities and differences as providing meaningful insights about power relations. We question the legitimacy of that assumption if participants are not involved at this stage of the process and explicit attention is not given to researchers’ reflexivity. For example, a researcher studying the socialisation of doctoral students may decide to confine observations to the university classrooms. This approach could privilege questions about learning at the institution and cause the researcher to miss important information about socialisation that takes place in research labs, community groups and other important settings.

Carspecken suggested paying attention to: repeated interviews; consistency checks between participant actions and interviews; non-leading interview techniques; peer debriefing on possible leading; member checks of researcher reconstructions; and encouraging participants’ words. As we stated previously, by introducing these techniques late in the process of data analysis, he does not address bias during data collection and lacks inclusion of participant power to question reconstructions.

Stages four and five: conducting systems analysis

Carspecken (1996) described comparing data from the first three stages to broader social, political, historical or institutional factors. This serves as a way for researchers to empirically ‘test’ or compare analysed data to information collected from social sites that are similar to the primary social location. It is in the researchers’ purview to determine which social sites are similar to the primary social location. Participants might not share that perception. During this stage, researchers are also encouraged to undertake interviews or observations, or study cultural commodities, such as publications, videos or policies, to compare with the reconstructions they have produced. These comparisons explain or support ideas about systems relationships. For example, researchers studying academic socialisation would need to collect data from other academic settings to examine cultural commodities such as academic policies. Without adequate access to detailed information about social sites, determination of similarities and differences can be limited and may rest on researchers’ assumptions.
Carspecken recommended researchers look for similarities between study results, other social sites and scholarly literature to minimise bias; however, he provided little discussion of how researchers ought to do if they find significant differences between their reconstructions and other social sites. Conducting an analysis of findings in relation to other literature and macro-level social theories involves selecting theories that explain relationships between participant experiences and factors such as class, race, gender, economics or politics. Carspecken suggested researchers analyse the social-psychological and material interests, needs and desires of participants. Understanding needs is intended to provide important clues about how access to resources is influenced by social factors and how power relations manifest in a given context. Unfortunately, Carspecken does not specify how researchers select theories without further reinforcing dominant power relationships or how researchers should address the influence of theories prior to the onset of the study. Reflexivity could be helpful in that regard.

**Summary**

As we and other authors have suggested (Browne 2000, Manias and Street 2001, Kincheloe and McLaren 2005, Walby 2007), a major limitation of critical ethnography is the difficulty in providing adequate descriptions and critiques of social conditions without further reinforcing current power relations. By revealing the power relations that shape participants’ actions and views, critical ethnographers may unintentionally validate dominant structures by failing to question their own views and research processes. Researchers may target particular populations/participants, without questioning how they came to identify them, and make decisions during data collection and analysis without reflecting on those choices. Critical ethnographers must attend to the possibility that their constructed representations could further alienate participants and contribute to oppression.

Carspecken’s (1996) critical methodology can also pose difficulties by asking researchers to separate researchers’ views from participants’ views (Kincheloe and McLaren 2005). This requirement makes it difficult to represent participant views without imposing researchers’ biases; also some researchers have had difficulty providing sufficient critique of participant views (Manias and Street 2001, Groenkjaer 2002), while others had concerns about taking credit for participant ideas (Reyes Cruz 2008). Critical ethnographers require techniques to discuss how researchers and participants contribute to study results, yet still minimise researcher bias and reinforcement of oppression.

**Future directions: reflexivity, relationality and reciprocity** Though past critical researchers have brought attention to the problem of researcher bias (Browne 2000, Manias and Street 2001, Kincheloe and McLaren 2005) and some have discussed reflexivity as a possible solution (Manias and Street 2001, Walby 2007), few have simultaneously addressed the problem of reinforcing dominant power relations. We add to previous discussions by recommending reflexivity, relationality and reciprocity.

Reflexivity is open reflection about researchers’ beliefs and values during the research process (Hall and Callery 2001). This reflection is thought to increase rigour by acknowledging the influence of researcher bias. Researchers can question how they query for detail, clarity or explanation to become conscious of how they construct data (Hall and Callery 2001). They can also write field notes about what is and is not included in participant observation so they make explicit areas they have privileged.

McCabe and Holmes (2009) argued that researchers ought to engage in reflexivity with participants to understand and critique more subtle forms of domination and better promote emancipation. Building on reflexivity enables critical ethnographers to acknowledge biases and give participants the opportunity to critique researcher views. Hall and Callery (2001) also suggested asking participants to identify topics not covered in the interview guide or attempting to shift interviews to focus on participant issues. If critical researchers maintain that participants contribute to the construction of the data, we argue that researchers must attend to the ways that participants influence construction of that data.

Since critical ethnography is used to reduce the social, economic and historical structures contributing to social inequities (Browne 2000, Cook 2005, Hardcastle et al 2006), relationality is an important element to consider in minimising dominant power relations. Relationality is defined as the responsibility of researchers to share power with participants in decision making and social action (Hall and Callery 2001). Relationality requires researchers to contemplate possible outcomes affecting participants and larger communities and it includes the community of participants as arbiters of quality, thus bridging the gap between research and ethics (Lincoln 1995). Researchers that study their own or similar social locations...
can find it particularly difficult to become conscious of biases, because they occupy a position of privilege and are unaware of structures they take for granted that help maintain their dominance. By emphasising commitment to the community and involving them in decisions about the quality of research outcomes, researchers are more likely to gain awareness of their privileged positions and these structures. Furthermore, researchers are also likely to be more careful with their decisions because they better understand how questioning dominant power relations can affect participants.

In addition to relationality, researchers can address bias with reciprocity. Reciprocity is the creation of trust and support between researcher and participants (Hall and Callery 2001). Researchers fostering reciprocity partner with participants and encourage their participation in all stages of the research process. Critical researchers can do this when setting research questions, choosing data sources and engaging in elements of reconstructive analysis. This gives participants a more equal footing in the construction of study results and possible social action. Incorporating participant involvement in those stages of the research process could increase confidence that findings represent what is significant to participants in their everyday lives, while simultaneously reducing researcher bias and reinforcement of dominant power relations.

Conclusion

Carspecken’s (1996) outline of critical ethnography offers important insights for nursing enquiry and practice; however, we argue researchers must be cautious when using this approach. Critical ethnography would benefit from further discussion of how to address researcher bias and potential reinforcement of dominant power relations. We argue researchers using Carspecken’s critical ethnography can overcome those limitations by incorporating reflexivity, relationality and reciprocity. These techniques encourage researchers to be more aware of potential biases and dominant structures and involve participants as equal members in all aspects of the research process. Incorporating these criteria will allow researchers to minimise researcher bias and to capitalise on participant expertise.

Researchers can have more confidence that they are carefully critiquing oppression, while adequately addressing the reduction of dominant power relations.

Research


