

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

DOROTHY E. SMITH (Ed.) *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006, vi + 263 p.

Institutional ethnography is a method of inquiry that problematizes social relations at the local site of lived experience and examines how textual sequences coordinate consciousness, actions, and ruling relations. For those who are unfamiliar, institutional ethnography uses interviews, participant observation, text analysis and mapping as techniques to illustrate how people's lived experiences are organized by processes that extend outside the scope of everyday life. It is purported that institutional ethnography is a sociology that does not objectify people but preserves their presence as subjects.

*Institutional Ethnography as Practice*, edited by the founder of the methodology – world renowned feminist Dorothy E. Smith – draws together some of the best institutional ethnographers in the field. The contributors offer new insights on how institutional ethnographers can approach interviewing, data gathering, proposal writing, etc. This book is required reading for anyone interested in institutional ethnography, since it is the clearest articulation of how to go about proceeding with an institutional ethnography. It will also interest people concerned with qualitative methods, ontology/epistemology and organization studies.

Smith's contribution builds on her previous publications to show how texts are actively produced through the work of people and how the texts coordinate further sequences of action and work. She discusses her notion of "intertextual hierarchy," where higher order texts regulate and standardize text work done in other local settings of work. Marjorie DeVault and Liza McCoy write that listening for and asking about texts in institutional ethnography interviews allows for a kind of probing oriented toward the explication of ruling practices. The point of interviewing in institutional ethnography is not to learn about the individual per se, but to learn about the individual's location in the relations of ruling or to learn what the individual does with texts. Tim Diamond reflects on his past work in an interview with Smith to discuss the importance of taking a participant role during institutional ethnography.

Marie Campbell suggests that institutional ethnography departs from ethnomethodology inasmuch as it treats people and their talk not as the object of analysis but as an entry point into forms of extra-locally

organized knowledges. In a second piece, discussing past research on people living with HIV infection and their experiences concerning health, McCoy offers some useful tips for keeping institutions in view during data analysis and write-up. Alison Griffith shows that institutional ethnography is effective in explicating how institutional processes construct commonsense notions of single parent families. Susan Turner comments on her work regarding urban planning and explains the processes by which she developed an intricate and impressive method of mapping hundreds of textual connections between institutions.

Because a lot of qualitative inquiry is couched as a form of exploration or discovery, and is not based on a rigid research question or set of hypotheses, institutional ethnographers often worry about how to pitch their research to funding agencies. To remedy this worry, George Smith, Eric Mykhalovskiy and Douglas Weatherbee provide an example of how to construct an institutional ethnography research proposal. The piece by Lauren Eastwood shows how United Nations' textual procedures translate the articulated experiences of Indigenous Peoples into writings that fit the discursive frame of the organization – an example of what Smith calls “institutional capture.” The final piece, by Alex Wilson and Ellen Pence on legal interventions in the lives of battered women, shows how institutional ethnography can be taken up to preserve the presence of many standpoints (in this case, Indigenous women), and can help to locate where in institutional practices the standpoint of the subject comes outside the frame of organizational practice.

The promise of institutional ethnography is its critique of positivist sociology and its introduction of ethnographic practices that inquire into extra-local relations through texts that coordinate and govern action in the local. Yet, institutional ethnography must resist the pull towards qualitative realism, and continue to be open to its own contradictions and continual reflexive intervention into itself. Recall that institutional ethnography purports to be a sociology that does not objectify people but preserves their presence as subjects – this is its major claim. *Institutional Ethnography as Practice* fails to mention any of the limitations of institutional ethnography concerning whether it achieves what it sets out to do. In my opinion institutional ethnography appears to have three limitations.

The first limitation concerns ontology and truncation. To truncate means to shorten or to cut off. By drawing attention to the issue of truncation in relation to ontology, I hope to show that conceptions of the real are always partial. Smith argues that institutional ethnography is an alternative sociology because it has made the ontological shift to starting from the standpoint of the subject, and claims institutional ethnography preserves the presence of the subject on this basis. But Smith is not the only theorist who offers a subject-centered ontology of the social. Moreover, we see how ontology and the issue of truncation are important if we compare the ontological claims of actor-network theory with those of institutional ethnography. Actor-network theory and institutional ethnography are equally concerned with the production of “facts” and the social

organization of knowledge. However, actor-network theory tries to bridge the distinction between the social and the technical, and so insists on a radical indeterminacy of human actors and non-human actants. Privileging humans over non-human actants stakes an ontological claim, truncating any question of how actants “speak back” to the organization of the network. Ontological claims, philosophical in nature, are not disconnected from the actual practicalities of conducting research. Instead, these ontological claims configure what the objects of inquiry can be. The possibilities of a sociology that does not categorize social practice according to an abstract common denominator or ultimate referent is the promise of raising questions regarding ontology.

The second limitation regards data collection and the constitutive hermeneutics of the interview process. Interviewing is fundamentally a hermeneutic enterprise. Researcher and participant join together for an intense hermeneutic exchange, where talking and acting and the interpretation of this interactive process is performed by both researcher and participant. Smith argues that the standpoints of women specifically and people more generally are excluded from the frame that regulates social scientific knowledge. Institutional ethnography operates with its own frame, however, and this frame organizes the discourses and the hermeneutics of institutional ethnography as practice. The language used by such a methodologist to elicit talk in an interview is always already governed by the frame of institutional ethnographic discourse. Listening for and asking about texts, as Devault and McCoy put it, involves a constitutive hermeneutic that corrals what could possibly be said into a form that satisfies the demands of the ontological claims philosophically girding institutional ethnography. Likewise, observations are shaped to conform to this interpretive frame. Though institutional ethnographers claim to be people-centered instead of theory-driven, Smith’s ontology of the social determines the frame of institutional ethnographic discourse.

The third limitation involves data analysis and the production of possible subjects. Different theoretical lenses constitute different worlds. What is “in the data” differs depending on the theoretical approach one takes. The way the transcript is reassembled has formative consequences for what can be known from the data. So it is a key part of analysis rather than something prior to analysis. Practitioners of institutional ethnography are always “reassembling” and “editing” their interviews and field notes for presentation in final documents, thus retaining a gross amount of authority over the textual representations of research participants. Though McCoy’s piece begins to address this, data analysis techniques in institutional ethnography remain underdeveloped.

Despite the fact that these limitations of institutional ethnography are not addressed in *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*, the book is still a text that will be useful to institutional ethnographers specifically and qualitative researchers more generally in guiding future research.

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