

Chapter 75

Institutional Ethnography: A Holistic Approach to Understanding Systems

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ABSTRACT

This paper introduces institutional ethnography (IE) as a useful and systematic process for examining organizations and work data through the lens of stakeholders, at different levels, and considering the different forces at play. Drawing from ethnomethodology, IE focuses on how everyday experience is socially organized. Ideological shifts have changed the view of research as purely technical and rational to one of social practice embedded in particular cultural, political, and historical contexts. Research has translated into partially unsuccessful practice because it negates individuals' unique experiences based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender, allowing for a monolithic view to become the given reality for all those who live in today's society. Because adult vocational education is practiced in a highly charged political context, amongst a nexus of interconnected and interdependent social processes such as federal and state legislation, program funding and planning, literacy work, and employment training, discourse sets the parameters for a person's ability or inability to navigate the structural and political subsystems that impact learning, teaching, and work. Power is critically important as an analytic focus which crosses boundaries providing researchers a view of social organization that illuminates practices that marginalize.

INTRODUCTION

Originally introduced by Dorothy Smith (1987), institutional ethnography (IE) is a direct style of thinking about the relationships among individual activities, knowledge, society, and political action. In other words, IE takes a holistic approach to understanding or uncovering a problem that is reminiscent of general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972), force-field analysis (Lewin, 1946), or stakeholder

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theory (Freeman, 1984). Notions of systems, fields, and stakeholders take into account that many factors, policies, and people within/outside of an organization influence an issue or problem. Senge's (2006) concept of a learning organization or Swanson's (1995) declaration that human resource development is based on three theories, system theory being one of them, are examples of the perspective that a holistic approach is the way forward. A research method with a systematic process for collecting and analyzing data used to examine a problem through the lens of stakeholders, at different levels, and considering the different forces at play seems useful to fields examining organizations and work.

Ideological shifts are moving away from viewing research as purely technical and rational but rather as social practice "embedded in particular cultural, political, and historical contexts" (Edwards, Clarke, Harrison, & Reeve, 2002, p. 129). Awareness at the academic level has raised the question "what types of research and research methods should be acceptable to support the competing purposes of this field" (Quigley, 1997, p. 4). Research has translated into partially unsuccessful practice because it negates individuals' unique experiences based on race, ethnicity, class, and gender, allowing "for a monolithic view to become the 'given' reality for all those who live in our society" (Rocco & West, 1998, p. 171-172). This reality is sustained by the ideologies purported in dominant discourses and interpenetrates multiple sites of power, implicating the power persons have in their homes, communities, jobs, and government.

Because adult vocational education is practiced in a highly charged political context, amongst a nexus of interconnected and interdependent social processes such as federal and state legislation, program funding and planning, literacy work, and employment training, discourse sets the parameters for a person's ability or inability to navigate the structural and political subsystems that impact learning, teaching, and work. Heavily constructed and maintained through texts and documents, discourse transports ideology from individuals to governing bodies, to practices within bureaucratic administration, to extended social relations- which are the external contexts that shape and influence adult learning and the practice of adult education.

The field needs (a) an alternative vision of the traditional adult vocational education setting, its students, and the profession (Cunningham, 1989); and (b) an analysis of adult vocational education that merges social and cultural dimensions with microsocial theories of learning and teaching (Amstutz, 1999; Cunningham, 2000; Ettling, 2001; Heaney, 2000; Sheared, 1999; Sissell, 2001). Essential to this analysis is institutional ethnography (IE), a research method that gives analytic emphasis to merging both social and individual contexts- entering everyday life from the standpoint of marginalized, often excluded, populations (Grahame and Grahame, 2000), yet extending investigation to the larger social and economic processes that shape individual experience (Smith, 1987). This article seeks to introduce institutional ethnography (IE) as an effective analytic research tool- useful for investigating oppressive ruling relations that intersect institutional and cultural boundaries with individual experience within a system. The intent of this article is not to outline a recipe for conducting an IE study but to discuss its basic premise. The following section introduces institutional ethnography-its conceptual and methodological basics; discusses its applications for adult vocational education using as examples adult literacy and employment training; and concludes with implications for practice.

INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

IE is a form of critical ethnography committed to a particular way of seeing and investigating the institutional conditions of experience (Darville, 2002). Devault and McCoy (2001) describe institutional

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