

# CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY, THE THEORY OF SOCIAL PRACTICE AND PIERRE BOURDIEU: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARION JONES

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## Abstract

Critical ethnography is one of the more methodologically creative approaches to nursing and midwifery research as it combines aspects of two different research paradigms, the interpretive and the radical/critical. It focuses on making visible the 'taken-for-granted' aspects of a cultural group and power interplays within it. This methodology is particularly useful for research questions that explore practice. This is the eleventh article in a series based on interviews with nursing and midwifery researchers, designed to offer the beginning researcher a first-hand account of the experience of using particular methodologies. This article focuses on critical ethnography as interpreted by Marion Jones (RGON, MA, PhD) in interview. Marion is Associate Dean Post Graduate in the Faculty of Health at the Auckland University of Technology. For her PhD thesis Marion used the theoretical positioning of Pierre Bourdieu [1930 - 2002] to guide her use of critical ethnography to explore how different health professionals shape team practice.

**Key Words:** Research, methodologies, critical ethnography, Bourdieu

## Introduction

Critical ethnography is becoming more widely used in nursing and midwifery research as a methodology to explore issues that involve groups and the power interplay within them. The methodology is a hybrid as it combines approaches from two research paradigms - ethnography from the interpretive and a critical approach from the radical/critical paradigm (refer to Grant & Giddings (2002) for an overview of a useful paradigmatic framework).

This article, the eleventh in a series based on interviews with nursing and midwifery researchers, offers the beginning researcher a brief introduction to this research approach (refer to Giddings & Wood (2000) for background information on the series). It gives an initial overview of ethnography and how the inclusion of a critical perspective is a useful way for making visible the complex power

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interplays involved in cultural groups. An interview with Marion Jones, Associate Dean Post Graduate in the Faculty of Health at the Auckland University of Technology, will then explore how one researcher used this approach. For her PhD thesis Marion used the theoretical positioning of Pierre Bourdieu [1930 - 2002] to guide her use of critical ethnography to explore how different health professionals shape team practice.

Ethnography is a research tradition that developed within social anthropology. It is concerned with describing and interpreting *cultural* behaviour. The term 'culture' is used more broadly in ethnography than as we know it in common usage. It incorporates any group that shares meaning and understanding. For example, nurses working in a clinical area such as accident and emergency can be described as creating a cultural group. The 'culture' of such a group is rarely visible or tangible to those within it. The focus of ethnography is to get an insider's view (an emic perspective), to uncover the 'taken for granted' and 'common-sense' beliefs, values, rituals and ideologies of a group (tacit knowledge). An ethnographer attempts to 'write' that culture by collecting 'thick descriptions' from a cultural setting. Data collection can involve multiple methods (e.g. interviews, field observation, focus groups, documentary analysis, questionnaires, and photography) so may take many months or even years to complete.

Incorporating a critical perspective with ethnography adds a theoretical

lens that makes visible power interplays within the cultural group; that some people are advantaged (privileged) at different times by the cultural structures and contexts and others are disadvantaged (oppressed). One can be both privileged and oppressed within the variety of contexts that a cultural group offers. For example, when dealing with patients/clients one-to-one, a nurse or midwife most often has a privileged decision-making position, but when interacting with physicians or obstetricians about accessing a particular service for their patient/client, they often have less decision-making power. Theoretical positions that inform a radical/critical approach include critical social theory (focus on social inequalities) and feminism (focus on gender inequalities).

Marion (**MJ**) was interviewed by Lynne Giddings (**LG**).



### Interview

**LG:** *Marion, why did you choose critical ethnography as your methodology for your PhD research?*

**MJ:** I came to realise after a lot of reading and thinking that it was the best methodology to answer my research question. I was interested in team practice and how different health professions shaped that practice. I read the works of many theorists and philosophers before deciding on Bourdieu - it was a very long journey.

**LG:** *When did it start?*

**MJ:** My PhD took four years - I started the middle of 1996 and finished in 2000 - and it took a good year to sort through the possibilities. I read incredibly widely. I read critical theorists such as Habermas (1971) and Friere (1974) and pragmatists like Rorty (1982). I needed a theorist whose ideas would work within a practice setting. I fell upon Bourdieu and suddenly I had that A-hah! This could work! I liked how he talked about practice and his theory of practice. Bourdieu was a sociologist with ethnographic leanings, so his approach was a good fit with what I was attempting to do. His theories enabled me to look from a critical perspective at the culture of these different team practice groups.

As my research question for my PhD became clearer, critical ethnography fitted that too. It has many different approaches but basically it helps one look at 'culture' in the broad sense - like a 'team practice' can be a culture, and examine what people do within it. Also, I was influenced by one of my supervisors, David Allen. He had a very constructive way of challenging me to think beyond what I knew. He challenged me along the way and

asked questions like "So, what does this mean?" He facilitated my way through my PhD superbly. Choosing a supervisor that you 'click with' is very important.

**LG:** *What about the 'critical' part of critical ethnography?*

**MJ:** By using a 'critical' positioning it is saying we are making an assumption that there is some injustice, some marginalisation, some power interplay that is impacting on how people function within that cultural group. At first I struggled with making those assumptions until I read the work of Richard Quantz (1997) and realised that having those assumptions is not actually a negative thing but rather allows for social change. The concern that you use critical ethnography to show a group is oppressed is naïve - this is not the important focus. What you are really wanting is how people respond to their positioning and what political, cultural, and social forces influence this. Quantz says this well.

**LG:** *So as you read you came to agree with the critical paradigm's philosophical positioning that social injustices and marginalisation processes exist and that the outcome of research can be social change?*

**MJ:** Yes, that it is not a negative position to assume social inequalities. One cannot be a naïve ethnographer as it was once thought. But rather as Bourdieu says, power is everywhere and it is *how* that power is used that is important. Research from a critical perspective can show social inequalities and benefit people

by giving them knowledge of these and so giving them a fair chance.

**LG:** *So using Bourdieu's ideas as your theoretical framework for using critical ethnography, what are its key elements?*

**MJ:** First, before answering that question I would like to say that when using a theorist like Bourdieu, it is good to read secondary sources first. A book by Harker, Mahar and Wilkes (1990) is user-friendly and explains Bourdieu's theoretical concepts clearly and well. To initially use a direct translation of his work could be very heavy going and quite complex. Bourdieu is actually concerned about what individuals do in their day-to-day-lives. His theory of social practice was very appropriate for my study and allowed for recognition of every culture, any group of people who somehow see themselves as a collective, have theories about the world, and how it ought to be. Bourdieu (1977) believes that how one does things makes it possible to know about things.

**LG:** *So go to an overview first then get into the primary sources. Now, what do you see as the key elements of critical ethnography?*

**MJ:** Critical ethnography looks at the 'why' of things, rather than staying with the interpreting or uncovering of experience as one may do when using a methodology like phenomenology. It asks not only why is 'such and such' happening but also what do we want to do about it - what can we do about it? It is really a critical dialogue or interrogation and involves political

and social action. A critical ethnography ends up asking whose interests are being served by a value, position, or orientation? Harker, Mahar and Wilkes (1990) is one book I have found that simply and clearly sets out the key elements of Bourdieu's work. Basically it explores epistemological questions like how do we know 'x, y and z'? And how is it possible to say that we know it? Also what are the implications of that knowing and what authority is derived by having that knowledge? A sociologist by the name of David Swartz (1997) says one of the greatest strengths of Bourdieu's theories is that he has never lost sight of the practicality of epistemological issues or their importance. I think that very practical aspect of Bourdieu's ideas was something that sold it to me.

**LG:** *So you could see the practical application of his work.*

**MJ:** Absolutely. I knew that what I wanted to do was to unpack practice. I need to explain that I did this study in the middle of the 1990s health reforms so I was aware that these would impact on the culture of team practice and the responses of different health professionals. So as well as using Bourdieu's work I used ideas from health management theorists such as Kaluzny (1985). He looked at intra and inter organisational management and practice. I used the two together in my analysis to help explain the practice of the teams with which I worked.

**LG:** *So when developing a methodology like critical ethnography you can actually have more than one theoretical positioning?*

**MJ:** Yes, I would say that I used concepts or constructs from Bourdieu's work, and these were then complemented and informed by the theory of Kaluzny. One can certainly bring in more than one perspective as long as they are congruent with one another. I remember the wise words of my supervisor, who said, "Please keep your theoretical underpinnings simple, don't try and make it so complex that it's difficult to follow through into the trustworthiness of your data."

**LG:** *So what were Bourdieu's concepts?*

**MJ:** Put simply he believed that 'habitus' (that is the total being and assumptions underpinning you as a person) only exists because of the practices and interactions that occur and provide a basis for practice. It is also a product of history and is an ongoing process. Another concept of his theory is 'field' (which is a social arena where interaction and struggles take place). Fields are without boundaries, and together with habitus equal practice. He defines a field as a network of relations between positions. A field is a field of struggles and can be likened to Kurt Lewin's force field analysis.

Bourdieu drew on the work of many other philosophers such as Marx, Durkheim, and Hegel. He specifically developed Karl Marx's concept of 'capital' and expanded it to focus on how power was distributed rather than purely economic capital. He saw power interplay between economic capital, cultural capital, political capital, symbolic capital, and social

capital. I used these as a framework to look at how people work together - it gave me a way to explore people's day-to-day practice.

**LG:** *Did you have this theoretical framework prior to collecting and analysing your data?*

**MJ:** Yes, I did, although they were developed in more depth as I engaged in analysis. By understanding his concepts prior to starting the data collection I was able to focus my questions and have a clearer idea of what I needed to record and observe - then of course how I analysed and interpreted my data. It was the guiding framework.

**LG:** *Can you tell me more how you collected the data?*

**MJ:** I collected data over approximately two and a bit years. In ethnography, one of the main methods of collecting data is observation, but as soon as you put a critical label on it, the focus is specifically on interaction. So one observes the group discussing issues but one interviews each participant as well. I started off with the interviews. I then observed them working with their clients, as I wanted to know how different health professional disciplines shaped inter-professional or team practice. I later observed them in their various inter-professional or inter-discipline meetings.

**LG:** *How did you collect that data?*

**MJ:** It was a great challenge, especially during the team meetings,

though after a while they just ignored me because I was around for so long. It is like being a spot on the wall. They just continue and you don't affect their conversation.

I had three main ways of collecting that data - sociograms, field notes and focus groups. I always did sociograms so that I could look at which discipline was talking, and when. I could then explore questions like which discipline participated the most? Was there a difference between newer and not so new staff participation? The teams involved nurses, physiotherapists, speech therapists, occupational therapists, and social workers, so there was a lot of observation.

My field notes recorded what the issues were and what was said. After leaving the meeting I then made notes of any emerging patterns or anything that I was curious about. These notes, like the field notes, supported the trustworthiness of my data and the processes I used. All participants were informed of what I was doing and of course I had ethical approval before starting the study.

**LG:** *So you did not audio-tape the meetings?*

**MJ:** No, not when I was observing the meetings. I did tape-record when I was doing the individual interviews and focus groups.

**LG:** *Over two years of collecting data. That is a lot of data. How did you make sense of it?*

**MJ:** Well, I was making sense of it as I was going. And what was really

important was that each stage influenced the next stage. I had to keep returning to basic questions like: Why was I doing this study? What information did I need? I had to keep focused and very organised. I finished each team (individual interviews and observations) before I went on to another team and so on. So I would analyse that data and then I would do the next team interview, analyse, and the next team interview and so on.

One thing, whenever those meetings were scheduled to be, I had to be there! I had to juggle my work and life around them.

Oh yes, about fifteen months after I did the initial interviews and observations I started doing focus groups for the first team. I took my findings back to them for discussion and critique.

**LG:** *Did it matter if the team structure had changed over that time?*

**MJ:** Well I was very lucky; the teams remained pretty consistent. In fact nobody left the teams before I went back to them with my findings. This going back to the participants is part of the critical ethnography process. It is important for the credibility of the findings.

**LG:** *What are the ethical issues specific to using critical ethnography?*

**MJ:** I never had any difficulty, largely because I made every thing I did, what I was doing and why I was doing it, transparent.

**LG:** *That is in fact the main ethical issue when doing critical ethnography, transparency.*

**MJ:** Absolutely. You must be transparent with your process. So I talked about: this is the question that I am asking, these are the issues that I want to have a look at, and I want to really see how your team works and what influences there are.

**LG:** *Were there any negative responses when you gave feedback to the focus groups?*

**MJ:** I was so nervous. I owned that nervousness, I was honest about it, as I respected that they (participants) had given up their time and shared so willingly their experiences with me. These were my interpretations of the data through the lens of Bourdieu's theory. I was doing the focus groups to ensure the credibility of my findings, so it was nerve racking. There were ethical things to consider like not naming specific people and what they said, and ensuring that each member that I had interviewed individually was happy that the others knew about it, i.e. each individual consented to be part of a focus group. There was no disagreement with my findings as I laid out each step of my analysis process but the feedback created very good discussion and provided clarity for both the participants and myself as researcher.

**LG:** *What were the highlights for you of doing critical ethnography?*

**MJ:** The focus groups were the highlight. They were the most

exciting part of the study because by then I was very familiar with people. I had been talking with them for a long time. They had started thinking about things they had never thought of before. I think that is part and parcel of critical ethnography. Because you ask questions, people start to think in a way they have never thought before. It was wonderful to see and experience that. People were very open in sharing their thoughts and ideas. With the mixing of disciplines in the focus groups, discussions happened that were quite special, that wouldn't occur in the everyday. That was so exciting.

**LG:** *So the researcher and the researched are developing together.*

**MJ:** They are.

**LG:** *You tape-recorded the focus groups?*

**MJ:** I did. But what was critical and is part of setting up focus groups when doing ethnography, I had a second person who made notes about who was talking and when, the beginning and end of each sentence and anything that happened during the group. During focus groups no matter how clear you are about the rules, people do talk over each other. So when I transcribed the tapes, the notes that the other person had typed up made interpretation easier. She had signed a confidentiality agreement of course.

**LG:** *What were the difficulties of doing a critical ethnography study?*

**MJ:** Getting the theoretical underpinnings and how Bourdieu applied that, especially his work on cultural capital. Bourdieu has specific processes to be used in analysis and these involve understanding the field of power, making maps of the positions which make up the field and the relationships between them, and to analyse the people/habitus produced in relation to interactions, constraints and opportunities. He believes that society involves lots of inter-related fields and how we keep these in balance or not in balance, as the case may be.

**LG:** *What hints would you give a beginning researcher who is interested in doing a study using critical ethnography as the methodology?*

**MJ:** Know what you want to find out. That comes first I think. Rather than saying "I want to do a critical ethnographic study" start with "what do I want to know?" So if you are interested in how groups function, or how people function in groups, and what influences practice, critical ethnography is a methodology that can do that. It uses 'how' and 'why' questions. How is something influenced or shaped?

**LG:** *What readings would assist a novice researcher?*

**MJ:** A user-friendly little book that is available in the Sage Publication series is one by Jim Thomas (1993) and it deals specifically with critical ethnography. I haven't found anything that's better. Quantz' work

is really good. For PhD level research the detail of Phil Carspecken (1996) is very good. James Spradley (1979) is still one of the best sources for ethnography.

**LG:** *Do you think Masters students could use Bourdieu for their theoretical framework?*

**MJ:** Yes, but start with a secondary source like Richard Harker et al's (1990) book that I mentioned before. Other useful sources are: *Culture and power* by David Swartz (1997); *Bourdieu: A critical reader* by Richard Shusterman (1999); and *Bourdieu: Critical perspectives* by Calhoun, Li Puma and Postone (1993).

If you are a Masters student, be guided by your supervisor as the theoretical framework depends a great deal on your research question. Bourdieu's theoretical constructs are particularly applicable to the practice setting.

**LG:** *Someone may be reading this article who is a practitioner wanting to do research but not for a degree so they would not have a supervisor. Could they use critical ethnography?*

**MJ:** One would need some form of peer review and support. A research consultant well grounded in the methodology would work. This is where practice and education can have quite a fruitful partnership. Practitioners consulting with academics and vice versa works well in the New Zealand setting. The practitioner would need to be research aware and have completed postgraduate level papers, I suspect.

**LG:** *Do you see critical ethnography as having a place in nursing and midwifery research?*

**MJ:** Definitely. I believe the critical paradigm offers a richness and a perspective for nursing and midwifery research in combination with other methodologies, not just ethnography. Though as I said earlier, the methodology depends on what you want to find out - your research question.

**LG:** *Would you describe yourself as a critical ethnographer?*

**MJ:** I would probably describe myself as a person who is very nosey and wants to ask questions [*shared laughter*]. I don't like putting boxes around people as 'phenomenologists' or 'critical ethnographers' as that can be limiting. But yes, I do now have the knowledge and expertise, so in that respect I am a critical ethnographer. I am also interested in a variety of research approaches. I like helping new researchers match their interests, research questions and research methodologies. I would refer students and practitioners to those that have the expertise in a particular methodology once the match has been made, or is in the process of being made.

**LG:** *Thank you Marion, it has been great talking with you.*

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Critical ethnography offers nursing and midwifery researchers a way to bring about change in practice. Whereas the more traditional

interpretive ethnographic approaches focussed on describing the culture ("What is this?"), the critical ethnographic approach effectively makes visible social inequalities and social injustices and asks, "What could this be?". Marion Jones in her PhD research brought to light the opportunities, constraints and challenges that shape inter-professional team practice.

As Marion emphasised in this interview, it is the research question - what the researcher wants to find out or bring about - that guides the choice of methodology. If critical ethnography has a 'goodness of fit' with the question, then prior to data collection a theoretical framework needs to be found to guide the process. Marion chose concepts from the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu. His concepts of economic capital, cultural capital, political capital, symbolic capital, and social capital served the purpose well. As Marion mentioned the critical concepts of his theory are habitus and field along with strategy, which in relation to her study included balancing the structures of the organisation, team, health professional discipline (habitus) with the political, organisational and professional forces (capital) within a dynamic health care system (field).

For a summary of information concerning critical ethnography underpinned by Bourdieu's theory, refer to Table 1.

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**Table 1. Basic information about Critical Ethnography underpinned by the Social Practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu.**

<p><b>Key terms</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* <u>Ethnography</u>: involves describing and seeking to understand a culture and includes the interpretation of cultural patterns.</li> <li>* <u>Critical</u>: involves exploring how political, social and/or material disempowerment/social injustice is manifested and the reflective and emancipatory action that occurs.</li> <li>* <u>Thick description</u>: Clifford Geertz's (1973) term for large amounts of data collected over a period of time, and in the case of ethnography involves description of a specific culture/group.</li> <li>* <u>Emic perspective</u>: insider view of a culture.</li> <li>* <u>Culture</u>: generally refers to the totality of all learned social behaviours, ways of being and understanding of a given group.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Paradigmatic approach</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Radical/critical.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Origins</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Social anthropology</li> <li>* Critical social theory, the Frankfurt School theorists/philosophers and feminism</li> <li>* The social practice theory of Pierre Bourdieu [1930-2002]</li> </ul>
<p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* To explore and make visible social inequalities, injustices and marginalisation.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Focus</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* In relation to Bourdieu, what forms of capital are specific to the field under study, how are they distributed and what dominant and subordinate positions are evident? Along with this how does the specific 'habitus' influence the situation within a field of struggle?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Research question</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* How does a specific cultural group/s influence/shape practice or another topic/issue?</li> <li>* Whose interests are being served by a specific action, value, position, organisation, group?</li> </ul>
<p><b>Sampling</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* Purposive.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Data Collection Methods</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* A wide variety including participant observation, interviews, focus groups, policy documents, videos, photographs, and questionnaires.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Analytical strategies</b> (systematic and procedure-oriented processes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* There is a cyclic nature of data collection and analysis underpinned by the theoretical perspective used as a framework. Overall the researcher examines power relations, constraining ideology, beliefs, norms, advantaged/disadvantaged others within a particular context.</li> </ul>