Chapter 26

Critical Virtual Ethnography

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Learning Objectives

1. List and describe the underlying assumptions of “critical theory.”
2. Summarize in your own words “the ethnographic approach.”
3. List and describe difficulties faced by ethnographers.
4. Briefly describe the move to reconceptualize critical theory.
5. Summarize in your own words the “emergence of critical ethnography.”
6. Write an explanation for the following terms:
   a. Framing the research
   b. Actioning the research
   c. Carrying out the research
   d. Initial observations
   e. Negotiating and setting up interactional activities
   f. Building and maintaining collaboration
   g. Blurring and reducing power asymmetries
   h. Confirming/disconfirming tentative interpretations through running member checks and seeking response data

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Abstract

Critical virtual ethnography considers the use of ethnography in researching virtual communities operating in cyberspace. The chapter begins with an examination of critical theory following the postmodernist turn and considers the difficulties faced by ethnographers as a result. It then looks at the way that critical ethnography can be undertaken through an examination of research into knowledge construction online with particular reference to the criteria adopted for analyzing the interactions. The chapter concludes with an examination of the possibilities that this style of research affords researchers.

Introduction

This chapter brings together critical theory and ethnography, and examines them in conjunction with virtual communities in cyberspace, hence the term critical virtual ethnography. It begins with a review of the underlying assumptions associated with critical theory and examines how these have been reconceptualized in the light of recent social and cultural change. It then goes on to consider how to carry out ethnographic research into the culture of virtual communities operating in cyberspace with reference to an ongoing investigation into knowledge construction and assessment online.

The Underlying Assumptions of Critical Theory

Critical theory recognizes that the problems of society are more than simply isolated events involving individuals or deficiencies in the social structure, and adopts a dialectical view which explores the relationships between agency and structure, the individual and society, the local and the global, the subjective and the objective, and the particular and the general.

The individual, as social actor, both creates and is created by the social universe of which he/she is a part. Neither the individual nor society is given priority in the analysis; the two are inextricably interwoven, so that reference to one must by implication mean reference to the other. (McLaren, 1989, p. 167)