Critical Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis in Education
Book Review

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INTRODUCTION

As a new practitioner scholar, I am intrigued by the endless opportunities for qualitative data collection, analysis, and interpretation. In addition to conducting qualitative interviews, researchers can also analyze field notes, documents, television scripts, video footage, photographs, speeches, social media content, and observations (Dennis, 2018; Lee-Johnson & Henderson, 2018; Mobley, 2018; Reavis, 2018; Winkle-Wagner, Thandi Sulé, et al., 2018). This data can then be analyzed using a multitude of methods, including through a critical theoretical lens (Winkle-Wagner, et al., 2018). *Critical Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis in Education* showcases opportunities for data analysis and interpretation using different sub-theories of critical theory with the goal of disrupting "historical and contemporary inequality" (Winkle-Wagner, et al., 2018, p. i). The goal of this review is to take a fresh practitioner scholar's perspective to discuss the techniques of using critical theory to drive the analysis of qualitative data while conducting research as presented in *Critical Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis in Education*, edited by Rachelle Winkle-Wagner, Jamila Lee-Johnson, and Ashley N. Gaskew.

BACKGROUND

Summary

In *Critical Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis in Education,* Winkle-Wagner, et al. (2018) introduced readers to multiple perspectives from researchers who have used critical theories in data analysis and interpretation. Each chapter is written to provide guidance to the reader through specific examples and author experiences while utilizing critical theories in data analysis across a multitude of data collection methods. The goal of the book is to provide researchers with a fresh opportunity to present their research findings to disrupt historical systems and disband inequalities.

Audience

Critical Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis in Education is written for the qualitative researcher and/or graduate students who are interested in learning to apply critical theory to data analysis and interpretation. Furthermore, researchers interested in working with and observing underrepresented groups may also be interested in this book (Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson, et al., 2018, p. xiii).

Editors

Editors Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson, & Gaskew, are affiliated with the University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA. Winkle-Wagner is an Associate Professor of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis, while both Lee-Johnson and Gaskew are doctoral students at the time of publication. Winkle-Wagner's research focus includes access, student success, and methodologies for researching and analyzing data related to students of color (Winkle-Wagner, n.d.). Lee-Johnson's research passions lie in the promotion of female Black and Latinx student success (Lee-Johnson, n.d.). Finally, Gaskew has focused her research on critical theories within higher education (Gaskew, n.d.).

Critical Theory

Critical Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis in Education introduces new qualitative data analysis techniques through the critical theory lens. Critical theory is the overarching category of theories that critique social structures and examine inequalities. Furthermore, critical theory looks deeply at the root causes of inequities and injustices for marginalized populations, while critical theory analysis provides a voice to the oppressed populations (Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson, et al., 2018). Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault are credited as being early critical theorists. However, as Winkle-Wagner, et al., (2018) pointed out in Chapter 10, Marx, Bourdieu, and Foucault did not use racial perspectives and experiences to help drive their research and data analysis. Instead, the authors relied upon the critical theory work conducted by Audre Lorde, C.L.R. James, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Regardless of the critical sub-theory or the associated scholar used, Winkle-Wagner, et al. (2018) showcased the opportunities for new perspectives and experiences that can emerge by using critical theory as the underpinning for qualitative data analysis.

USING CRITICAL THEORY FOR QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

As Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson, and Gaskew (2018) summarized, critical theory in data analysis means creating new

methods that do not conform to the "norm" and actually become more humanizing for both the participants and the researchers (Winkle-Wagner, et al., 2018). In using critical theories, researchers reflect upon their own positions and use their work to "empower and/or benefit participants and communities" (p. 8). This mindset opens the opportunity to see data in a new light. The approaches conducted by the authors followed the normal qualitative data coding analysis that includes multiple cycles: low-level codes, high-level codes, theme development, and drawing conclusions. However, critical theory data analysis differs during the steps of high-level coding and theme development in codebooks.

For example, in Chapter 8, the author utilized critical geography for analyzing interviews to create a technique that could be applied to future studies. During the study, qualitative analysis techniques were used beginning with low-level coding, followed by transforming those codes into high-level codes with higher levels of inference. Rather than taking the next step of grouping codes into themes, the author utilized the tenets of critical geography to create themes. High-level codes were categorized into imagination, manifestation, and contradiction as well as space and place. Once this was completed, the author could then create codebooks according to the themes and begin drawing conclusions. Using this technique, the author found that using space and place as themes helped offer "nuanced insights that other data analysis techniques may miss" (Blackburn Cohen, 2018, p. 135).

In Chapter 11, another example included the analysis of a Presidential campaign speech given by Donald Trump using Postcolonial theory. Similar to Chapter 8, the author followed qualitative data analysis techniques and began with two rounds of low-level coding aligned directly with the campaign speech. Once the low-level codes were developed, the author used discourse analysis to group the low-level codes into themes according to Postcolonial theory, meaning fields analysis, and reconstructive horizon analysis. These techniques allowed the author to interpret data from multiple perspectives and identify possible meanings outside of what was actually said in the speech. This third round of coding involved meaning fields, or the consideration of all possible meanings outside of the speech for each concept. By incorporating this step within the analysis, researchers can present how language can have different meanings and purposes depending on the audience and underlying meanings. Once these steps were completed, the author was able to create high-level codes and draw conclusions.

DISCUSSION OF STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Winkle-Wagner, Lee-Johnson, and Gaskew (2018) and the chapter authors in *Critical Theory and Qualitative Data Analysis in Education* provided multiple techniques for coding data using Critical Theory. One of the strengths of this text is the amount of examples provided for the reader. In each chapter when a new technique is introduced, not only are the theories and steps for analysis discussed, but examples are also provided. This allows the reader to use this text as a guide in their own data analysis. As a practitioner scholar learning qualitative data analysis, I often struggle with the transition from coding to interpretation. More specifically, I grapple with the transition from high-level coding to thematic analysis and drawing conclusions. While I appreciate the coding examples provided by the authors, a discussion of how their own perspectives, backgrounds, and experiences influenced the conclusions would

have been beneficial. This brief discussion could have the opportunity to give more insights into the "how-to" behind using Critical Theory for qualitative data analysis, especially for new practitioners to the field. Another strength of this text is the presentation of multiple types of qualitative data, not just interviews. Instead, field notes, documents, television scripts, video footage, photographs, speeches, social media content, and observations are also analyzed in separate chapters (Dennis, 2018; Lee-Johnson & Henderson, 2018; Mobley, 2018; Reavis, 2018; Winkle-Wagner, Thandi Sulé, et al., 2018). However, each chapter read as its own study with little cohesiveness in the presentation of the driving theories and data analysis. To help make greater comparisons and contrasts to the possibilities that are created through the use of critical theory in data analysis, a more cohesive format between chapters would have been beneficial.

In analyzing the text as a new practitioner scholar, the original goals of presenting new techniques for data analysis using critical theory are truly met in this text, but a more cohesive approach within the chapters could have made the text even stronger.

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