

Critical race qualitative methods

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Abstract

Even though equality, diversity and inclusion targets feature in many policy documents and training programmes of organisations, race and racism remains an issue for many individuals. To understand the complex operation of prejudice and inequality in society, researchers should choose appropriate qualitative research designs that can shed light on the experiences of the marginalised and anti-racist practice. As outlined in this guide critical race research designs aligned with the tenets of critical race theory enable the story and counter-stories to be heard. It is when one listens, reflects, hears, and acts that social justice and decolonisation processes begin.

Learning Outcomes

- recognise the foundations of critical race qualitative methods.
- identify critical race qualitative designs for use in research projects.
- examine the challenges and limitations of critical race qualitative research methods.

Introduction

In academic work it is important to be critical and analytical of concepts and processes. Being critical suggests that one is thoughtful and evaluative. Good critical research will examine what has occurred as well as how and why circumstances are the way they are. To be critical will mean that you must ask yourself the ‘so what’ question to get to true meaning in a diverse context (University of Plymouth, 2008). Essentially this enables you and your research project to identify new knowledge, examine existing knowledge and deeply appreciate the research

environment. Undertaking a critical qualitative research project requires a willingness to question and challenge the validity and relevance of information and/or beliefs. When researching aspects of race and ethnicity, being critical involves diligence and prudent actions that go beyond simply accepting or rejecting various methodological designs. Being a critical race qualitative researcher means assuming responsibility for research methods that must reveal multiple perspectives and interpretations of a situation. Therefore, you will navigate methodological research options that seek to capture the complexity of race as a socially constructed and contested term.

This guide is split into three core sections in which I outline the key characteristics of critical race qualitative research methods. In each section I provide some important aims that you should reflect on when seeking to apply critical race qualitative methods in practice. I will also highlight some of my experiences as a critical race qualitative researcher. I do this not just to name my own reality, but also to contribute further to inclusive publications on diversity (Thomas, 2012). Across the guide are scattered references to acclaimed critical race scholars. For example, in her landmark article on critical race theory in education Ladson-Billing (1998) suggests that stories serve as interpretive structures by which we can order and interpret racial experiences. If all else is neglected in this guide, I recommend storytelling and counter-storytelling for research focused on race and racism.

What are Critical Race Methods?

Emerging from legal debates in the United States of America (USA), Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a moment and framework that examines the role of race and racism in society (Taylor *et al*, 2009). As theory it is intended to explain, frame, and justify racialised experiences. Applied in practice it is often aligned with qualitative research activities. CRT attempts to challenge traditional approaches to understanding race, both on an individual basis and as

embedded in the structures and systems of wider society. Consequently, the foundational principles of CRT include examining: the normalisation of racism in everyday life, stories and counter stories on race, liberal agendas and convergence of equality, white supremacy, and intersectionality (Gillborn, 2008). When undertaking a qualitative research project on critical race it is important to design a plan that considers these five core elements. Critical race qualitative research methods are techniques used to explore and analyse race, racism, inequality, and power. They are data collection strategies that elicit the lived experiences of the racially oppressed in marginalised contexts.

Normalisation of racism

To examine how racist practice is made normal, as a qualitative researcher, you must review the permanence of discrimination and prejudice. Critical race researchers acknowledge that racism is deeply ingrained in the fabric of society and therefore it needs to be scrutinised (Delgado and Stefanic, 1994; Gillborn, 2008). Hence, qualitative research methods include detailed assessments of the context. This might include analysis of historical records, policy documents, media reports, artefacts, and certifications. In my research within English secondary schools, I reviewed school behavioural policies and records of student detentions to build a picture of the actions taken by teachers towards various ethnic groups. Establishing this context early on in my research work enabled me to scrutinise and challenge existing rules and regulations in the school environment that advantaged some and not others.

Storytelling and counter-storytelling

Collecting narratives through interviews from research participants is a strategy often applied by qualitative researchers in a range of disciplines. However, as a critical race qualitative researcher, you must be able to not only analyse narratives but also delve into counter

narratives. In other words, storytelling and counter-storytelling provides a powerful means by which to amplify marginalised voices. It also challenges the prevailing narratives that perpetuate racial inequalities. Counter-storytelling is laying side by side or contrasting the story from the dominant and underprivileged perspective (Ladson-Billing, 1998). This method should aim to counteract stereotypes and misrepresentations. By incorporating storytelling and counter-storytelling in my qualitative research I was able to foster an inclusive understanding of contemporary groupings of teenagers in English schools; this being British minority ethnic and Eastern European young people. It is worth remembering that stories can be told in person through interviews but also can be implemented through examples such as written diaries, blogs and online postings. Whether it is as a face to face in person or through innovative online platforms a research participant must be enabled to tell their stories in their own words.

Liberal agendas and convergence

Liberalism operates to promote individual rights and neutrality. When considered as part of critical race it centres on the limitations of liberal approaches such as colour-blindness (seeking to treat everyone the same) to adequately capture the deeply rooted problem of racism. Interest convergence is focused on racial changes enacted by person in power when they coincide with their own self-interests (Lawrence and Hylton, 2022). Much like the context of the normalisation of racism these two elements would require a qualitative researcher to analyse history in depth. Reviewing existing records and events is a method that can be undertaken so that disparities are not individualised but considered within the hierarchy of institutions in wider society. Reflect deeply on when, where, and why events and activities occur in the research environment. For example, in my research several young people mentioned cultural days held in school for the Black community. They suggested that schools put on pointless activities during 'Black History Month' that were merely to 'tick a box'. Many of my student

participants were judgemental of those educators that ran events as they felt that did not represent their community (Thomas, 2012).

White supremacy

The focus on White supremacy in critical race research analyses the manifestation of White identity and how it has created and contributed to injustice and inequality (Bhopal, 2018). It highlights the importance of examining policies and practices that across society have advantaged dominant racial groups. Hence critical race qualitative researchers would need to investigate, within context, where systemic power imbalances occur. This is likely to warrant a complex interplay of research designs such as case study and ethnographic immersive field work.

Intersectionality

Critical race qualitative researchers recognise the possibility that individuals may experience multiple formations of oppression simultaneously. Crenshaw (1991) coined the term intersectionality that suggests that there are several forms of identity that can compound disadvantage for example race, gender, class, and disability. Therefore, acknowledging that individuals may experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously is essential. To capture this a qualitative research method must be flexible and provide an avenue for showcasing a nuanced understanding of identity. Appropriate online websites can be used creatively to map out the daily life and interactions of participants and their families. I have seen online Padlets effectively used by contemporary post-graduate researchers to give participants ownership of their life story in a timeline formatting. The researcher was then able to analyse the intersecting issues that emerged over a given period.

Section summary

- *Critical race qualitative methods are techniques that are used to explore and analyse race, racism, inequality, and power within research.*
- *Critical race qualitative methods usually aligned with and extend the core tenets of Critical Race Theory.*
- *The five principles that are recognised in critical race qualitative research projects are: normalisation of racism, storytelling and counter-storytelling, liberalism and convergence, white supremacy, and intersectionality.*

Critical Race Qualitative Research Design

Ethnography is the systematic study of individual cultures. As part of CRT it involves an in depth study of a particular community and is often referred to as *Critical Race Ethnography*, because it provides a powerful lens for exploring and examining the dynamics of race in a given social and cultural context (Hopson and Dixson, 2014). Critical race ethnographers seek social justice by immersing themselves into the lives and communities of people to gain a holistic understanding of their experiences and perceptions. In my research on racism in English schools, this meant that I had to be a part of the secondary school community. To be a critical race ethnographer I worked and participated in school life in varying roles for several years. I took on roles and embedded my life in locations as a teacher, community leader, pastoral support worker, and local authority facilitator. This was on a long-term basis, so that I could both participate and conduct observations in the field. Through my research work it meant that I was able to amplify the experiences and perspectives of those individuals in schools who are not usually heard from in traditional research methodologies. Critical ethnography also afforded me the opportunity to self-reflect within my own written diary. Researchers who seek to have a critical race ethnographic design must engage in continuous self-reflection, recognising the influence of their own identity on the research process and outcomes. This will contribute to transparency and ethical research behaviour.

Narrative Analysis is an important critical race qualitative research strategy. Through the examination of narratives direct from research participants, within the framing of CRT, there is the possibility of understanding the lived experiences of individuals within diverse racial contexts. By focusing on the stories and counter-stories of participants' personal accounts, testimonies, and descriptions it is possible to reveal and examine a range of social categories. Indeed, this often leads to an *Intersectional Analysis* whereby social categories and structures, can be identified that do not operate in isolation, intersect, and mutually reinforce, creating an avenue for exploring unique and complex lived experiences. For example, to understand my personal experience of racism in higher education, it is important to account for my existence as Black British and female. According to Rollock (2021) such intersectional work can reveal a racial battle that my White male counterparts do not have to engage in for career progression. Qualitative researchers using narrative and intersectional analysis often employ diverse methodologies in their projects and research methods include in depth-interviews, focus groups, participant observations, diary logs and photo-based tasks. All these research methods can also be regularly adapted (Lawrence and Hylton, 2022) for use within online research environments (for example in a Padlet website, life history form, as previously identified).

Collaborative and Participatory designs involve a critical race researcher embedding phases of collaboration and participation in their project (Aldana and Richards-Schuster, 2021). If such a design is implemented, you would need to recognise that traditional research methods often perpetuate power imbalances and researchers themselves regularly hold authority over the participants they involve. Thus, by involving individuals/communities in the research journey you would be empowering others to shape the research agenda, processes, and outcomes. This is not a passive process but one that addresses the actual concerns and priorities of the research participant. Collaborative and participatory qualitative research methods centre individuals

from marginalised groups by them taking on various research activities. For example, participants could co-design research questions, co-conduct research methods, co-analyse data, and co-author research outcomes. One study where this exposed the racialisation of young people living in urban areas was conducted by Aldana and Richards-Schuster (2021) who utilised youth participatory action research to design their entire project. Young people then incorporated creative and novel approaches to collect data that included drawings, videos, cartoons, theatre/socio-drama, word clouds and voting boxes as qualitative research methods.

Other critical race qualitative research designs that can be adopted by a researcher could include *Historical Analysis*, *Legal Analysis*, *Discourse Analysis*, and *Comparative Analysis*. In order, these research strategies would trace the development of racial inequality, scrutinise laws and legal systems, examine language and communication, and identify similarities and differences across racialised communities. Although all the designs and methods outlined in this section are not always mutually exclusive researchers can employ a combination of approaches to gain a rich understanding of the complexities of race and ethnicity in society. In all instances I would suggest that you deeply consider the research context and self-reflect before deciding upon your own critical race qualitative research design.

Section summary

- *Critical race ethnography, narrative and intersectional analysis, and collaborative and participatory approaches are effective research designs.*
- *Self-reflection is an important process for all researchers before, during and after the implementation of a research design.*
- *Engaging your research community within your research design can be rewarding and liberating.*

What are the benefits and challenges of using critical race methods?

There are several strengths of critical race qualitative research methods. First is that these methods emphasise the importance of understanding the social environment within their historical and cultural contexts. For me this has always been one of the greatest strengths of my critical race work as it enabled a rich comparison at all levels of an investigation. Featuring as part of an intersectional analysis critical race methods enable the interconnected nature of various social identities such as race, class, gender, and sexuality to showcase a comprehensive understanding of the context and the individual experience (Taylor *et al*, 2009). Second, a major advantage of the use of critical race methods is the ability to centre the experiences and perspectives of marginalised individuals and communities. Using the methods and designs as outlined in this guide creates a platform for hearing from those who are usually overlooked in mainstream research. In my school-based research this involved hearing from young people whose parents were newly arriving economic migrants from Eastern Europe, alongside young people whose parents/grandparents were part of former migration waves. Those who are historically silenced are prioritised in critical race designs and an authentic portrayal of their lives is possible as a result. Therefore, critical race qualitative research methods by their nature work towards decolonisation and antiracism agendas. Third, critical race qualitative research methods provide an avenue for advocacy and equity in society. By this I mean that they are tools that are often used to demonstrate a personal commitment to social justice. Unlike other research methods that can be detached from the social issues of the day, critical race methods deliberately explore and account for systems of oppression and point towards ideas that can dismantle them. Finally, within critical race qualitative design a researcher can become more self-aware and flexible in their approach to the research investigation. By their nature critical race methods recognise that all researchers are not neutral observers and the subjectivity of the research process is acknowledged. To this end critical research qualitative methods often move

beyond traditional research methodologies and push boundaries for the acquisition of research knowledge (Lawrence and Hylton, 2022).

In more recent times there has been extensive public criticism of critical race as an ideology. Although born in the USA, CRT has recently been politicised by politicians in several western governments (Clayton *et al*, 2021; Robbins, 2020). However, beyond such western controversy there is acknowledgement of the limitations of critical race as a research approach. Given that a critical race research approach encourages reflexivity there is a risk that personal biases may influence the interpretation of the data collected. Hence, I would advise that researchers keep a journal (paper based or digital) to ensure they are aware of their own perspectives and continually reflect on their positionality. I found this strategy useful in my own work as a Black British female teacher with sensitivity towards the migration challenges young people face in the English education system. Critical race qualitative research methods can be criticised on the grounds that the findings often focused on an in-depth understanding rather than generalisable findings. Hence the sample sizes of the methods enacted tend to be small and this can lead to issues related to essentialising racial identities. To overcome this, advocates of critical race methodologies, argue that quantitative methods can and should be integrated alongside qualitative methods more frequently (Sablan, 2019). This would avoid the oversimplification of race related issues that in qualitative realms further perpetuate stereotypes of race. Much of my work in education has focused on elements of critical race and therefore the final limitation is one I know very well. Qualitative critical race research methods are resource intensive and time consuming. This is both to implement and to analyse the data. However once collected and analysed critical race qualitative research data provides an insight into a world you may never have seen or heard of before.

Section summary

- *The benefits of critical race methods are that they result in context rich data, unique perspectives and experiences, platforms for advocacy, and self-reflection.*
- *The challenges of critical race methods are that they are: subjective to personal bias, limited in generalisability, and resource intensive and time consuming.*
- *When applying critical race methods it is good practice to prioritise the voices of those who have been historically silenced.*

Conclusion

Critical projects by their nature demand that researchers ask a variety of questions. The parameters for using critical race qualitative research designs therefore must seek to examine knowledge from multiple perspectives having considered the research context. To implement successful critical race methods researchers should seek to align and extend the core theoretical principles of the normalisation of racism, storytelling and counter-storytelling, liberalism and convergence, white supremacy, and intersectionality. Common critical race research designs feature ethnographic, narrative, intersectional, collaborative, and participatory, historical, legal, discourse and comparative approaches. Although critical race designs have distinctive benefits, such as the ability to centre the voices of the marginalised, it would be wise to develop self-reflection tools as a researcher. This could combat criticisms related to generalisability and essentialism.

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