PERSPECTIVES ON AND FROM INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Edited by James Reid
and Lisa Russell

STUDIES IN
QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

VOLUME 15

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JAMES REID AND LISA RUSSELL

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Jo Bishop is a senior lecturer in Childhood Studies at the University of Huddersfield. She has worked in post-compulsory education for around 25 years teaching across a range of vocational courses which prepare people for employment in schools, colleges, social care, and youth work settings. Her current research interests lie in the enactment of policies which have resulted in a more diverse schools workforce, including the introduction of occupational roles not previously associated with this arena such as the police. The subject of her recent PhD thesis focused on the experiences of learning mentors in English secondary schools as an example of paraprofessionals who have an increasing presence in formal education settings and are required to perform a qualitatively different role to that of teachers. Jo is currently planning research which will look at how processes and systems of pastoral care are conceived and implemented within an increasingly fragmented school system in the UK.

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Alison Griffith is a professor Emerita at York University in Toronto, Canada. She has published four books and numerous articles in the area of Institutional Ethnography, focusing particularly on mothering work for mass compulsory schooling and the implications of neoliberalism for front line workers. Currently, she is completing a book on Institutional Ethnography with Dorothy E Smith. She has begun to explore ways of bringing institutional ethnographic research to bear reconciliation issues between settlers and first peoples, particularly in the Comox Valley/K'omox Nation.

Mitchell McLarnon is a doctoral student, researcher, gardener, and course lecturer at McGill University. He serves on the executive council for the Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies and on the editorial board of *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*. In recent years, he has worked as an instructor at the University of Edinburgh and has held research contracts at Dalhousie University and the University of PEI. His research interests include masculinity, gender, social justice, participatory and arts-based educational research methodologies, environmental education, and multiliteracies. Along with his academic pursuits, he also coaches the sport of canoe/kayak at the Pointe-Claire Canoe Club and dedicates several hours a week to music and the arts.

Dr. Naomi Nicholls is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Education at McGill. Her research shows how a range of social inequalities – including homelessness and housing insecurity, criminalization, school failure and attrition, and reduced labour market participation – are shaped by social relations, organized across intersecting institutional, and social contexts. She also uses institutional ethnography to understand how social innovation, knowledge-to-action and collective impact processes work in practice – and as such, how these social practices can be enhanced to produce just outcomes.

Dr. David Peacock is the executive director of Community Service-Learning in the Faculty of Arts at the University of Alberta, Canada. David's Ph.D. was in the sociology of higher education field and examined widening participation practices of outreach workers in Australian universities. David researches and publishes on student equity policy and practices in higher education, global service-learning, curriculum theory, community-university engagement, and "first generation" university students' participation in experiential learning programming.

Dr. James Reid is a senior lecturer in childhood studies in the Department of Education and Community Studies at the University of Huddersfield.

Subsequent to social work practice with children and their families, he taught social work and worked with UNICEF of Central Asia in developing academic infrastructure and practices. As a member of the Huddersfield Centre for Research in Education and Society (HudCRES), Jim's recent research interests have focused on particular aspects of professionalism including how teachers come to care and employability. He is co-convenor of the Children and Childhoods special interest group at the British Educational Research Association where he is engaging with colleagues to think about theorizing childhood, children and young people as subjects in research, and the use of creative methods in data generation and analysis. This includes how such methods, including poetry, might be used within institutional ethnography.

Dr. Lisa Russell is a senior lecturer in the School of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield. She has specialist research interests in poverty, young people, and social exclusion. She has research expertise and published work in the areas of social justice, ethnography, and social inclusion. She has managed an ethnography exploring pupil resistance across three secondary schools in Birmingham (England) and Sydney (Australia), she has worked on an ESRC project aimed at exploring themes of social and educational inclusion through the creative arts with primary age school children and has also completed a longitudinal study concerning the experiences of NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) young people funded by the Leverhulme Trust.

Professor Pete Sanderson is the Dean of the School of Education and Professional Development at the University of Huddersfield, UK. He joined the university in 1985 after working variously in the travel business, as a residential child care worker, a contract researcher and a further education lecturer. Pete gained his BA in history from Cambridge. His M.Phil. at the University of York was concerned with issues of race and housing in Bradford, and he went on to work as a contract researcher on Leverhulme and EEC funded projects on race, ethnicity, and educational achievement before embarking on a career in teaching. His Ph.D. from the University of Leeds was concerned with applying social judgment and cognitive process theories to the activity of assessing expository text, based in part on his experience as a senior examiner for sociology high school examinations.

Dr. Debra Talbot is a lecturer in education and director of Professional Learning and Professional Experience at the University of Sydney. Her research in teacher education, curriculum, pedagogy, and social justice engages with emancipatory methodologies, such as institutional ethnography,

to focus on the material effects of schools and schooling. She works with teachers in schools to transform practice in the interest of more equitable education outcomes.

Dr. Jonathan Tummons is an associate professor in the School of Education at Durham University, UK. Jonathan's research interests centre on assessment, with a particular interest in assessment in further, adult and higher education; the experiences of part-time and non-traditional students in higher education; student transitions between further and higher education institutions; professionalism and professionalization; professional learning and development; and teacher education in further and adult education. He is particularly interested in using frameworks and concepts that derive from ethnography, sociology, and anthropology, including communities of practice theory; actor-network theory; material semiotics; and literacy as social practice ("new literacy studies"). He is also researching and writing about the use of computer software (specifically, Atlas-Ti) in the analysis of large qualitative datasets. He is currently co-investigator for "Becoming a Professional Through Distributed Learning: A Sociomaterial Ethnography," a 3-year research project funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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INTRODUCTION

Lisa Russell

ABSTRACT

The origins and key debates regarding institutional ethnography (IE) are briefly outlined. Key questions regarding what is IE and how can it be better critically understood and applied are addressed, before a summary of each contributing chapter is summarized. IE is relevant and has a growing following, yet its distinct ontological, epistemological, methodological, and theoretical nature must be acknowledged and appropriately grounded within firm historical roots in order to clearly interrogate its contemporary developments.

Keywords: Institutional ethnography; debates; developments; theory

Institutional ethnography (IE) was originally created by Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987, 2006) and has been subsequently developed by a number of other social scientists such as Billo and Mountz (2016), Campbell and Gregor (2004), and Devault (2006). Although rooted in Marxist and Feminist scholarship it is increasingly being operationalized by a range of academics utilizing a number of different ontological and epistemological approaches (e.g., see Billo & Mountz, 2016; Winkelman & Halifax, 2007). IE is thus considered an integrated approach that is wide in its appeal, and while many regard it as valuable in exposing and analysing the "ruling relations" that operationalize within and beyond institutions, much of the broad literature regarding IE remains underengaged and in need of further interrogation. In an attempt to explore the distinguishing and developmental features of IE, this series brings together a collection of debates and findings of and from a number of IE's founded on a variety of disciplinary and international perspectives.

Ultimately, IE scholars connect through their ontological commitment to examine what and how "ruling relations" and sometimes the interacting "economic relations" operationalize within and beyond an institution. These institutions can and do vary in their character, for example, they may include hospitals and medical professions or schools and the education sector. The methods used to examine these relations may also differ but tend to include a focus on text analysis utilizing interviews, participant observation, and mapping to critically interrogate the narratives that manifest and (co) produce what is deemed knowledge and/or reality within and beyond an institutional context to shape everyday practices. Texts are viewed as coordinating consciousness, actions, and rulings, they are viewed as powerful means that shape everyday practices and so must be critically analyzed in order to understand how and why certain social actors experience their everyday practices as they do (Walby, 2005). IE aims to push beyond the local setting of people's everyday experiences by examining the extended relations that coordinate the micro, macro, and meso layers of society. IE is thus viewed as an alternative "sociology" and as a critical methodology (Walby, 2005).

> IE is both a critique and a method of sociological inquiry however much it differs from the systematic (and objectifying) techniques of traditional sociology." (Walby, 2005, p. 159)

IE is also distinct from the many other branches of ethnography in that they must *always* move beyond the analysis of the micro local context. Those texts that run outside of the micro but permeate the local are explored. It is thus purported that "Institutional ethnography is unique a research practice" (Walby, 2007, p. 1009). Indeed, Smith positions it as an "alternative sociology." She acknowledges yet problematizes sociology as focusing too intently on the individual rather than on the social relations to mitigate the issue many sociologists have been criticized for – objectifying the participants. When discussing how sociology conceals the relations of power, Smith refers to how some women who were union members felt after she had met them. She describes the encounter as "unsuccessful," despite the fact that their political interests aligned:

> They told us toward the end of our unsuccessful meeting that their experience of working with sociologist had been one of finding themselves becoming the objects of the study. Sociology, I came to think, did not know how to do otherwise. Sociology seems to be stuck with this problem even when research is undertaken with a political intention that unites the researcher's interests with those of activists. (Smith, 2005, p. 29)

So for the institutional ethnographer the focus of inquiry always moves beyond the micro. The challenge here is that other branches of ethnographies

may also move beyond the local to focus on interacting macro and meso factors, which may serve to confuse the boundaries of what is deemed IE and what is not. Similar to other ethnographers and sociologists, Smith (2005) is critical of empirical work that focus on the agency-structure binary or on nonhuman enactments, both of which are explored more fully in this edition. The assumption with IE is that it can never be fixed as a "sociology" (or indeed a methodology) as it then runs the risk of becoming a weak ontology.

Another distinctive feature of IE is its departure from theory-governed research. Smith explains this in the following extract as a distinguishable defining characteristic:

> To write a sociology from people's standpoint as contrasted with a standpoint in a theory-governed discourse does not mean writing a popular sociology. Though it starts from where we are in our everyday lives, it explores social relations and organization in which our everyday doings participate but which are not fully visible to us. (Smith, 2005, p. 1)

Some attempt has been made to define and problematize IE, yet there remains a dearth in knowledge regarding IE's own contradictions and absolute need to continually critically analyze and be reflexive into itself (Walby, 2007). Indeed, much research is conducted within institutions such as universities or healthcare settings that fund and are implicated themselves within the ruling and economic relations of the (co) production of knowledge. Although IE acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed (Smith, 1990a) and that its characteristic textual forms bear and replicate social relations, little is done to reflexively analyze how this in itself shapes knowledge and/or dominant powerful texts. IE's project of inquiry rejects the governance of theory (Smith, 2004, p. 49) which in itself could be argued to ignore the power of theory, which is arguably a form of textual and conceptual knowledge used to co(produce) certain ruling and economic relations. Yet, IE is increasing in popularity and dominance and is often positioned as a shifting alternative. However, little is critically analyzed in terms of exactly how it is distinguishable from other branches of ethnography:

> Research methodologies are constantly evolving. Researchers must continually push methodological boundaries in order to address research questions that cannot be explored with traditional methods. (Taber, 2010, p. 5)

The issue to be further explored here is to question what is meant by "traditional methods" and how do IE methods "evolve" or "add to" what is already there. Part of this opacity derives from the fact that IE can hold similar if not the same principles as other ethnographies. Indeed, further compounding this issue is the challenge that ethnography itself is a contested term (Hammersley, 2017;

Walford, 2008). No two ethnographies are the same, and there is continual debate regarding what constitutes ethnography and how it should be conducted and presented. Ethnography derives from traditional anthropology, where time in the field is needed to discern the nuanced interacting nature of social structures and social relations. However, how time is measured may differ (Jeffrey & Troman, 2003), the methods used to gather data are dependent upon the research questions yet tend to implore participant observation field note data to generate rich data, but there is also a need for the research process to be theory-led and systematic in its approach (Walford, 2008). Thus, the very term "ethnography" has spread out from anthropology across the social sciences (Hammersley, 2017). Hammerlsey (2017) argues that one of the reasons for this spread is due to the increasing variation in what the term is taken to mean, and a growing number of labeled varieties that invariably reflect different philosophical and methodological ideas dilutes the cohesiveness of the term. There needs to be a clear difference made between "ethnography" and "ethnographic methods," for example, but the two are often conflated, due in part to the fragmentation of what is termed "ethnography." Hammersley (2017) lists 41 different adjectives that have come to be applied to the term "ethnography," including IE, autoethnography, insider ethnography, Marxist ethnography, and visual ethnography. Given this context and history, it is no surprise therefore that IE suffers from the same issue of having diverse theoretical and methodological commitments in its developments as "ethnography" itself has (Hammersley, 2017).

One area that could be made more explicit is how IE differs in its theoretical and methodological stance when compared to what may be defined as more traditional ethnography. Much is said about the need to expand and develop ethnographic approaches (Billo & Mountz, 2016); however, perhaps the reverse is required. Possibly, there is a greater need to carefully reflect with real rigor on what is already there and hone in on, not expand upon what is conceptually and methodologically understood as IE (and ethnography). Arguably, this clarification is required before clear cohesive developments can be made to further progress IE and indeed ethnography in more general terms. The more different disciplines are encouraged to "merge," the further the complexities involved and additionally blurred the ontological and epistemological lines become. This series brings together a collection of debates and findings of and from IE, based on a variety of disciplinary and international perspectives to contribute to the dearth of specific understanding regarding the methodological and theoretical workings of IE in an attempt to clarify IE's position.

Examples illustrated in this series underline the fact that what is deemed IE differs in terms of research design, data collection methods, and modes of analysis and extends to differences in methodological, ontological, epistemological, ethical, and political philosophies in how they are understood and utilized within IE. The series is thus divided into three parts. The first explores the ontology, epistemology, and methodology adopted in IE. The second section purports the critical approaches to IE, and the third considers textually mediated work.

Debra Talbot starts the exploration and reflection on what IE is and how it works via her analysis of how the influence of "governing texts" play out differently for different teachers within and across varying school contexts. Grounded in an Australian education context she utilizes the work of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and Voloshinov (1973) to develop a dialogical analysis of research conversations about teachers' learning. "Maps" were generated to expose and analyze relevant texts and the influence of other people regarding how a teacher learns and enacts her own teaching work.

Jim Reid then draws upon his own experience of conducting an IE in a primary school in England. He explicates the relevance of particular moments during the initial stages of the research that he argues exposes the manifestation and co-production of significant relations within and beyond a particular context in which teacher's come to understand and experience care. He continues to reveal the influence of the "I" poem as a means of data generation, data analysis, and meaningful reflexive practice that can serve to mediate the power differentials texts may facilitate.

Mike Corman and Gary Barron then move the discussion toward recognizing the similarities and differences between IE and Actor Network Theory (ANT), with a particular focus on their ontological and epistemological "shifts" with a view to explore what, if anything these approaches can learn from each other.

Rather than rejecting theory, in the proceeding chapter Jim Reid points to the shared and divergent theoretical roots of Dorothy Smith (1987, 2005, 2006) and Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1990) scholarships. He reinforces the importance of using Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus in IE to understand the researcher's relation with knowledge generation and points to the need to critically engage, enact, and analyze IE.

David Peacock then goes on to explicate a way to enjoin the differing social ontologies and methodologies of IE and critical discourse analysis (CDA) to clarify the particular instance of local policy enactment regarding student-equity outreach practices in Australian Universities in relation to the national widening participation agenda.

Naomi Nichols, Alison Giffith, and Mitchell McLarnon positions IE as a "radical re-visioning" of sociology on which the construction of individual subjectivity is always viewed in relation to the institutional relations. By drawing on research examples, the authors distinguish community-based participatory action research methods from IE as a sociology.

Chapter 7 includes Jo Bishop and Pete Sanderson's account of an IE carried out in a secondary school in England regarding pastoral care. Concepts such as "marginalization" and "caring" are problematized and nuanced.

Jonathan Tummons completes the series by offering some concluding comments that act to further clarify the distinctive nature and position of IE within a wider methodological and theoretical debate, thereby affirming its contemporary relevance across a broad section of methodological and epistemological paradigms.

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