

The roots of critical nonprofit scholarship: a reflective framework

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The roots of critical nonprofit scholarship – a reflective framework

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Abstract

We explore the variable knowledge-constituting assumptions of critical nonprofit scholarship, how they diverge from the 'mainstream' and what this means theoretically, methodologically and practically for scholars. We propose a reflexive framework to help researchers to interrogate their working practices. The framework also provides a means through which they can convey the legitimacy of their work to key audiences, by being explicit about the quality criteria by which their research should be judged. Next, the framework is applied to two exemplars studies at opposite ends of the critical spectrum to draw attention to pluralism in the field. Lastly, we look to allied fields for examples of innovative ways of using existing research methods to develop and extend the critical endeavour in nonprofit scholarship. Our aim is to provide a reference point for scholars who want to try to develop critical research methodologies but get stuck on a 'traditional' track.

Keywords: knowledge constituting assumptions; methodology; reflexivity; participatory research; research practice

In this chapter we consider the question '*what does 'good' critical nonprofit scholarship look like?*' Such a question is central to helping critical nonprofit scholars to interrogate their working practices and convey the legitimacy of their work to others. Addressing this question can also inform peer reviewers and journal editors from different ideological backgrounds of the different ways that good critical scholarship can be presented when reviewing such work. The chapter can also be useful to students, scholars and practitioners who are new to the critical endeavour.

Being critical nonprofit management scholars, the obvious starting point to address this question was to produce of a matrix or a set of categories that would facilitate the production of clear quality criteria akin to similar influential studies in the past (see Johnson, Buehring, Cassell & Symon, 2006; Cunliffe, 2010). Once we started on this journey, it became clear, there was no hard and fast framework or neat spectrum that could encompass the sheer diversity and pluralism of the field. Moreover, we became incredibly uneasy with trying to squeeze others' research into boxes. We felt such an action would be contradictory to the endeavour itself and could limit the creativity, passion and positionalities that make this field unique.

Instead, we present you with the tree of critical nonprofit scholarship as a means to reflexively interrogate our working practices and legitimize our research in the eyes of others (Figure 1). It is the inherent symbolism associated with a tree that enables it to serve as a useful model or metaphor when exploring the evolution or diversity of a phenomenon. In our context, the hidden root system (knowledge constituting assumptions) provides the foundation for the tree (critical research) to grow and flourish. The trunk (purpose of the research) is the central supporting axis and pipeline for growth. It is through the trunk a tree can be identified and is often seen by others as the most valuable element. The branches (methodology and data collection methods) can be found in all different shapes and sizes but are the means by which the tree engages with its external environment to ensure growth and survival. The leaves (layout and language) are central means for producing nutrients, and are the part most often seen and engaged with by others. They can be a great source of beauty, used for identification, change over time and even be recycled to support further growth. Lastly the sapwood (reflexivity) is the pipeline by which water flows from the roots to the leaves and back. It is the central element that runs through and connects all the parts of the tree and is fundamental to its function and survival.

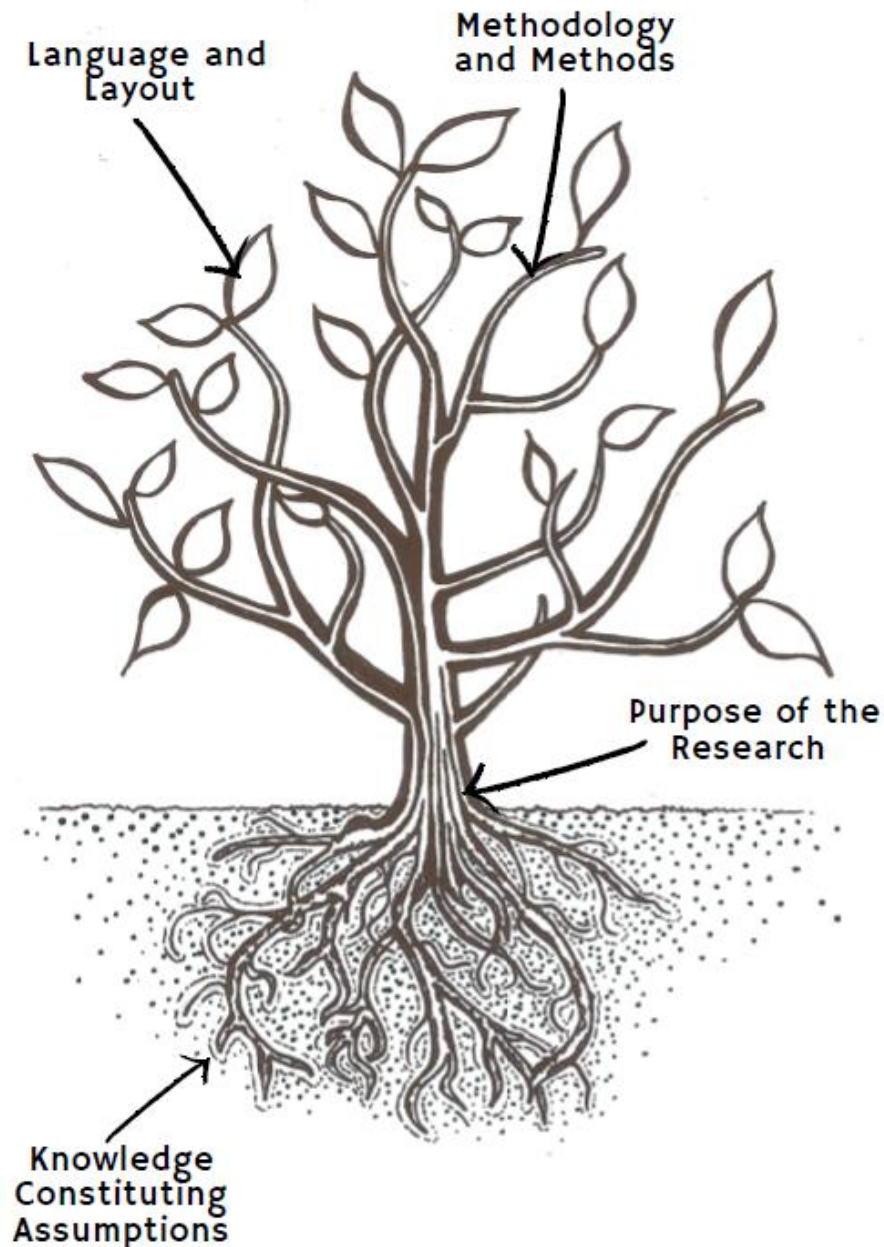


Figure 1: Tree of Critical Nonprofit Scholarship [The tree was drawn by Sarah Keebler Dawson, Creative Coordinator at Start Inspiring Minds - a mental health based charity in Salford UK that uses the creative arts to support wellbeing in the community]

This tree is not intended to be a prescriptive model but rather a way to get one thinking about the aspects of critical scholarship. For us personally, we found this imagery a useful tool to conceptualise these abstract and complex concepts. Therefore consider the tree as *one* possible tool or heuristic regarding how you can do critical research. Moreover, we acknowledge that in this chapter we use labels and concepts that are themselves a product of scholarship and therefore by their very nature can be problematic and contested (see Adler, Forbes & Wilmott, 2008). Instead

this chapter is intended to provide an overview for those who might be new to critical nonprofit research. For those who are more advanced and want to go into more depth, we signpost you to further reading. It is likely that these issues will be linked to other chapters in this book.

Building on this, we now go on to discuss the different parts of the tree and how they can help us to reflect on what 'good' looks like across the multiplicity of critical work in the academic sphere. Following these discussions, we will use the tree as a lens to evaluate three nonprofit papers considered as significantly critical as selected by Coule, Dodge and Eikenberry (2020). In their typology of critical nonprofit research these papers are identified as significantly critical because they exemplify multiple tenets of critical scholarship such as challenging structures of domination, questioning taken for granted assumptions, going beyond instrumentalism and paying attention to power and knowledge. We selected these papers to help demonstrate not only the application of the tree, but what some of these abstract concepts look like in practice.

Bringing the tree to life by reflexively interrogating critical nonprofit scholarship

In this section, we interrogate three highly critical papers - Eliasoph (2009), Roca (2007) and Gelles, Merrick, Derrickson, Otis, & Sweeten-Lopez & Folsom (2009) - to demonstrate how our reflexive framework can help to illuminate the core critical elements of the work, and thus help to identify good critical practice. If we are to make visible our aims, it is important to point out the motivation behind our choices. We chose the most critical examples to draw attention to the challenge of assessing how 'good' critical research exemplifies multiple core tenets of critical scholarship. The sheer diversity and multiplicity of the field means one cannot easily employ a straightforward process of box-ticking. Rather, the piece needs to be judged holistically, and at times we need to read in-between the lines and make assumptions about others' thinking, and become comfortable with challenging our own sensibilities. It is not surprising that some of us feel uncomfortable with this approach. This is important if we are to try to reverse the dampening of this critical work over time. Rather than trying to show how the least critical work could be more so, the focus should be on appreciating and interrogating the most critical work, to support other scholars seeking to develop their approaches.

The Roots - Knowledge constituting assumptions

We start with our knowledge constituting assumptions. They are critical to evaluating any scholarship, as there is an intrinsic link between them, our methodological choices, research practice and the evaluation of our work (see Johnson et al., 2006 - as example of such evaluation criteria). They provide the foundation upon which we pursue certain goals, design and conduct our research and shape how we present our findings to the world. The pluralistic nature of critical scholarship results in a range of different knowledge constituting assumptions that are seen as legitimate in this broad church of scholarship. Much like the roots of a tree, these assumptions are often hidden from view although they are the central driving force behind the research.

Often researchers either make no explicit reference to these assumptions or align themselves with philosophical paradigms like feminism, critical theory or postmodernism that are normatively associated with particular knowledge constituting assumptions (ontological and epistemological assumptions' - (Wilmott, 1993). The challenge here is that within these paradigms scholars can adopt a range of different assumptions, which in turn results in very different ways in which '*we do research, what we see as 'data', how we collect and analyse data, we theorise and how we write up our research accounts*' (Cunliffe, 2010 p.5). Unsurprisingly, in the three papers we reviewed the authors do not explicitly state the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin their work let alone align themselves with a philosophical paradigm. Rather we have had to infer these commitments from the way the authors describe key concepts.

So what are these assumptions? One of these is the status we give to social reality or how we define what it is we are studying (ontology). In the main, critical nonprofit scholarship does not have one defining ontological assumption but the majority of studies tend towards ontological realism (Coule et al., 2020). This realist view assumes our social world exists independently of human understanding or cognition. Often critical researchers who adopt a conservative or least critical approach raise awareness, but do not challenge instances of structural domination, inequality and repression. Here the purpose is to describe, characterise or explain these social structures or practices of domination and inequality (e.g. pay gaps,

conflict, management practices, asymmetrical relations of power and control). Knowledge (epistemology) becomes a 'fact' or a 'truth' (objective) that can be neutrally observed and recounted by the researcher to explore causality, predict behaviour (positivism, feminism) or describe how people inter-subjectively (e.g. verstehen Outhwaite, 1975) experience their own worlds (neo-empiricism, some forms of interpretivism).

In contrast, those who are the most critical in their work, conceive the social world as real and independent but as something we can never fully understand and know [insert footnote 1]. Although they recognise these structures are intangible and not open to direct empirical observation they have real consequences for people. Here our knowledge and sense-making is contaminated by socio-cultural factors resulting in partial and positioned perspectives (Habermas, 1974). Although knowledge is socially constructed, certain groups can use power, prestige and capital to privilege one understanding over another over another and disempower alternatives. Neutral observation is not possible because communication is 'systematically distorted' resulting in socially constructed 'realities-for-us' (Kolakowski, 1969) that are produced through the pretence of consensus (Habermas, 1974). Rather our sensemaking should emerge from 'ideal-speech' where consensus is achieved through argument and analysis without coercion, distortion or duplicity (Habermas, 1984). The degree of repression in society influences how much communication deviates from this ideal. Therefore these assumptions drive critical theorists to investigate how a particular social structures may produce and reinforce distorted communicative actions that practically and subtly shape its members' lives with an aim to liberate or emancipate them from these asymmetrical power relations and constraints (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996).

One example of this approach is reflected in the philosophical assumptions often adopted by scholars in the Global South (see Santos Chapter). Here social reality has significant material consequences for people who have been silenced and overlooked by western traditions (Santos, 2019). Therefore knowledge production is focused on understanding the lived experiences of resistance by these social groups with particular attention to what is 'under the radar, untraceable' (Santos Book Chapter p. 4).

[footnote 1 - Although we recognise real social structures are intangible or not open to direct empirical observation they have real consequences for people. For instance, one cannot observe hierarchy but you can see symbols of hierarchy like organisational charts and pay bands. These symbols exude power over others. If you misbehaved at work you would feel the hierarchy although it is not a real, tangible thing.]

We infer that the three papers reviewed adopt a realist ontology but the status of knowledge varies. For Eliasoph (2009) and Roca (2007) it appears that the status of knowledge is socially constructed, fraught with tensions and domination from the social structures around us.

“This paper clarifies important differences between old fashioned voluntary associations and these newly prevalent projects that are top down, funded, open to any members of the public and usually short-term. This is not simply an exercise in creating precise definitions and splitting hairs. It matters for anyone... who wants to understand how these newly prevalent organizations work. It helps us to see what they can do easily, what they can do only with great difficulty, and why this is so.” (Eliasoph, 2009 p.292)

Whereas in Gelles et al. (2009) the authors measure the meaning and interpretations participants ascribe to their social relationships and networks which suggests an objective epistemological sense. The authors are careful to not adhere to scientific principles often associated with objectivist studies (e.g. construct validity, generalizability - Johnson et al., 2006). Rather measures are described as not comprehensive, open to interpretation and imperfect. On the surface such commitments would suggest this is a less critical study, but as we progress through the application of the tree, the emancipatory nature of the study reveals itself.

There is a small faction of critical scholarship which conceives the social world as subjective with no independent existence. Here, social reality is an outcome of language that is enacted in our social interactions resulting in multiple shifting and fluid meanings (Shotter, 2008, Cunliffe, 2010). Critical scholars who adopt these knowledge constituting assumptions sit in the middle of the critical spectrum because they can only consider why some discourses are being voiced whilst others are being silenced because no one discourse can be privileged or advocated (Gergen, 2009). These scholars are illuminating, but falling short of, challenging inequalities, power dynamics and oppression or providing pathways to emancipation. Demonstrating the intrinsic

link to research purpose (tree trunk) and the need to view critical work holistically rather than relying on individual criteria.

The Trunk - Purpose of the research

In the Chapter 1 of this handbook Coule, Dodge and Eikenberry presented us with four common tenets that define the field of critical nonprofit scholarship. These tenets exemplify the common purpose(s) the scholar sets out to achieve via their research. Like a trunk of a tree, the purpose of the research plays a number of pivotal roles. Firstly, it serves to identify the type of tree from others in the metaphorical forest. Here the purpose is what delineates critical work from mainstream and more traditional forms of management science (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alder et al., 2008). Secondly, for those who conduct and participate in critical work, the purpose is arguably the most important and 'valuable' part of the research process. Such research seeks to shape how work could and should be organised to create more just and sustainable operations by uncovering oppression and power imbalances within nonprofit action (see Eikenberry, 2009, King & Griffin 2019 and Santos, 2019). For example, some 'Global South' scholars challenge prevailing Western-based constructions of concepts like 'democracy', 'development' and the 'economy' by demonstrating how these silence and overlook other forms of knowledge and processes of being and sense-making (see Santos Chapter). The goal of such approaches is to provide alternative solutions created by minority groups which bring value, inspire autonomy and enable social change (see Santos Chapter).

The trunk of the most critical and radical scholarship (Category A) can be imagined as the thickest as it addresses multiple purposes such as challenging structures of domination, questioning taken for granted assumptions, going beyond instrumentalism, and paying attention to power and knowledge. In contrast the more conservative and least critical of studies (Category D) in which only one purpose is pursued (often with the goal of exposing rather than challenging) is thinner and arguably less substantial in proportion. Although the girth of the trunk may vary, it is still the axis and support from which the research evolves.

The trunk springs from the roots and therefore is shaped by the ontological and epistemological positions from which the research develops and thus influences what can be considered appropriate evaluation criteria. It is important to note that there is no one set of knowledge constituting assumptions that equate to particular levels of criticality. Rather there are tendencies to adopt certain assumptions, but that does not exclude any combination (which we will demonstrate later in the chapter). Moreover, the trunk shapes the nature of the branches and leaves just as the roots provide the foundation. Therefore, we must look at all component parts of the tree rather than making judgements based on a single part or snapshot.

Across the three papers, the degree to which the research exemplifies multiple tenets of critical scholarship ranges from explicitly overt to subtle and implicit. When reading Gelles et al. (2009), the reader must engage with the entire piece to make the connections between their work and tenets of critical scholarship. In contrast, Eliasoph (2009) and Roca (2007) make their position abundantly clear from the onset. In the first paragraph, Eliasoph (2009) points out that social researchers are functioning with an outdated framework of understanding of nonprofit organisations that deliver emancipatory projects. Such ways of thinking carry a risk of '*demanding these organizations to do things that they cannot do, and ignoring what they do well*' (p.292). As a result they set out to challenge how a particular subset of organizations can be better understood, whilst also raising some inherent tensions about the way in which these organizations reproduce social structures/behaviours when they attempt to cultivate 'civic spirit', which in turn affect the experiences of participants. Therefore the purpose is to challenge and change the understanding and practice of social researchers - '*it is time for social researchers to catch up*' (p292).

Similarly, Roca (2007) is overtly critical of the nature of relationships between the state and civil society in Andalusia from the onset. The authors set out to demonstrate how the reliance of development non governmental organisations (DNGOs) on '*funds from the state and other questionable sources*' are resulting in the groups becoming part of the new global structures of domination. In particular, they draw attention to how these groups '*compete with - and partially neutralize - genuine social movements*' (p. 118).

The Branches

Although each paper takes a distinctive approach to discussing their methodology and practical application of their methods, their choices link coherently with their espoused metatheoretical assumptions. Neither Eliasoph (2009) nor Roca (2007) have a section dedicated to methodology or methods, which you would expect to see in a conventional journal article. The authors state in a sentence that they conducted an ethnography which involved elements of participant observation (Roca, 2007; Elisasoph, 2009) and open-ended interviews (Roca, 2007). As a reader you do not discover specific details of the methods (how participants were recruited, how many visits, what were the topics in the interviews). Yet the knowledge constituting assumptions framing each piece of work do not necessitate such discussions. Rather there are rich ethnographic descriptions and data extracts presented throughout to fully explore the empirical setting and sensitize the discussion and arguments being made by the authors.

Gelles et al. (2009) reads like a conventional mainstream research article. The reader is presented with a detailed discussion of social network analysis which includes the construction and design of the survey instrument, sampling, coding and operationalisation. All these elements would be expected from scholars who perceive social reality and knowledge construction as objective phenomena. Interestingly, the authors stressed the importance of ensuring that the research design would facilitate findings that would be accessible and valuable to programme alumni, sponsors and the nonprofit research community, which is central to achieving the goals of emancipation. What is not made clear in the methods section, but is only briefly mentioned in the conclusion, is that the researchers are the researched - '*as the authors and participant observers, four of whom are fellows*' (p.544). Here, we have programme alumni designing, conducting, analysing and disseminating the research. The minority voices are the ones imposing a logic onto the research (survey instrument). They are also exploring the hidden structures that may be helping or hindering the development of weak ties, which are important to facilitating the sustainability and development of these minority communities. Rather than having someone that sits outside of the 'marginalised' group shedding light on their situation, here we have the 'marginalised' in control of knowledge production. As a result this paper which at first glance might appear mainstream, actually fulfils central tenets of critical scholarship.

The Branches - Methodology, methods and their practical application

Drawing on our tree metaphor, the roots and trunk firmly shape the look and configuration of the branches. Although there is pluralism in the critical work within the nonprofit field, this is not necessarily reflected in choices of methodologies and data collection methods. Although qualitative methodologies (e.g. ethnography, case study) and qualitative methods (interviews and participant observation) dominate, nearly one third of studies adopt quantitative methodologies and survey methods (Coule et al., 2020). This one-third are the least critical and most closely resemble mainstream methodological approaches and knowledge constituting assumptions. There is a broad trend for studies to coalesce in what one could call two camps.

The majority of empirical studies that are most critical and radical tend to adopt autoethnography (King, 2017), case study methodology (Coule & Patmore, 2013) or discourse analysis (Coule and Bennett, 2016) that rely on qualitative methods of data collection such as participant observation, interviews and/or document analysis (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2013). Largely this is unsurprising as interviews alone do not facilitate the researcher to access the deep structures that shape our action and context (Duberley & Johnson, 2009). Often people are unaware of these structures because they are 'normalised', they do not apprehend them or lack the language to talk about them (Jermier, 1998). Rather the researcher needs to immerse themselves in their participants' setting to understand 'political struggles concerning power and authority, cultural negotiations over identity and social constructions of the power at hand' (Forrester, 1992 p47), if any form of emancipation is to be achieved. Methodologies like ethnography and case study research facilitate such access in ways that cross-sectional survey research cannot (Cunliffe, 2010).

Conversely, quantitative research methodologies like surveys represent the majority of the least critical and more conservative approaches to critical scholarship (Mesch & Rooney, 2008; Sampson & Moore, 2008). Such methodologies and methods suit such purposes as they offer a way to measure instances of power imbalances and equality, and then draw generalizations about their effects on individuals and groups; all made possible by the assumptions that our social world, and our understanding of it, are stable and concrete.

What is crucially important when inspecting these branches is that not all branches are alike, although they might appear to be so on the surface, as one type of root system (ontological and epistemological assumptions) and trunk (research purpose) does not necessitate a particular type of branch (method). A single method can lend itself to researchers from a variety of philosophical traditions and perspectives. Not all critical ethnographies lead to the most critical of work. In Alvesson and Skoldberg's (2000) typology of critical ethnography, some approaches can reflect conventional ethnography design, delivery and analysis (objective ontology and objective epistemology) whilst other types will go beyond empirical observation, to achieve in depth critical interpretation (objective/subjective ontology and subjective epistemology). The same principle applies to selection of quantitative methods and methodologies. In the example discussed later (Gelles et al., 2009) quantitative methods are employed in a highly critical paper due to the role of research participants in the research design, data collection and analysis. Although quantitative research is often overlooked as a means for producing highly critical and radical pieces of research, through careful design and application such approaches can achieve these purposes (Sprague, 2005; Gephart, 2006; Keleman & Ruemens, 2011).

Our reflective tree demonstrates that obvious features like the branches that are highly visible and easily identifiable cannot be solely used to judge or evaluate critical nonprofit research. Rather we need to start from the roots and work our way up as these features are all intertwined. Moreover, we have to take time to explore the 'nature' of the branches. Whilst from a distance they may appear as one type, upon closer inspection there is often more to them than meets the eye.

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The Leaves - the layout and language

This part of the tree demonstrates that the way our research is presented to the world is shaped by the goals we pursue, the design and practical application of our research, and our identity as researchers. Like leaves, the component parts from the foundation upward create a particular look and style to our research outputs. However the external environment arguably plays just as much of a pivotal role in shaping the leaf. From our perspective, it is clear that certain environments suit particular types of leaves and we can see a similar pattern in academic research.

In the previous chapter, Coule, Dodge and Eikenberry identified a dampening of critical approaches in the nonprofit field over time. This conservatism can be attributed to such factors as lack of understanding of the quality criteria associated with critical approaches, the constraints of the publishing process and the pathways for academic career advancement (Parker, 2014). Combined, this results in specific social norms concerning the style and language used in academic journal articles. This is particularly so in high-ranking mainstream journals, as their house style guides result in standardization across their outputs. Whilst there are instances of the most critical papers published in these journals, they will look and feel mainstream in nature. That is, there will be a methods/methodology section in which specific detail is paid to how the study is rigorous and how the research addresses gaps in knowledge (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011: 2013). The language will have a neutralised, less conversational or challenging tone.

If the author decides to abandon traditional conventions and instead presents their research in an imaginative way, this does not negate its rigour or quality. As we found when we applied our reflexive tree to three of the most critical papers, the layout and language varied considerably across the examples. Some were conventional and others were jarringly unconventional. Regardless, the essential hallmarks of 'good' critical work was present throughout each of the three pieces. Arguably the unconventional pieces do not regularly appear in the higher ranking journals. What the application of the tree to critical nonprofit scholarship offers is a way to adjust our aesthetics to see beauty in the unconventional.

It is important to dedicate some time and space to consider the way in which some critical research can *look* so different to what could be labelled '*traditional*' research. Critical researchers can struggle to have their work accepted in some of our field's mainstream and highly ranked journals, because their work looks (layout) and sounds (language) quite different. This is not the case for all the most critical papers however. The presentation and language of Gilles et al. (2009) is akin to much conventional empirical research. A reader is faced with sections one would expect to see - a dedicated literature review, methods section, findings and analysis, and discussion. The language used is largely conservative throughout the piece, reflecting the objective knowledge constituting assumptions.

Whereas, Roca (2007) and Eliasoph (2009) have an unconventional layout as they choose to include different elements and, crucially, do not necessarily include the standard sections that we would see in many academic articles. In both examples there is no distinct literature review, methodology, findings and analysis or discussion sections. Yet the activity associated with each of these sections is clearly present. For example, the literature review is not a standard review in which the author(s) highlight a gap(s) in theoretical knowledge (Sandberg & Alvesson, 2011). Rather they highlight the tensions, dominance, and marginalisation inherent in the different realities by drawing on the literature to foreground their arguments.

Where the language of Gelles et al. (2009) is conversative and familiar, Eliasoph's (2009) is a fascinating example of how critical research can pose a challenge to the academic 'mainstream'. The language can be described as direct. In places, it can shock or surprise, expressing viewpoints or an overt stance - "*It's time for social researchers to catch-up*" (p. 292) "*Safe Night*" was a prophylactically named, hybrid sponsored evening event for youth (p. 298); '*participants quickly learned how to play this game of hide-and-seek with volunteering and accounting* (p. 301).

Arguably this difference does not result in research which is lower quality. Indeed, we can consider the choice of language entirely consistent with the critical endeavour. The most critical work should challenge us, and make its audience sit-up and take note. It should push the bounds of how academic work is not just conducted, but also communicated. Employing a structure, and choice of language, which stops the reader in their tracks, makes them perhaps feel uncomfortable, but articulates clearly the challenge, is perhaps what we should be looking for in the best critical work. We are not necessarily advocating for all critical research to look and sound like Eliasoph (2009) but rather working towards an environment where encountering such styles can become normalised.

The Sapwood - reflexivity

The sapwood (see Figure 1) is the white hollow pipeline that runs throughout all parts of the tree and is fundamental to its function and survival. As sapwood is to a tree, reflexivity is the keystone of critical research - without it, one could argue the research is not critical. Moreover, reflexivity permeates every aspect of the research process; the purpose we set to achieve, our role as a researcher, role of the

researched, how we write our research accounts, and how we analyse and theorise from our data (Jeans & Huzzard, 2014). It is as much about who we are as individuals as it is about the performance we go through to make our research credible to others.

Simply put, reflexivity is a concept which refers to the way in which a researcher considers, or recognises, their own role within the research (Johnson & Duberley, 2003). 'Deep' reflexivity refers to the critical examination of how a researcher's own contextually and socially produced positionality helps to shape the research undertaken (Collier and Muneri, 2016). Thus, we can see how our own position can ultimately determine the kind of knowledge created. There are variations, or degrees, of reflexivity, and it is important to recognise how different levels of reflexivity support different levels of critical work.

In the least critical of papers, research is likely to demonstrate a degree of researcher reflection rather than reflexivity, acknowledging the role of the researcher, but with no attempt at exploring what this might mean for the study or findings. This level of reflexivity has been called 'methodological reflexivity' (Johnson and Duberley, 2003) wherein the researcher reflects on their own research choices, and their behaviour within the research. This level of reflexivity might involve the researcher considering their own identity position (Collier and Muneri, 2016), but stops short of considering what impact such factors might have on the study.

In the work that exemplifies multiple tenets we start to see researchers engaging more fully with their own role within the research, exploring how their own position and worldview is playing a part in the research process, and this is made explicit within the study. This degree of reflexivity is moving towards 'epistemic reflexivity', which would see a researcher examining their own position, and how this frames and shapes the research process (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). It is also here that we see researchers moving beyond the narrative themes of the participants, and use their own knowledge to connect the data to deeper structures, illuminating issues (such as power) that were not explicit within participant accounts. This is where researchers can be understood to move beyond the empirics underpinning the research, and draw on well-informed interpretation and reasoned appraisal, drawing on historical and contextual factors which illuminate the phenomena in focus (see McDuire-Ra, 2007).

Roca (2007) and Eliasoph (2009) demonstrate this strong voice of the researcher when discussing the meanings and actions observed in their empirical context. They are not afraid to be present in the research and therefore make no attempt to detach or distance themselves throughout the piece (see extract below).

Instead of learning the lessons that organizers wanted them to learn, participants were learning some other very valuable lessons:... how to hear, and then quickly ignore, the plug-in volunteers' lavish promises; how to create instant intimacy with people whom they had no expectation of ever seeing again; and, how to represent their traditional cultures in innocuous ways to people who would not have the time to learn anything about them. These are valuable lessons but not the inspiring lessons that the organizers had in mind. They are, however, valuable for employment in the fast-pace world of short-term employment and networking....'
(Eliasoph, 2009 p.307)

Here, it feels very much as if they 'own' their interpretations rather than presenting them as an objective truth to the reader.

In addition to reflexivity facilitating a challenge to dominant ideas and 'common sense' understandings (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000), there are also fundamental questions concerning the role of the researched within any study. However reflexive the researcher, critical research can take a step beyond by ceding the traditional position of power (the researcher) to the researched. By recognising the power in our position, we can work towards returning that power (to varying degrees) to the research participants. This element of reflexivity is an important aspect of critical scholarship, but as with the other elements discussed here, there are varying degrees to which researchers can do this. For example in the Gelles et al. (2009) paper, the authors are the researched (fellows of the programmes being evaluated) and are in control of the design, data collection and analysis of the study. Being former members results in them knowing it intimately (i.e. 'the researched) enabling the surfacing of hidden agendas and meanings that might not otherwise have been noticed by others. The 'unanticipated findings' section is an example of this as they combine the empirics with their own experience of being on the programme to help provide a deeper insight into the programme's functioning.

What is fascinating about this example is that the voice of the researcher is much less apparent and arguably more conventional. To the reader it feels as though the researcher is standing outside of the research and objectively reporting the

findings and the process. Arguably, one would expect such conventions when employing quantitative methods as they facilitate such language use and presentation. What this shows is that reflexivity isn't an obvious, tangible feature in the work. There is not necessarily a specific section, or terms you can search for, to quickly gauge the level of deep reflexivity in a piece. Rather it only emerges from reading and engaging as a whole. Although this is more difficult to spot, it is no less important a feature of the most critical work.

The least critical of studies retain a degree of distance between the researcher and the researched. Here, researchers reflect on their own role in the research but do not engage participants in any aspect of the research process, beyond their role as participants. In the more critical work the researcher will seek to engage in a degree of co-production (codesign etc) with the research participants. Co-production is a research design process rather than a theoretical perspective. This approach starts to address issues of power imbalance, seeking to give the researched an active role (and thus a degree of control) over an element of the research whether that be research design, data collection or analysis. We discuss co-production in more detail later in this chapter.

We would be remiss if we didn't draw attention to the important role the external environment plays when interrogating reflexivity in published academic research. In the previous section, we discuss how journal guidelines play a central role in shaping the presentation of our critical research to external audiences. Parker (2014) rightly points out the lack of attention paid to reflexivity in journal guidelines, despite it being the life-blood of critical research. Therefore, as critical scholars we have one of two paths to follow in order to achieve publication, both of which are imperfect. The first implies a tokenism to reflexivity because there is little to compel, reward or enable us to engage with it in any depth in such outputs. For the second, we engage with it in a deep and authentic way but when it comes to presenting it as a written work, this element is commonly stripped out and remains hidden to others². As a result, we suggest a degree of prudence when reflexively interrogating this element of others' work.

[footnote 2 - There are exceptions to this, although arguably rare - see King, 2017]

Having constructed the reflexive framework, and applied it to a series of critical nonprofit papers, this chapter now explores how nonprofit scholars can look to an allied academic field for inspiration into how they might extend critical scholarship further.

Allied Fields - how other trees grow

Through considering how research is conducted in other contexts, or fields, we seek to support the new approaches to critical nonprofit scholarship, in terms of how we design, conduct, and talk about our research. Our aim here is to provide a reference point for scholars who want to try to develop critical research methodologies but get stuck on a 'traditional' track.

A challenge we would like to put to nonprofit scholars is to seriously consider the notion of reflexivity (sapwood) within their research. The work that exemplifies multiple tenets of critical scholarship is also characterised by the researchers engaging deeply with their own role within the research, exploring how their own position and worldview is playing a part in the research (Johnson and Duberley, 2003). As our tree metaphor conveys, the significance here is the interrelated nature of each aspect of the research. An important way in which nonprofit scholars can seek to develop their critical work is to consider how the tenets of critical work can sit at the heart, or the roots, of the research process, feeding through in a meaningful way to the research purpose (trunk), the research methodology and methods (branches), and how the research is conveyed (leaves). This isn't just about identifying some alternative methods to use, but re-examining the whole research process - root to branch.

Central to the tenets of critical research is the notion of power, and in particular the idea that the research endeavour is power-laden. As critical researchers we seek ways to redress power imbalances, taking seriously the power we hold as researchers, and considering how we can give voice, and cede control, to those we are researching. Within the allied field of public health research we can see a rich seam of Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR). CBPR puts communities at the centre of the knowledge-creation endeavour as researchers embed principles of co-production into their research. It is not a prescribed set of methods, but rather a different way of approaching research, whereby academics work with community members, and/or research participants, to devise and conduct research. Taking this kind of approach can potentially challenge what Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) identify as "*the*

socialization process in the research community” (p133), or the tendency to conform to research protocols within your field. Allowing those we are researching to help to decide what is important or the kind of questions being asked, not only challenges us as scholars, but also certainly challenges the academic community within which we hope to have our work ratified.

It is through ceding power and control, and co-producing research that we can “*promote critical reflection and emancipation from frozen social and ideational patterns*” (Alvesson & Skoldberg. 2000: 144). To put it another way, by opening up the research process to those we are researching, we can start to better understand the questions which matter to them, what is important from their perspective, and in turn shift the kind of knowledge being created.

Principles of co-produced research

Working to authentically engage participants is a core principle of co-produced research, which can be enriching for the researched, the researcher and the research itself. In their research with women living with HIV, Logie, James, Tharao and Loufty (2012) point to the importance of authentic engagement, taking seriously (and working to overcome) the challenges faced by participants as they engage in the research process. The importance of flexibility as an approach to ethical engagement is highlighted, dedicating time to support learning, adapting to different needs during the different phases of the research.

Supporting equitable involvement is a fundamental principle, and yet to do this authentically is not straightforward. Guta, Flicker and Roche (2013) explore the challenges of engaging community members in public health research which is pre-determined by the researchers, training people to fit into the confines of the ‘traditional’ research process, pointing to the contradictions inherent in seeking to empower and engage simultaneously, whilst the researchers retain control of the research framework. The authors discuss the tensions peer researchers face when having to balance being a *‘representative of their community and speak authentically about their experience; on the other hand they have to be able to function in ways that are conducive to a structured working environment’* (p.445) - particularly those who might be *too* much like their communities. Guta et al. (2013) suggest researchers need to

better balance the formal expectations of the project with the identities of participant researchers.

Knowledge creation and learning is at the heart of research; yet as we produce research outputs such as journal articles, we send our research out into the world without knowing the impact it will have. Flicker and Nixon (2016) discuss the challenges of authentic engagement through their experience of producing an academic article with community researchers. They demonstrate the possibility of enacting the principles of shared and individual learning, but raise the very significant challenges of bridging the divide between the community members and the expectations of academic institutions and academic publishing environments.

Despite the challenges these public health studies raise, each contributes to the debates surrounding empowerment and emancipation, recognising that co-produced research involves sharing power with the ultimate goal of empowering those involved. Flicker (2008) reports on a study with young people living with HIV, and highlights the way in which their involvement in the research not only improved the quality of the research, but also gave the young people a sense of being valued, which in turn led some of them to describe the sense of purpose and self worth which the research had afforded them, expanding personal horizons and enabling them to rethink the future. We can see the potential of co-produced research in supporting social action and change beyond the research itself, as individuals emerge from the research changed by their learning, acting as a potential catalyst for broader social change (Trickett and Beehler, 2017). This is not an easy road, and not all co-produced research arrives at emancipation and social change, but the possibility makes the endeavour ultimately worthwhile for critical nonprofit scholars.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have presented the tree of critical nonprofit scholarship as a means to help identify what good looks across a diverse and pluralistic field which diverges from the mainstream. Through the discussion of the core components of the tree we demonstrate how the knowledge constituting assumptions that underpin different approaches to critical nonprofits research influence methodological design choices, the practical application of methods and forms of reflexivity. We argue there is no one 'right' way to do such research but rather is about understanding how the

core components come together to create the critical endeavour. Therefore the reflexive framework we propose in this chapter aims to help researchers and external audiences understand the legitimacy of their work.

Looking ahead to the future, we explore one way that critical nonprofit scholars can develop and extend their work. We draw attention to the potential offered by co-production in the public health research field. This framework offers novel approaches to how researchers can share power with research participants. And ultimately work towards driving emancipation and social change. Our aim here is to provide a reference point for scholars who want to try to develop critical research methodologies in new and novel ways.

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