Overview of critical ethnography

*Critical ethnography* is a methodology that came about in the 1960s and 1970s as an outgrowth of *traditional* or *conventional* ethnography. It was the result of the desire by ethnographers to create a form of ethnography that was reflective as well as analytical in nature and that focused on “the relationships among knowledge, society and political action” (Thomas, 1993, p. vii).

Critical ethnography can be considered a product of traditional ethnography. However, unlike traditional ethnography, it is intrinsically critical in nature. It assumes the position that unequal power relationships exist among the social and cultural groups under study and it aims, in part, to uncover those inequities. Critical ethnographers often strive for democracy and social justice-oriented changes as the outcomes of their research projects.

While *traditional* ethnography is usually considered having a value-free approach to knowledge, critical ethnography views knowledge as contested and driven by the interests of the dominant society. Critical ethnography intentionally uses the premises of critical theory (critical social theory or another critical theoretical framework) to inform its development and execution.

Thomas has described critical ethnography as “conventional ethnography with a political purpose” (1993, p. 4). To grasp the meaning of this statement it is necessary to intimately understand both the philosophical underpinnings of ethnography as an important qualitative approach to research and critical theory as the conceptual basis of critical ethnography. Both of these topics will be dealt with later in this chapter.

Because of its relevancy to real-life issues of power and disenfranchisement and for its ability to engender change in the status quo, critical ethnography is a good fit for the applied sciences. For these reasons, critical ethnography has been adopted by nursing and related disciplines (especially education) for about two decades. Nursing has used critical ethnography to address clinical issues specific to practice (Street, 1992; Martin, 2006; Harrowin, Mill, Spiers, Kulig, & Kipp, 2010), in settings such as long-term residential care agencies (Bland, 2007; Baumbusch, 2010) and with vulnerable populations such as the rural elderly (Averill, 2002, 2005, 2006), the terminally ill (Allen, Chapman, Francis, & O’Connor, 2008); women experiencing menopause (Elliott, Berman, & Kim, 2002) and women subjected to violence (Mikandawire-Valhmu, Rodriguez, Ammar, & Nemoto, 2009). Because of its ability to inform important debates on issues of urgency in health care and quality of life, the method of critical ethnography can be particularly useful to the evolution of nursing research and theory.