

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DOROTHY E. SMITH, *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*. Oxford: AltaMira Press, 2005, xiv + 222 p. + glossary + reference list + index.

Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People has been much anticipated by scholars and researchers interested in institutional ethnography, an approach to doing sociology developed by Dorothy Smith. Academics have wanted and needed a comprehensive text about institutional ethnography -- what it is, what it aims to discover, and how to go about doing it -- written by Smith herself. This is that book. As such, it is a welcomed addition to the institutional ethnography literature, and will be enormously useful for anyone interested in using or doing institutional ethnography. This book would also be suitable as a textbook for upper undergraduate and graduate level courses in sociological theory, research methodology, qualitative research, and feminist thought (although Smith makes clear -- both in the title and the text -- that institutional ethnography is a sociology for people, not just women).

Typically, Dorothy Smith's books are collections of essays and previously published papers, assembled in such a way as to illustrate themes and theoretical points. *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* is a departure from this format. It has been written as a book. Building chapter by chapter, it explains the theoretical and methodological principles of her alternative approach to thinking and doing sociology. As such, it captures well the cumulative evolution and refinement of her thinking over the past two decades, most especially since the publication of *The Everyday World as Problematic* (1987).

Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People is laid out in four main parts. The first section describes the foundations for her alternative sociology. Smith begins, very usefully, by recounting for readers how her own experiences and difficulties with mainstream sociological approaches led to the development of institutional ethnography. This nicely conveys how institutional ethnography is not just a mode of inquiry, but involves a "paradigm shift" (p. 2) in the very way we think about the social. The second section of the book, An Ontology of the Social, "provides a theory defining the object of institutional ethnographic study" (p. 208), while the third section focuses on how institutions can be made accessible to the type of ethnographic inquiry Smith promotes. This section is where readers will find much of her more recent thinking on institutional discourse, and on the significance of texts as mediators and coordinators of translocal social

relations, or “ruling relations.” The final section is the conclusion, which, among other things, “maps the journey...traveled in the book” (p. 3). The conclusion gives a very good overview of the sequencing of the book’s chapters and sections, outlining how each of these essentially articulates a “step” in the institutional ethnography research process.

Smith takes considerable time in this book to explain her key concepts -- concepts such as “women’s standpoint / the standpoint of the everyday/everynight world,” the “ruling relations,” “text,” “institutional discourse,” and “the social” for example -- that have not always been easily or clearly grasped. For example, the entire first chapter is focused on the notion of “women’s standpoint” and to articulating how and why it differs from conceptions of standpoint developed by other scholars. As well, useful explanations of how institutional ethnography differentiates from, and overlaps with, other popular qualitative approaches are woven throughout the book.

Like Smith’s other writing, *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People*, is theoretically sophisticated. And while explanations of how to “do” institutional ethnography methodologically are woven into each chapter, the book, on balance, is weighted more to the theoretical than the practical. It will be *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*, the forthcoming accompanying volume to this book, where we can anticipate seeing more details on the practical matters of doing institutional ethnography.

On the whole, *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* would not be considered “easy reading,” nor is it a text that should (or could) be read quickly. Smith herself notes (p. 2) that criticisms about the difficulty of her writing -- which could be applied to this book as well -- might be less about style and more about the complexity of the theoretical material. That said, Smith has made concerted efforts throughout this book to explain her points comprehensively, and wherever possible, to provide illustrative stories and examples. She has also included a glossary, providing definitions and explanations for 31 key terms and concepts. The end result is an accessible and readable text, but one that would likely remain challenging for many undergraduate readers.

Stephanie Knaak *University of Alberta*.