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Forward

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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 summarised. 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.

KEY WORDS 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 Campbell and Gregor (2004), Devault (2006) and Billo and Mountz (2016). Although rooted in Marxist and Feminist scholarship it is increasingly being operationalised by a range of academics utilising a number of different ontological and epistemological approaches (for example see Winkelman and Halifax, 2007 and Billo and Mountz, 2016). 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 operationalise within and beyond institutions, much of the broad literature regarding IE remains under-engaged 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' operationalise 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 utilising 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 analysed 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; p159).

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; page 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 criticised 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; Page 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. Like other ethnographers and sociologists, Smith (2005) is critical of empirical work that focus on the agency-structure binary or on non-human enactments, both of which are explored more fully in this edition. The assumption with IE is, 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 organisation in which our everyday doings participate but which are not fully visible to us’ (Smith, 2005; Page 1).

Some attempt has been made to define and problematise IE, yet there remains a dearth in knowledge regarding IE’s own contradictions and absolute need to continually critically analyse and be reflexive into itself (Walby, 2007). Indeed, much research is conducted within institutions such as universities or health care 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’s its characteristic textual forms bear and replicate social relations, little is done to reflexively analyse how this in itself shapes knowledge and/or dominant powerful texts. IE’s project of inquiry rejects the governance of theory (Smith, 2004; Page 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 analysed 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; Page 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 (Walford, 2009; Hammersley 2017). 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 and 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, 2009). Thus the very term ethnography has spread out from anthropology across the social sciences (Hammersley, 2017). Hammersley (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 labelled 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 and Mountz, 2016), however perhaps the reverse is required. Possibly there is a greater need to carefully reflect with real rigour 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 utilised 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 utilises the work of Bakhtin (1981; 1984 and 1986) and Volovshinov (1973) to develop a dialogical analysis of research conversations about teachers' learning. 'Maps' were generated to expose and analyse 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 teachers 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 towards recognising 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 analyse 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 8 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 'marginalisation' 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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