# Barbara Dennis: Walking with Strangers
# Critical Ethnography and Educational Promise
## Book Review

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#### ABSTRACT

This book review critiques Barbara Dennis's *Walking with Strangers: Critical Ethnography and Educational Promise,* which tells the story of her engagement with a midwestern school district that was experiencing challenges with the increase of their transnational population. Dennis's portrayal is an intimate and thorough example of the emotional, personal, and methodological processes involved in conducting critical participatory ethnography. This review explores the chapters in the text as they provide insight to various components of the project and provides a discussion of the strengths and challenges presented within the book.

#### KEYWORDS

*research methodology, critical theoretical frameworks, participatory research*

As an emerging scholar who is passionate about the explication of theoretical frameworks and models for practitioner use, I am intrigued by the application of critical perspectives to methodologies. Of particular interest is considering how to apply a critical perspective when methodologies have employed techniques that hinder the ability to fully analyze circumstances and experiences. For example, quantitative analysis approaches tend to categorize in ways that limit the ability to understand the intersections of race and educational opportunities (Teranishi, 2007), while qualitative approaches often use software to code and organize, both of which are driven from the researchers' personal ideologies and assumptions (Sampson & Wong, 2024). *Walking with Strangers: Critical Ethnography and Educational Promise* illustrates not only the application of critical theory to a qualitative research methodology – specifically ethnography – but shines light on the deep and complicated work of implementing research techniques in a way that upholds the principles of the utilized critical theory. I read this text alongside engaging in a course on critical methodologies and found it to be a helpful example of authentically employing a critical methodology. The goal of this review is to provide an emerging scholarly perspective in understanding the critical application of participatory ethnography as presented in *Walking with Strangers: Critical Ethnography and Educational Promise* by Barbara Dennis.

## Background

### Summary

In *Walking with Strangers: Critical Ethnography and Educational Promise*, Dennis (2020) shared the story of her engagement with a

midwestern school district that was experiencing challenges with the increase of their transnational population. Instead of simply sharing the study results, Dennis (2020) presented the experiences and methodological decisions in which she and her team engaged as they worked to understand the heart of the school district's challenges. The chapters present in-depth and thoughtful discussions of navigating relationships with school district stakeholders (i.e., students, faculty, and staff), the implementation of varying techniques such as Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* and narrative reconstructions, and changes observed throughout their time with the district. The goal of the book is to reveal the intimate processes involved in developing participatory research relationships in order to support both a) transnational students entering into a new community that is hesitant to welcome them and b) community members, including school staff, in increasing empathy, knowledge, and skills needed to welcome these students into educational and local spaces.

### Audience

*Walking with Strangers: Critical Ethnography and Educational Promise* is written for qualitatively-focused researchers and graduate students who are interested in gaining insight into the complexities of navigating relationships and established ideologies in order to conduct critical participatory ethnographic research within educational settings. The discussions are full of methodological content, so a basic understanding of qualitative research methods is needed. Individuals interested in engaging in transformative work aimed at supporting marginalized student populations will enjoy

Dennis's (2020) reflection and the space she created for the reader to engage with these ideas as well.

### Author

Dennis is a professor of qualitative inquiry in the Inquiry Methodology program at Indiana University Bloomington's School of Education. Her research takes a critical, often qualitative approach to centering individual experiences with a range of topics, such as chronic pain, conceptions of peace, and safety and trust in emerging adult relationships. She describes herself as "methodologically creative," focusing on "understanding people's experiences as members of unequal and oppressive societies" (Indiana University Bloomington, 2024, para. 3).

### Critical Theory as Metatheory

Following a preface that presented the nature of the project, Dennis (2020) used chapter one to dive into the theoretical foundations of the project. She explained her use of the term *metatheory* instead of lens or framework as it 1) emphasizes that there is something guiding the choice of theories, 2) "suggests reciprocity," in which "the theory both impacts and is impacted by all aspects of the study," and 3) provides "criteria through which its own merits can be assessed, whereas 'frameworks' and 'lenses' must be justified by reasons external to their own claims" (Dennis, 2020, p. 11). Dennis (2020) named critical theory as the metatheory guiding the work and further identified Habermas's (1985, 1987) Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) as a metatheoretical guide to the project. TCA is a theory of society that identifies principles related to meaning, understanding, truth, and validity that assist in understanding how groups of people interact, and as such was an appropriate choice for this ethnographic study focused on understanding the dynamics of transnational students entering into a community that is not welcoming their arrival.

Dennis's (2020) first chapter also introduced the pensive tone that continues throughout the book. She held herself accountable to the theoretical choices by acknowledging the challenges they present, namely the choosing of critical theory and TCA. She explored misconceptions (e.g., critical theories only explicitly focus on power and inequity), the need to be clear about alignment with particular critical theories as there is a wide range of origins, perspectives and goals within different strands,and critiques of utilizing particular theories as guidance (e.g., Habermas wrote only using male pronouns, excluding women). Through her first chapter, Dennis (2020) not only provided the background and essential workings of the critical metatheories driving the project but also provided an example of the dialogue of research, where "assumptions and commitments are brought under examination in the process of conducting the research itself" (p. 11).

## Engaging in Critical Ethnography

Dennis (2020) moved seamlessly from presenting theoretical perspectives driving this project to discussing the navigation of relationships (chapter two), ethics (chapter three), and understanding the historical context of Unityville (chapter four, written by project team member Dini Metro-Roland). Through the initial building of relationships with Unityville school faculty and staff, Dennis (2020) and her team began to identify prevailing beliefs that the transnational students should assimilate, particularly by speaking English (e.g., the school's English-speaking only policy). In chapters

two and three, Dennis (2020) discussed how the team wrestled with insider-outsider dynamics and working the slash (i.e., exploring the "-" between) as their team and the transnational students were outsiders with the potential of moving towards insider status. This carried over into the conversation of ethics where the team had to navigate themes such as ethics as self-care/care for all of us and ethics as seeking justice in everyday mistreatment of students. Through working with these themes, Dennis and her team conceptualized their position within the spaces they embodied in Unityville, as well as the specific methodological approaches to research that would enable them to further understand Unityville's challenges.

Dini Metro-Roland authored chapter four and provided an illustration of the historical perspective-taking that supported the critical ethnography project. It is within this chapter that Dennis and her team identified a need to fully (as much as possible) understand the perspectives of all stakeholders in Unityville schools in order to understand deeply seated beliefs and values directing the dynamics in this community. The following excerpt, shared by Metro-Roland, conveys the historical recognition and situated perspective the team embraced in order to further their work:

> [Some] ethnographers treat the process of historical analysis in a way that invites the emergence of new questions and avenues of investigation. For these ethnographers, historical context both grounds and informs their research questions and analyses. It is this latter understanding of historical context that is more characteristic of our project at Unityville. While our team of researchers felt a natural affinity with transnational students and were certainly supportive of their right to maintain cultural and personal integrity, we also sought, in principle, to take seriously the claims of those who saw the matter differently. We did not do so simply for tactical reasons – to better know your enemy – but because we genuinely sought to better understand the concerns, fears, and hopes of all participating conversation partners from the schools and community… It was in response to conversations we had in the field during our research that eventually convinced us of the need to better understand the sources of the monoculturalist narrative that helped form the town's self-image and the dominant approach to the transnational students (Dennis, 2020, p. 104).

Metro-Roland followed with a narrative analysis of Unityville's historical events and the inevitability of a monoculturalist perspective taken up by many of the citizens of Unityville. Understanding this historical perspective not only allowed Dennis and her team to more fully consider the perspectives of those in favor of assimilation, but also enabled them to better decide on methodologies that would further the uncovering of values and beliefs on which these perspectives were built.

Dennis (2020) returned as the author of the remaining chapters and presented a few methodological approaches utilized to explore the dynamics within the Unityville school system. The first process involved exploring monocultural tales through narrative reconstruction (chapter five). Dennis (2020) explained, "[a]s ethnographers, we watched and listened closely to the ways in which monoculturalism was being sustained [through]… dropped references ('story seeds')… I reconstructed the narratives from seeds, articulated deep structural contexts, and claimed critical insights" (p. 134). Example meaning fields (i.e., sentences written by the researcher from the perspective of the actor), tables organizing inferences and claims, and figures organizing the structure of story

seeds support the narrative reconstruction performed and the themes that became apparent to the research team.

In chapter six, Dennis (2020) explained the use of Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* to give Unityville educators opportunities to explore transnational students' bullying experiences as they role-played scenarios that students had described. Reenacted scenes went through many iterations, filled with pauses in which the leaders (researchers) encouraged conversation and transparent reflection of emotions from participants embodying the bully and the bullied. Many teachers expressed the empathy they gained and the understanding of the role they played in transnational students' oppression.

In chapter seven, the final chapter on methodological processes, Dennis (2020) conducted an analysis of time to explore interpretations of the changes that were occurring in Unityville during the project. For example, she explained, "[e]xploring the data for generative conceptions of time involved looking for something akin to deep structures in grammar at work in the background beliefs about change itself" (Dennis, 2020, p. 205). Dennis (2020) noted that there was a "strong 'principle of addition'" in which teachers referenced the "'addition' of 'newcomers'" and the "'adding' [of] [English-as-a-New-Language] classes to the curriculum," typically presented in a negative light (p. 205). However, further into the project, teachers began to comment on the increase (i.e., addition) in a) positive attitudes among staff and students, b) understanding of students' perspectives, and c) students' success. This form of analysis, along with the other methodological processes, enabled Dennis and her team to explore and understand all stakeholders' perspectives while also supporting the developing perspectives that supported the transnational students. Dennis's (2020) final chapter reflected on the project, asking questions such as how was the project transformative and in what ways was it complicit with the status quo.

## Discussion of Strengths and Weaknesses

Dennis (2020) provided an intimate and thorough example of the emotional, personal, and methodological processes involved in conducting critical participatory ethnography. One of the strengths in this text is the transparency with which the project and involved activities are discussed. Dennis (2020) made claims in the book that those participating in critical theory must both make visible their positions and actively "reflect on and investigate their own claims to knowledge, power, and truth" (p. 19). Dennis (2020) applied this reflective process throughout the text (reflecting as she wrote) and made clear that these processes guided the activities and methodological decisions. I found this book to be incredibly helpful as I developed an understanding of how these varying methodologies are applied and put into practice. Some of Dennis's (2020) guiding metatheories and methodological examples, such as the analysis of time and narrative reconstruction, were quite new to me and were challenging to understand at times. However, she included appendices that elaborate on some of these ideas (e.g., Habermas's TCA) and encouraged readers to return to sections to review. While my understanding was fuzzy at times, I found these applications demonstrated the creative approaches that critical theories often encourage; critically analyzing a context requires individuals to push beyond traditional approaches, exploring avenues that will allow dynamics generally invisible or intentionally ignored to be brought to the surface.

In line with the goal of critical theories and their application, this study challenged the accepted beliefs and perspectives in Unityville and sparked transformation among staff, students, and the surrounding community. At the same time, Dennis (2020) critiqued her own work, recognizing the ways the project failed to support Black students and address gendered norms that oppressed the students. She recognized the "risk in being transparent" (Dennis, 2020, p. 242) – being complicit in upholding the status quo in any way does not look good – but also acknowledged the essential need to critique any attempt as transforming society as it brings its own goals and values. Dennis (2020) conveyed an authentic attempt to uncover and understand the context of Unityville schools, as well as to support the transnational student population through the implementation of critical participatory ethnography.

Towards the end of the book, Dennis (2020) claimed,

> though the substantiative richness of the study was not the focus of this book, it is possible to see how the methodological orientation was tightly connected with the emergence of substantive insights. Most specifically, we were able to locate the role of empathy in the transformation toward a more inclusively thriving school community (p. 243).

This quote provides an accurate summary of the text. *Walking with Strangers: Critical Ethnography and Educational Promise* is not a methodological text in the sense of being a textbook, but it provides rich descriptions and examples of the implementation of a critical participatory ethnography. Additionally, Dennis (2020) demonstrated the humility, self-reflection, and accountability needed to implement this work authentically, which is required if one hopes to promote social and educational transformation.

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