2015

Introduction to the Special Issue: New Scholarship in Institutional Ethnography

Paul C. Luken
University of West Georgia, pluken@bellsouth.net

Suzanne Vaughan
Arizona State University, suzanne.vaughn@asu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Part of the Social Work Commons

Introduction to the Special Issue:
New Scholarship in Institutional Ethnography

Paul C. Luken

Department of Sociology
University of West Georgia

Suzanne Vaughan

School of Social and Behavioral Sciences
Arizona State University

Special Editors

Twelve years ago the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* (*JSSW*) published a special issue devoted to institutional ethnography, "Institutional Ethnography: Theory and Practice" (Winfield, 2003). This alternative sociology, founded by Dorothy E. Smith, begins from the standpoint of the experiences of particular, active subjects and sets out to discover and describe the social relations shaping those experiences (Smith, 1987, 2005, 2006). *JSSW*, dedicated to publishing new, cutting-edge theoretical and methodological articles, was the first academic journal to devote a special issue to this new mode of inquiry used to investigate the social world. Over the ensuing years, the number of international practitioners of institutional ethnography has increased across a diverse array of disciplines, opening up new areas of investigation and methodological strategies, and in the process increasing our knowledge of "ruling relations," that "expansive, historically specific apparatus of management and control that arose with the development of corporate capitalism and supports it operation" (DeVault, 2006, p. 295).

New Contributions to Institutional Ethnography

The articles in this special issue highlight the work of a new generation of institutional ethnographers as they have taken up investigations of the everyday world to explicate the connections between local settings where people are at work in Norway, Canada, the United States or Thailand, and the translocal relations that both implicate and organize peoples' day-to-day work. Although all the studies included in this issue begin at different sites and in different time periods, each unfolds a similar set of organizing and governing processes that are spread across a wide array of institutional contexts, including health, welfare, education, employment, rehabilitation, and disaster aid services.

In "Captured by Care: An Institutional Ethnography on the Work of Being in a Rehabilitation Process in Norway," Janne Paulsen Breimo demonstrates that in Norway recent reforms regarding rehabilitation practices have made the processes more difficult in some ways for both recipients and coordinators of rehabilitation services. Changes that began in the 1980s, under the banner of New Public Management or "managerialism," were purported to make the services more client-centered or customer-centered. The result, however, is that service users lives have become more complicated and busier. Administrators and social workers report that the coordinating of services has become less personal and more technical, as formal criteria have replaced the professional judgments of social workers.

Furthermore, as reforms have continued over years, the criteria that are used to categorize applicants are in a constant state of flux, and the units providing services are constantly changing and being renamed. This produces more work and greater confusion for the rehabilitation clients who must repeatedly build new relationships; likewise, the service providers must begin anew with clients and other service providers. Instead of being client-centered, people in rehabilitation find their lives under the direction of the service providers. Breimo concludes that "the system's need for change leads to the abandonment of service recipients' and service providers' need for stability."

Jessica Braimoh's article, "A Service Disparity for Rural Youth: The Organization of Social Services across the Urban Youth Centre and Its Rural Branch," reveals that the process of applying for and receiving Employment Services in Ontario, Canada, is not actually as formally standardized as it would appear to outsiders. Employment Services' mission to assist people in need of jobs is compromised by the conditions under which service providers work. Units were required by their agreements with the funder to meet certain targets for securing employment and returning to school by their clients. Work with clients with a number of difficult "barriers" became challenges with respect to meeting the success quotas required by the funder; therefore, service plans were designed to meet the greatest likelihood of success rather than to meet the service providers' perceived needs of the clients.

By investigating two different offices, the Rural Branch and the Urban Youth Centre, Braimoh was able to determine that intake practices and service plans varied depending upon the availability of services in the local areas. Issues related to homelessness, addiction, mental health, and others, presented problems for workers at the Rural Branch, since the needed services did not operate in the area. Thus, youth with these concerns received different service plans at the Rural Branch than those at the Urban Youth Centre. The result is that the perceived needs of the youth were eclipsed by the institutionalized social relations.

The work of women released from incarceration as they struggle to attain welfare benefits is the point of departure for Megan Welsh's research. Her article, "Categories of Exclusion: The Transformation of Formerly Incarcerated Women into 'Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents' in Welfare Processing," shows in detail how the complexities and messiness of the women's lives is textually removed in the processes by which they apply for assistance. The women become categorized simply as "Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents," a restrictive label for those confronting federal and state policies based in a discourse defining women as the caretakers of children. The women's priorities—securing food and housing, meeting with their supervisors and counselors, reuniting with children and other family members, and finding

employment—are impeded by the state's requirements for assistance.

Aaron Williams and Janet Rankin's article on "Interrogating the Ruling Relations of Thailand's Post-Tsunami Reconstruction: Empirically Tracking Social Relations in the Absence of Conventional Texts," though methodological in focus, examines the disaster recovery work in southern Thailand after the December 2004 earthquake off Sumatra and the tsunami that travelled the Indian Ocean and Andaman Sea to coasts across the region. Their study traces the methodological problems they faced, but ultimately overcame, in explicating the actual activities that enacted reconstruction and recovery processes, as well as the uneven outcomes this reconstruction process had on people's lives. They note that although conventional texts on paper outlining policies and government plans for reconstruction appeared to have little to no activation on the ground in the recovery process in the villages they investigated, the presence of fences, protest signs, along with new satellite dishes, roads, electrical poles, garbage piles required textual processes that link to the institutional (ruling) practices of a capitalist economy. Drawing upon a discourse of sustainability and social reproduction circulating among those doing disaster research, Williams and Rankin show how the everyday activities of villagers, in conjunction with the military, non-profit organizations, international aid agencies, land developers, and local governments are mutually coordinated and result in disparities among people and villages equally devastated by the environmental disaster.

Unlike the previous articles, Lisa Watt's "(Un)safe at School: Parent's Work of Securing Nursing Care and Coordinating School Health Support Services for Children with Diabetes in Ontario Schools" and Nicola Waters' "Taking Up 'the Explorer's Interests and Cartographic Skills' to Discover the Ruling Relations in Nurses' Wound Clinic Work" begin from their own experiences. Watt, a mother of a child who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes, uncovers the invisible work she must do in relation to the school, her child's doctor at the clinic, school nurses, and community care coordinators, all of whom are mandated by the requirements of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to guarantee the right to education for

every child, regardless of the child's health conditions and/or disabilities. As an expert who is able to converse knowledgeably about her child's health, she draws on very rich data sources to uncover the ruling relations that organize school administrators, nurses, physicians, and other health coordinators to show how school health operates and to illustrate some of the interests that the School Health Support Services serve and protect.

Nicola Waters, in her investigation of wound care work done by nursing specialists, combines her own expert knowledge and that of collegial nurses to trace how healthcare reform in Canada has reorganized the ways in which nurses work with patients in clinical settings. While mapping how local work processes hook into other work processes at sites located elsewhere has been a standard practice in institutional ethnography, in the process of Waters' research, she stumbles upon new managerial practices of process mapping used by consultants for the Skin and Wound Review Project. Using insights from the practices of counter cartography and her skills as an institutional ethnographer, she illustrates how this "Other Mapping Project" created an objectified version of wound care work, carrying with it institutional priorities that fit with the strategic direction of managers financing the project, rather than a version of wound care work grounded in the actual work and work knowledges of nurses doing wound care with their patients. Methodologically, her paper provides a model of how institutional ethnographers think through the line of fault between actual experience and official versions of that experience and work to refine a problematic that can be investigated.

The Reorganization of the Social Welfare Regime

Much like Alison Griffith and Dorothy Smith's recent edited volume, *Under New Public Management* (2014), collectively these articles point to an adoption of standardization and/or accountability practices in the public sector in the name of efficiency and cost reduction. The researchers in this special issue point out that not only do these practices make it more difficult for social service workers to carry out their

work, but they operate to exclude those who are already marginalized and in need of services. Furthermore, these studies make clear how the policies and practices of managerialism erode the venerable standards of professional expertise and judgment autonomy among public sector workers who now must align their work with the objectives of organizational managers and political officials within the social welfare regime. Finally, and more importantly, these papers suggest that these same standardization and accountability processes help organize class relations that transcend more familiar notions of race, class, and gender differences used in other methodological approaches (Mykhalovskiy, 2008). Rather than arguing that access to health, employment, housing, and rehabilitation is a function of an individual's social background or financial status, each study suggests that classing practices are produced as part of the organization of social service work as they intersect with the work processes of funding agencies, evaluation teams, other social welfare organizations, doctors, teachers, physical therapist, etc.

Other social welfare researchers often use bureaucratic/ managerial procedures or impersonal economic processes to explain the difficulties and challenges front-line workers and others face without attention to the strategies and work of those located elsewhere (DeVault, 2008), but these papers show how it actually happens and the specific ruling relations and work processes that are implicated at the state and/or international level. Each study shows how the work processes at the local site bring into being the ruling relations organized elsewhere—by the work of public officials, social workers, and others implementing policies of the new managerialism in Norway; by the work of Employment Services and its funding agencies in Canada; the work of state officials, probation officers and other social workers in the provision of welfare assistance in the United States; the work of non-governmental agencies, public officials, private land developers, and disaster aid agencies in Thailand; the work of health care consultants in Canada; and the work of physicians, school nurses, and community care coordinators in the provision of access to education in Canada.

Finally, in expanding to other contexts, these researchers have begun to identify methodological practices that have

further informed the work of those doing institutional ethnographic research. Drawing upon previous methodological work done by Campbell and Gregor (2004), Campbell (2006), DeVault and McCoy (2006), Griffith (2006), McCoy (2006), and Turner (2006), among others, these new researchers point out that standardizing, coordinating, and governing often occur through textually mediated organization in the form of policies, standard forms, and discourse; however, several of these authors employ novel ways of collecting data to unfold these relations. As new researchers in the field, they locate a variety of non-conventional texts, including signs, satellite dishes, letters, process maps, blogs, and medical orders. These inquiries have provided new ways of thinking beyond conventional texts about how the social is coordinated. Analytically, these articles draw attention to the whole question of which texts are 'active/activated' in different settings and raise interesting questions about time (with respect to currency of texts) and visibility of texts for institutional ethnographers.

Special Issue Reviewers

Graham Barnes, *Battered Women's Justice Project, Minneapolis, MN, USA*
Laura Bisaillon, *University of Toronto Scarborough, Canada*
Jeremy Brunson, *Gallaudet University, USA*
Marie Campbell, *University of Victoria, Canada*
William Carroll, *University of Victoria, Canada*
Kathryn Church, *Ryerson University, Canada*
Laurie Clune, *Regina University, Canada*
Barbara Comber, *Queensland University of Technology, Australia*
Richard Darville, *Carleton University, Canada*
Gerald deMontigny, *Carleton University, Canada*
Marjorie DeVault, *Syracuse University, USA*

Timothy Diamond
Lauren Eastwood, *SUNY Plattsburg, USA*
Kamini Grahame, *Penn State University Harrisburg, USA*
Peter Grahame, *Penn State University Schuylkill, USA*
Alison Griffith, *York University, Canada*
Liza McCoy, *University of Calgary, Canada*
Eric Mykhalovskiy, *York University, Canada*
Nancy Naples, *University of Connecticut, USA*
Naomi Nichols, *York University, Canada*
Henry Parada, *Ryerson University, Canada*
Janet Rankin, *University of Calgary, Canada*
Frank Ridzi, *Le Moyne College, USA*
Dorothy Smith, *University of Victoria, Canada*
Susan Turner, *Turner Reid Associates, Guelph, Ontario, Canada*
Karin Widerberg, *University of Oslo, Norway*
Cheryl Zurawski, *Athabasca University, Canada*

References

Campbell, M. L. (2006). Institutional ethnography and experience as data. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 91-107). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Campbell, M. L., & Gregor, F. (2004). *Mapping social relations: A primer in doing institutional ethnography*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

DeVault, M. L. (2006). Introduction: What is institutional ethnography? *Social Problems, 53,* 294-298.

DeVault, M. L. (2008). *People at work: Life, power, and social inclusion in the new economy*. New York: New York University Press.

DeVault, M. L., & McCoy, L. (2006). Institutional ethnography: Using interviews to investigate ruling relations. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 15-44). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Griffith, A. I. (2006). Constructing single parent families for schooling: Discovering an institutional discourse. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 127-138). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Griffith, A. I., & Smith, D. E. (Eds.). (2014). *Under new public management: Institutional ethnographies of changing front-line work*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

McCoy, L. (2006). Keeping the institution in view: Working with interview accounts of everyday experience. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 109-126). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Mykhalovskiy, E. (2008). Beyond decision making: Class, community organizations, and the healthwork of people living with HIV/AIDS. Contributions from institutional ethnographic research. *Medical Anthropology*, 27(2), 136-163.

Smith, D. E. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic: A feminist sociology*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.

Smith, D. E. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press.

Smith, D. E. (Ed.). (2006). *Institutional ethnography as practice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Turner, S. M. (2006). Mapping institutions as work and texts. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 139-162). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Winfield, B. N. (Ed.). (2003). Institutional ethnography: Theory and practice. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 30(1), 3-169.