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Ethnographic Approaches

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Ethnography as a social science methodology is by and large a 19th-century enterprise anchored in the discipline of anthropology. During the mid- to late 19th century, anthropologists increasingly recognized the value of knowledge acquired through direct participation and immersion in a culture. Anthropologists Franz Boaz and Bronislaw Malinowski are generally credited with the establishment of an ethnographic approach, or participant observation, as the principal method in anthropology (Tedlock, 2000). Ethnographic approaches have diverse philosophical origins, disciplinary traditions, and intellectual trajectories. This chapter focuses on critical ethnography as a community-based research approach. A civic, participatory, and collaborative project, critical ethnography is rooted in the social justice commitments of critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin & Giardina, 2011; Madison, 2005).

A number of shifts were instrumental in the development of critical ethnographic approaches in the United States. Leading these was the Chicago School of Ethnography, which emerged during the 1920s in the sociology department at the University of Chicago. Key proponents of the Chicago school, such as Robert Park, John Dewey, and Herbert Blumer, played a crucial role by shifting the ethnographic lenses from foreign, exotic cultures to a focus on urban landscapes in the United States. During the 1960s and 1970s, ethnographic approaches witnessed the emergence of ethnomethodologies (Garfinkel, 1967) and symbolic and interpretive anthropologies (Geertz, 1973; Turner, 1967). Clifford Geertz introduced the term *thick description* as a methodological device to get at the symbolic and interpretive import of what is documented during fieldwork. However, it was not until the 1980s that ethnographic approaches began to take a critical turn with the influence of feminist, indigenous, poststructural, and postcolonial scholarship. The most salient feature of the transformation was the unmasking of ethnographic authority, that is, the elucidation of colonial and imperialist underpinnings of classic ethnographic traditions (Conquergood, 1991). Critical ethnographic approaches shifted the focus of ethnographic inquiry from the objective study of other cultures to the reflexive study of social suffering and inequities (Angel-Ajani, 2006; Burawoy, 2003; Hale, 2008).

INTRODUCTION TO CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

The salient feature of critical ethnography is its orientation to social justice and activism. Critical ethnography is rooted in critical realist philosophies that emphasize connections between structural inequities and the everyday realities of people (Carspecken, 1996). Critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address injustice and inequities in specific domains (Madison, 2005). Recognizing the disparities that stand between "what is" and "what could be" in many communities across the globe, critical ethnographers must disrupt the status quo and unpack the power structures underlying different forms of injustice. Madison (2005, p. 5) was unequivocal in her assertion that critical ethnographers must "resist domestication." This implies that we have to deploy the skills, resources, and privilege at our disposal to create spaces for voices that are systematically silenced or subjugated. The goal of critical ethnography ultimately is to contribute to emancipatory knowledge and decentered discourses of social justice. These fundamental principles align

seamlessly with the guiding principles of community psychology and have the potential to enrich community-based research.

Critical Ethnography and Power

Critical ethnographic approaches are profoundly shaped by feminist, postcolonial, indigenous, and critical race scholarship (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2003; Tomaselli, Dyll, & Francis, 2008; Visweswaran, 2003), the common thread across these bodies of scholarship being a highly nuanced conceptualization of power. Although the potential of ethnographic approaches to generate deeply contextualized understandings is widely recognized (e.g., Banyard & Miller, 1998; Case, Todd, & Kral, 2014), these very understandings may reproduce existing dynamics of power, privilege, and subjugation. Interrogating the ebb and flow of power is fundamental to the emancipatory practice of critical ethnography and has significant implications for how community-based research is conceptualized, conducted, represented, and disseminated (Dutta, 2014). First, contemporary ethnography impels us to critically examine the positionality of the researcher in relation to community-based research. Second, it calls for a critical interrogation of "collaboration" between researchers and communities. Third, it impels us to examine and reenvision such dichotomies as global-local and universal-particular, which are often taken for granted in research.

Positionality and Reflexivity

A keystone of ethnography is the researcher's deep immersion in the community or context of inquiry. This immersion takes place in a particular sociopolitical and cultural milieu and is shaped by researchers' worldviews, values, biographies, and politics. The various intersections of these lived domains constitute the research horizon. Positionality refers to the explication of this horizon through a critical engagement with our power, privilege, biases, and insights vis-à-vis participant communities (Madison, 2005). Participant observation has a long and early history of scientific empiricism. Preoccupied with the notion of objectivity, early ethnographers, especially during the colonial period, failed to discern the values inherent in the categorizations they imposed on groups that were different from them. Along the lines of this postcolonial critique, critical race theorists have discussed how White privilege tends to be undetectable as neutral or normative, rendered so through institutional arrangements (Bonnet, 1999). Fine (1994) outlined an activist epistemological stance that requires the researcher to assume a clear position, one that is committed to disrupting hegemonic practices. It is precisely this activist stance that defines the positionality of the critical ethnographer. Although we do not presume to speak on behalf of marginalized voices, our research attempts to create conditions where such voices may be heard.

An activist stance calls for reflexivity, that is, the process of continually examining our roles and positions in relation to our multifaceted research contexts (Finlay, 2002). It is through a reflexive engagement that we strive to remain firmly anchored in the empirical world of our research participants (Dutta, 2014). The perfomative turn in ethnography played a crucial role in facilitating dialogues on reflexivity. Emerging from a critique of mainstream Western academic traditions that privilege written expressions, the performative turn privileged embodied practices and expressions, thus honoring and legitimizing diverse forms of knowledge and knowledge production (Madison, 2005; Mirón, 2008). Another example of reflexive practices is a decolonizing standpoint that entails assuming a transdisciplinary and political stance geared toward unpacking colonial and neocolonial legacies (Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011). Informed by feminist and postcolonial praxis, Lykes (2013, p. 777) clarified her positionality vis-à-vis communities affected by armed conflict in Guatemala as one of "passionate solidarity and informed empathy." These and other forms of reflexive practices are essential to a dialectical engagement among the researcher, research process, and research products.

Rethinking Collaboration

The *American Heritage Dictionary* (2014) defines collaboration as "working together, especially in a joint intellectual effort." Collaboration is considered foundational to community-based research and is typically viewed as a positive goal (e.g., Minkler, 2005). Many indigenous scholars, however, critique this assumption, arguing that the idea of collaboration typically embodies the desire and commitments of dominant groups (Jones & Jenkins, 2008; Smith, 2012). When the terms of collaboration are not interrogated, these efforts

may unwittingly reinscribe the very imperialist impulses we wished to circumvent through collaboration (Fine, Tuck, & Zeller-Berkman, 2008; Lykes, 2013). Thus, instead of assuming that collaboration is inherently positive, critical ethnography demands a scrutiny of the power dynamics inherent in micropractices of collaboration. For example, who initiates the research and calls for collaboration? Who establishes the terms of the collaborative process? Who wishes to understand and to what end? What are the legitimate modes of expression? The rhetoric of inclusion associated with collaboration may easily disintegrate into exclusionary practices in the absence of a critical engagement with these questions (Smith, 2012). This critical engagement entails what Fine (1994, p. 72) referred to as "working the hyphen": "creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and is not, 'happening between,' within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told . . . and whose story is being shadowed." Crucially, working the hyphen allows for uneasy or unsettled (non)relationships based on learning from the margins as opposed to learning about the other, thus allowing for decolonized alternatives to traditional collaboration (Jones & Jenkins, 2008).

Redefining Global-Local Relations

The global-local dichotomy serves as a referent for several common binary categorizations in research: Global North and Global South, center and periphery, universal and particular, colonizer and indigenous. These binaries are colonial and imperialist constructions, with one term representing the signifier and the other being signified (Jones & Jenkins, 2008; Nabavi, 2006). In addition to colonial and neocolonial forces, such binaries are promoted and reinforced through contemporary United States security lenses (Appadurai, 2000; Shome & Hegde, 2002). As a consequence, issues experienced by communities in the Global South and other regions of the world are discursively constituted as local, while issues and communities within the US context are viewed as embodying the global universal (Das, 2001). Drawing awareness to the symbolic violence inherent in these categorizations, we need to analyze how these terms and ultimately regions of the world are hierarchically interconnected (Gupta & Ferguson, 1992; Marcus, 1995). In order to fulfill its emancipatory promise, critical ethnographies strive to reestablish more reciprocal, nonhierarchical relations between the core and peripheries of knowledge production, within the Global North as well as between North and South (Appadurai, 2000; Ghamari-Tabrizi, 2005).

The Critical Ethnographic Research Process

This section presents some key considerations involved in critical ethnographic research. It should be noted, though, that the phases of the research typically play out in an iterative manner rather than progressing in a linear fashion. At the outset, we need to be aware of the philosophical and paradigmatic influences that shape our research agendas. Reflexivity of method is foundational to critical ethnography and helps us recognize the dynamic interplay between researchers and participants, critical theory and data, and research and action.

Data Collection and Analysis

The cornerstone of ethnography is immersive fieldwork in a territorially bound locale. Fieldwork typically involves participant (or nonparticipant) observation along with individual/group interviews and focus groups (Madison, 2005; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). In order to examine the ways in which social structures and systems are instantiated locally, contemporary critical ethnographic approaches have expanded to include such methods as archival data, cultural products (e.g., books, television, music), spatial mapping, participatory action research, and multimedia techniques (Given, 2008). Some key considerations guiding decisions regarding specific methods are as follows: What are the goals of the research (e.g., gather exploratory data versus critical understanding)? Is the ethnography one of several components of the research or is the research primarily designed as an ethnographic project? Are there particular contingencies associated with research participants (e.g., hidden or hard-to-reach populations)? Are there risks associated with particular methods? As we explore the potential of various methods, it is important to keep sight of the centrality of the ethnographer as a critical, reflective tool in the research process (Schensul & LeCompte, 2013).

Sampling in ethnographic research relies primarily on purposive and criterion-based sampling techniques (e.g., critical case sampling, stakeholder sampling, and negative case sampling).

Such sampling techniques are designed to yield as information-rich data as possible. It is important to note that there is no one best sampling strategy because the most effective strategy is contingent on the community, context, and research objectives. The data collected may take a variety of forms. Primarily in the form of texts (e.g., fieldnotes, observations, or interview transcripts), data may also include cultural artifacts, photographs, and video. As much as data analysis is about seeking emerging patterns and themes, it is also about locating absences and irregularities. Analysis techniques may vary accordingly, although critical discourse analysis (Van Dijk, 1993), narrative analysis (Loseke, 2007), and cultural analysis (Strauss, 2005) are commonly used in critical ethnographic research. Methods of data collection and analysis are not mutually exclusive and may be creatively combined to illuminate the issues being studied.

Representational Issues in Critical Ethnography

The end product of traditional ethnographic research is the ethnographic text, although this scenario has altered considerably in recent times. The postmodern turn in qualitative inquiry brought about a crisis of representation, which challenged classic ethnographic norms based on objectivist represention of culture. The postmodern turn unveiled the complicity of conventional social science methods in reinscribing historical oppression (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Ethnographic approaches are increasingly used in conjunction with other methods to illuminate some contextual aspects of the phenomena or community of interest (e.g., Allen, Mohatt, Markstrom, Byers, & Novins, 2012; Greene, 2006). The production of detailed ethnographic texts is not central in these cases. Representational issues are core to critical ethnographic research, regardless of its scope. The distanced and disembodied stance of the researcher, typically venerated in social science research, is antithetical to the emancipatory foundations of critical ethnography (Jones & Jenkins, 2008; Reyes Cruz & Sonn, 2011). Reflexive practices are not limited to the formulation of research questions and collection of data. It is equally important for us to reflexively consider the implications of how we represent our findings. As Hammersley (2002, p. 74) argued, "representation must always be from some point of view which makes some features of the phenomenon relevant and others irrelevant." Given the multiplicity of explanations that are possible, it is vital for critical ethnographers to delineate the standpoint from which particular findings are understood and presented.

Quality Considerations in Critical Ethnographic Research

Critical ethnography reframes traditional notions of assessing research quality. This move is shaped by an awareness of the politics of evidence. Far from involving disinterested, cognitive acts, standards for assessing evidence are regulated by political and institutional apparatuses (Denzin, 2009). As critical ethnographers, we have to deconstruct the meaning of evidence vis-à-vis our research contexts by raising questions such as: Whose criteria and standards are used to assess evidence and about whom? Who determines what constitutes evidence? Who determines what methods produce the best forms of evidence? Critical ethnography moves away from truth claims–based authoritative norms or predetermined criteria in a bid to disrupt the status quo (Madison, 2005).

Considerations of quality in critical ethnographic research are inextricably tied to ethics (see Battiste, 2008, & Fine, 2006, for more elaboration). For example, Smith (2012) emphasized a justice orientation over a truth orientation in evaluating research, especially research involving historically disenfranchised communities. The concept of *psychopolitical validity*, introduced by Prilleltensky (2003), is particularly relevant for evaluating community-based critical ethnographic research. Psychopolitical validity is concerned with the extent to which research contributes to understanding, resisting, and addressing diverse forms of oppression. Prilleltensky discussed two kinds of psychopolitical validity. Epistemic validity evaluates the extent to which power dynamics are cognized in the research, while transformative validity assesses the extent to which research leads to social change. Another relevant validation principle is that of *ontological authenticity* (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Applied to critical community-based ethnography, this means that our research should be evaluated on the extent to which it is able to provide a nuanced, discursively complex, and enriched conception of the issues of interest. A common thread uniting all these validation methods is an emphasis on the disruption of hegemonic understandings.

The next section draws upon the author's research in Northeast India to illuminate some methodological issues in critical ethnographic research. The author has been engaged in critical ethnographic investigations of ethnic conflict and peace building in Northeast India for over a decade. This example will illustrate how critical ethnographic research has been employed to explicate protracted ethnic conflict in the community. Consistent with a critical ethnographic approach, the case study illustrates a reflexive, first-person account of the ethnographic research.

CASE STUDY

Background and Aims

The site of this community-based critical ethnographic research is the Garo Hills region of Northeast India. Characterized by extraordinary ethnic and linguistic diversity, Northeast India has been the site of protracted ethnic conflicts, some of these spanning the entire postcolonial period since 1947. Much of the conflict takes the form of armed insurgencies. Northeast India shares almost 98% of its boundaries with neighboring countries and is connected to the rest of India (referred to as "mainland India" in popular discourse) by a narrow strip of land, approximately 12 miles wide. Thus, although the phenomenon of ethnic separatism is not unique to Northeast India, the strategic location of the region renders it critical from a national security standpoint. The Indian government relies on security-driven approaches to respond to conflicts in Northeast India, the most notable being the Armed Forces Special Power Act that grants extraordinary powers to the military and has been operational since 1958 in the region. Both public and scholarly attention focus on the spectacular confrontations between armed insurgent groups and the Indian military, obfuscating the violence that has become endemic to the region. The critical ethnographic project was an effort to move away from crisis-based politics and elucidate the ethnic violence from the vantage point of ordinary citizens. The project was guided by two main objectives: (a) to interrogate the everyday violence in order to understand the processes by which it is normalized and how it reconfigures identities and subjectivities of local youth and (b) to draw upon the emerging understanding to explore and facilitate community-based peace building in Garo Hills. Community-based research in contexts such as Garo Hills necessitates methods that create spaces for marginal or alternative narratives. Given the protracted violence in the community, I had to be mindful about refraining from depicting any final truth. Instead, the goal was to elucidate the complexity of ethnic identity politics, illuminating the diverse voices that are erased by powerful, security-driven discourses.

Methodology

I employed narrative inquiry and participatory action research methods within a broader critical ethnographic framework (Appadurai, 2006; McIntyre, 2000; Rappaport, 2000). Specific methods of data elicitation included interviews, group discussions, observations, and written materials collected over a year of intensive fieldwork in Garo Hills. The narratives of youth from diverse ethnic groups in Garo Hills formed the bulk of the materials, but I also conducted interviews with a range of stakeholders (e.g., members of insurgent groups, district administrators, police, educators) in order to gain an ecological understanding of the conflict. The interviews were complemented with participant observations of day-to-day life and community events, relevant public documents, and newspaper articles. Although I examined the data to discover thematic regularities in how my participants talked about everyday violence, I also conducted critical discourse analysis to understand the broader institutional contexts and societal narratives implicated in ethnic conflict in Garo Hills (Van Dijk, 1993).

Positionality and Reflexivity

My identity as a researcher is profoundly shaped by my experiences of growing up in the Northeastern borderlands of India. The gradually deepening ethnic faultlines in my home community sensitized me to complex layers of ethnic othering. The dominant ethnic group in Garo Hills is the Garo tribe, although other tribal and *non-tribal* (an official ethnic identity category) communities also live in the region. Much of the ethnic violence and exclusions are perpetrated against non-tribal minorities, considered to be outsiders in the region. Ethnically, I am "the other." Although this otherness was substantially mitigated by my family's longstanding involvement in local community organizing, there was always a disjuncture between my emotional experience of home and the sociopolitical

conditions necessary to legitimize the relationship (Dutta, 2015). Growing up in Northeast India, I also became painfully aware of the deprecating lens with which the residents of the region are viewed by mainland India. The popular imagery of Northeast India tends to be associated with remoteness, insurgency, and underdevelopment. These characterizations, animating much intellectual debate and social policy, are immediate and tangible to the lives of those who call these locales home. Yet our voices are hardly ever part of the public discourse. These experiences and insights fundamentally shaped my research agenda, foregrounding the embodied experiences of ordinary citizens.

The particular configurations of my positionality—my ethnicity, community involvement, and current residence in the United States—made me a partial insider vis-à-vis Garo Hills. This status undermined my non-tribal ethnicity, allowing me to challenge local norms without the social or safety costs associated with being the ethnic other. Deep involvement with the larger community also enabled me to take advantage of serendipitous community events to advance inclusivity and civic engagement in Garo Hills. Through a reflexive use of autoethnography (e.g., utilizing experiences, memories, and my structural positioning), I tried to achieve greater intersubjectivity and representational richness in elucidating the fraught context of Northeast India (Dutta, 2015; Humphreys, 2005).

Critical ethnographic research requires us to be vigilant of our power and privilege as researchers. This meant being heedful of my emotional and structural positionality vis-à-vis my participants. My affiliation to a university in the United States conferred upon me privileged status in the local community. This privilege compounded my responsibility even as I leveraged it to secure social and material resources for my participants. I was cognizant that the shared histories with my participants did not erase the differences in our circumstances. This was never more evident than when youth talked about the limitations imposed on their mobility due to lack of social or financial capital. My privilege—to move across multiple contexts—was brought into sharp relief against the youths' efforts to reconcile with everyday violence. Ultimately, I was also in a position to produce knowledge about Garo Hills. Thus, democratizing the research process was imperative to avoid the reproduction of totalizing discourses about conflict in Garo Hills.

Recasting Ethnic Conflict Through a Critical Ethnographic Lens

The role played by hegemonic ethnic identity politics in producing and maintaining protracted ethnic violence in Northeast India became apparent early in my research. A critical ethnographic approach highlighted the importance of interrogating state-sponsored ethnic categorizations—the identity politics as well as the lived experiences associated with those categories. Divisive ethnic categorizations in Northeast India were created during the British colonial regime and subsequently reinforced through ethnocentric policies formulated by the postcolonial state (Baruah, 2003). A case in point is the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, which classifies residents of Northeast India into tribals and non-tribals, a distinction introduced by the British. The term *tribe* collapses over 400 heterogeneous groups into one broad classification distinguished from caste (Bhaumik, 2009). Similarly, the term *non-tribal* homogenizes all ethnicities that do not identify as tribals, whether they are long-term residents of the region or recent migrants. These ethnic divisions, however problematic and inadequate, constituted the lived realities of my youth participants and at times were embraced as politicized identities. Therefore, a constant challenge in this ethnography was to write about the embodied ethnic experiences without reinscribing the violence inherent in these categories.

Findings

I analyzed fieldnotes and transcripts from interviews and group discussions with youth to examine the everyday experiences associated with state-sponsored ethnic labels. Discourse analysis of interviews with stakeholders, such as educators, separatist groups, and district administrators, illuminated the social and institutional practices that reify and maintain ethnic divisions in Garo Hills. These analyses helped elucidate the different forms of everyday violence and othering that have become endemic to the local community. In particular, the analyses illuminated the ubiquity of ethnic violence experienced by non-tribal ethnic groups in Garo Hills and the processes by which it is normalized.

The analyses also underscored the marginality experienced by both dominant and minority ethnic groups in Garo Hills. These findings disrupted the victim-vicitimizer dichotomy, which is often implicated in intractable ethnic conflict.

The lives of non-tribal youth, the ethnic others in Garo Hills, are marked by routine acts of bodily harm, harassment, extortion, silencing, and humiliation. In the following excerpt, Kavi (a pseudonym, used to protect the participant's identity), a non-tribal youth participant, described the pervasive nature of ethnic violence against non-tribals:

> It (i.e., ethnic violence) happens everywhere—in offices, in banks, at the post office. But no one says anything. Everybody feels scorched, but there is nothing to be done. No one to complain to . . . . There is a continuous fear that some problem will occur. And it is not as if they (young Garo males) let people off after giving them one slap. They can do anything. Whatever comes to their mind, they do it. There is no limit.

This context, rife with violence, constitutes what Martín-Baró (1994, p. 125) referred to as "normal abnormality." The ubiquitous violence constrains the lives of non-tribal youth—their movement, the way they dress, and the way they talk; their ways of being in the world are mediated by the imperative to evade violence. These youth have come to anticipate the multiple forms of violence and marginality that shape their lives. Notably, more than the acts of physical violence, it is the constant threat of violence—"a continuous fear that some problem will occur" (as Kavi put it)—that creates a repressive environment. My critical ethnographic research uncovered the institutionalized social indifference to the everyday violence, illuminating processes that serve to normalize and naturalize everyday ethnic violence in Garo Hills. These processes included the absence of any social critique by influential Garo citizens, high levels of impunity enjoyed by those who perpetrate ethnic violence, and naturalization of the conflict by the district administration and state police. Collectively, these processes act to maintain the violence and impede individual or collective resistance (Scheper-Hughes, 2006).

The everyday violence is guided by a divisive logic where one's non-tribal ethnicity is often sufficient cause to elicit violence. Patrick, a Garo youth participant explained: "Honestly if I tell the truth then, yes, most of the Garo youth do not like non-tribals." Across multiple stakeholder narratives, there emerged a divisive master narrative positioning Garo tribals in opposition to non-tribals. This master narrative of tribal versus non-tribal acts powerfully to shape how issues of belonging and exclusion are negotiated in the local community. Embedded in narratives of ethnic othering is the theme of exclusion so that different ethnic groups have varying levels of access to civic and community life. Ethnic antagonism is also rooted in a deep-seated fear about the depletion of limited resources, with different groups vying for the same resources (Dutta, 2013). The master narrative is fueled by a purist stance, such that only those individuals who are born as Garos can stake a claim to Garo Hills and participate in civic life.

The numerical majority of the Garos, however, does not immunize them against experiences of marginality and exclusion. Garo youth feel excluded in relation to mainland India, which is a complex response to the historiographical and cultural marginalization of Northeast India. State-sponsored and mainstream Indian discourses of tribe frame them as culturally and developmentally inferior, contributing to widespread negative stereotypes about tribal groups (Dutta, 2015). This is illustrated by the following excerpt, where Rudy, a Garo youth participant, described his experience at a job interview in a highly cosmopolitan Indian city:

> At the interview, this person actually had the audacity to ask me: Do people in your place still live in jungles and wear animal skins? I mean what do you answer to people like that? I have seen that many Indians are more ignorant than us from the Northeast.

Along similar lines, James, another Garo youth, had pointed out: "While living in Garo Hills, we can live like kings! But once we go outside, it feels very awkward—as if we are someone from the slum." Using the allegory of slum dwellers, James tried to convey the stigma and social distance embodied in their tribal identity. Thus, both tribal and non-tribal youth struggle with experiences of marginality. Divisive identity politics have engendered victim identities among members of both groups, which is used to justify continued ethnic othering

and violence. Being a responsible researcher in this context thus entailed explicating the multiple facets of violence—violence experienced by non-tribal minorities in Garo Hills as well as the structural violence perpetrated by the Indian State against tribal minorities such as the Garo tribe.

Implications and Actions

Critical ethnographic research is committed to moving from "what is" to "what could be." In this specific context, the process involved challenging victim-victimizer binaries and redefining the parameters of community in more inclusive terms. Thus, as much as this project was about interrogating everyday violence from the perspectives of ordinary citizens, it was also about exploring possibilities for resistance and change. Discourse analysis of the youth narratives suggested that individuals are not passive victims of these master narratives; rather, they demonstrated the potential to develop counternarratives when provided with a safe space to do so (Dutta & Aber, in press). Using research as intervention, I inititated and facilitated Voices, a youth participatory action research project on local community issues. The project engaged local youth from diverse ethnic groups in Garo Hills in a process whereby they collectively defined local community problems, framed research questions, conducted interviews and surveys with community members, analyzed the data, and represented local citizens' concerns to diverse audiences in a bid to inspire local action. Over the course of the project, the participating youth developed a strong researcher identity that took precedence over alliances based on ethnic identities. The project provided young people with opportunities to engage in social critique and to take deliberate action to enhance community well-being (Dutta & Aber, in press). The notion of everyday peace is rooted in these integrative community development processes. Violence that is entrenched in the social fabric of everyday life necessitates a notion of everyday peace. Embodied in the politics of possibility engendered by the community action project, the notion of everyday peace is captured in the following quote from Pansy, a youth member of Voices:

> After being a part of this project, discussing and working together for our community, it has become a part of our lives, something to look forward to . . . . The small project was so interesting and successful—imagine what we can do as a group!

CONCLUSION

This chapter has focused on critical ethnography as a conceptual and methodological framework for engaging in community-based research. A critical ethnographic approach is distinguished from traditional ethnographic approaches by its unequivocal commitment to public engagement and activism. These goals are advanced through a critical analysis of the power-knowledge nexus that shapes social realities. These analyses have major implications for community-based research, some of which, such as positionality and reflexivity, local-global relations, and representation, were discussed in this chapter. A case study illustrated how critical ethnographic approaches help us explicate a specific social problem–protracted ethnic conflict in Northeast India. A critical ethnographic approach illuminated the multiple narratives of marginality that are masked by dominant security-driven narratives. Doing so allowed us to generate community-level possibilities for peace building.

A salient feature of critical ethnography is the decolonization of knowledge production across all levels. At an interpersonal level, this engagement begins with an autoethnographic sensibility, or the recognition that we craft our scholarship in distinctive and personally meaningful ways. This meaningfulness has a range of consequences for community-based researchers engaged in social change. We do not merely describe the social world but also enact the social world through a complex set of assumptions made at every stage of the research process. A commitment to decolonization also entails attending to issues of representation. The way we represent social groups has serious consequences for how they are perceived and treated (Caplan & Nelson, 1973; Hall, 1997). At the level of knowledge production, critical ethnographic approaches call for a decolonization of the academy so as to create spaces for the production of counterhegemonic knowledge, otherwise reduced to local in scope. Critical ethnographic scholarship necessarily connects the personal to the social, cultural, and political.

The case study illustrates how critical ethnographic approaches may be employed to reframe

protracted ethnic conflict in Northeast India and to disrupt the impasse created by divisive ethnic identity politics. This work tries to foreground the perspectives of ordinary citizens, which are systematically excluded from both public policy and scholarly discourses. These perspectives are represented through the researcher's specific relationship to the community. Rather than trying to bracket off preexisting relationships in a bid to achieve objectivity, the researcher makes a concerted effort to be reflexive about this engagement. This reflexivity has been crucial in highlighting the micropolitics of ethnic conflict in the local community. Although prioritizing local communities in Garo Hills, this work scrutinizes the ways in which transnational and globalized forces are embodied in everyday micropolitics of conflict. Specifically, it draws attention to forms of ethnic violence afflicting many postcolonial states across the world. Thus, the local or particular instance offers a window into a more universal phenomenon. The failure to elucidate these global-local nexus reproduces and reifies essentialized perspectives of developing nations. By providing a thorough analysis of the processes by which violence becomes endemic in social landscapes, critical ethnography also offers a conceptual framework to examine structural violence in community-based research.

In summary, critical ethnographic approaches represent considerable potential for community-based researchers committed to social justice and social change agendas. It is certainly one of many possible approaches, but its major strength lies in the deconstruction of categories viewed as foundational and taken for granted in academic research. The critical ethnographic research described here elucidates multivocality in communities, demonstrating that communities are rarely as bounded or homogenous as the concept might imply. In order to produce counterhegemonic knowledge, our research must explicate the diverse voices within a community and attend to power dynamics inherent in those contexts. Although particularly suitable for understanding and addressing protracted conflict, critical ethnographic approaches may be employed across diverse contexts where researchers are committed to local action—the kind that is informed by an elucidation of the complex interplay between local and macrosocial forces.

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