December 1998

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Institutional Ethnography:
Studying Institutions from the Margins

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As new approaches to the development of knowledge emerge in the social sciences, there is a need to judge their appropriateness for use in social work research. Using criteria for assessing the goodness of fit between theories and social work values, this article evaluates institutional ethnography, a strategy for studying institutions which is based on feminist standpoint theory. The author holds that the use of institutional ethnography in social work research is congruent with social work principles and effective in producing knowledge which can inform practice. Discussion of a study of Canadian social work education from the standpoint of gay men illustrates this argument. Implications for social work research and education are discussed.

Social work ethics require that professional practice be based on an accurate understanding of the problems it addresses and on methods which are effective. For more than a decade there has been a spirited debate among social work scholars regarding the approach to research which is most appropriate in the development of knowledge for the profession (Allen-Meares, 1995; Atherton, 1993). Given the strength of arguments on all sides of this debate, there is a need for a framework for evaluating theories for use in social work research.

Stanley Witkin and Shimon Gottschalk (1988) have proposed such a framework, arguing that social work research should be informed by theories which are consistent with the profession's values and have the potential to produce knowledge useful in practice. They suggest that the appropriateness of theories for use in social work research be judged in relation to their " . . . explicit criticalness, recognition that humans are active agents, grounding in the life experiences of the client, and the promotion of social justice" (Witkin & Gottschalk, 1988, p. 222).

One of the newer approaches to the development of knowl-
edge is feminist standpoint theory, which Mary Swigonski (1994)
recommends for use in social work research, particularly in un-
derstanding the needs of marginalized populations. This article
presents an evaluation of institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987),
a strategy for the study of social institutions which is based on
standpoint theory, in relation to the criteria proposed by Witkin
and Gottschalk. The suitability of institutional ethnography for
use in social work research is demonstrated through discussion
of an investigation of social work education from the standpoint
of gay men (O'Neill, 1994).

The examination of these issues is presented in five sections.
The first section briefly outlines the paradigms that inform the de-
velopment of knowledge in the social sciences and highlights the
debate as to the most appropriate approach for use in social work.
The second section introduces standpoint theory and outlines
institutional ethnography. The third section summarizes a study
of social work education from the standpoint of gay men. The
fourth section evaluates this use of institutional ethnography in
relation to the criteria proposed by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988).
The final section addresses implications of this analysis for social
work research and education.

Diverse Approaches to Knowledge Development

Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln (1994) identify four distinct
paradigms which shape social science research: positivism, post-
positivism, critical theory, and constructivism. Positivism and
postpositivism are both characterized by the assumption that
an objective reality exists. Within the positivist framework, it is
believed that reality can be accurately perceived by eliminating
the biases of the investigator, distorting influences from the en-
vironment, and errors in data gathering. In contrast, within the
postpositivist paradigm, it is recognized that due to the complex-
ity of events and the limitations of science, extraneous factors
cannot be completely controlled and therefore, the veracity of
findings cannot be definitively established. While both positivist
and postpositivist studies usually involve quantitative data col-
lection, postpositivist inquiries may also include qualitative data
gathering.

In common with positivism and postpositivism, critical theory is rooted in the belief that there is a knowable world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). However, critical theorists argue that reality is shaped by ideologies which reflect the values and interests of dominant elites. Critical studies examine how largely hidden social processes disadvantage people on the basis of class, gender, ethnicity, and other differences, and aim to identify strategies for emancipatory change. Inquiries conducted within the critical paradigm incorporate the values of both investigators and research participants as key components of the research process. Both quantitative and qualitative data gathering methods may be used in critical studies.

In contrast to the positivist, postpositivist, and critical paradigms, constructivism is based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed, depending on an individual's social location and experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Identifying and understanding the values of both researchers and participants are central to the production of findings within the constructivist paradigm. Generally, qualitative methods are used in constructivist studies to understand human experience in relation to its context.

The debate within social work. Since the 1950s, studies based on positivist and postpositivist assumptions have been predominant in social work research (Fraser, Taylor, Jackson, & O'Jack, 1991; Irving, 1992). More recently, arguments have arisen that inquiry conducted within these paradigms is too narrow to meet the needs of social work, a profession which deals with the diverse needs of human beings in complex and ever changing social contexts (Heineman, 1981; Imre, 1984; Pieper, 1985, 1989, 1994; Rodwell, 1987; Tyson, 1992, 1994). Further, Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) contend that these approaches may result in research designs which treat participants as objects and threaten their self-determination. These authors advocate the use of constructivist approaches which recognize and illuminate the complexity of human behavior, take account of values inherent in research theories and methods, and recognize the influence of the investigator on the research process.

Feminist and postmodern social work scholars challenge the faith in rationalism upon which social work has traditionally been

based (Brown, 1994; Leonard, 1994; Rossiter, 1995). They hold that positivist and postpositivist approaches may at best, be irrelevant, and at worst, support oppression by ignoring gender, race, sexual orientation and other differences which are used to disadvantage people in our society. Swigonski (1994) contends that goals of objectivity, freedom from contamination by interactions between investigators and research participants, and universal generalizability conflict with social work commitments to respecting human diversity and advancing social justice.

Critics of research carried out within the critical and constructivist paradigms contend that such studies fail to produce knowledge which can be confidently used in social work practice (Bloom, 1995; Thyer, 1989; Wakefield, 1995). They point out that because non-positivist studies utilize samples which are not representative of a specified population, their findings are not generalizable and therefore cannot reliably inform social work practice with members of that population. These scholars also question the validity of the findings of critical and constructivist studies because of the lack of control of variables and the possible influence of investigators' values on data collection and interpretation.

Pragmatists assert that investigators should use the approach most appropriate to the state of knowledge in the area of inquiry and the type of data needed to answer the research question (Allen-Meares, 1995; Gambrill, 1995; Hartman, 1994; Reid, 1994). Some scholars, such as W. David Harrison (1994), advocate integrating principles and methods from each of the paradigms. However, Guba & Lincoln (1994) argue that there is a contradiction inherent in this position given the incompatible assumptions which underpin the various frameworks. The next section outlines standpoint theory and institutional ethnography, approaches which draw on both the constructivist and critical paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Standpoint Theory and Institutional Ethnography

Standpoint theory. Standpoint theory is a critical epistemology developed by feminist scholars (Collins, 1991; Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986, 1991; Harstock, 1983; Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1992) which posits that a better understanding of reality can

be achieved by conducting research from the social locations of marginalized groups than from the positions of dominant groups. According to this theory, objectivity in the development of knowledge is impossible to achieve because all inquiry is conducted from a particular social location, which is determined by gender, ethnicity, class, and other differences. Standpoint theorists hold that knowledge developed from the positions of dominant social groups may be particularly flawed by the omission of information which could threaten the privileges of the powerful. Concomitantly, they contend that knowledge developed from the positions of subordinated groups may be more comprehensive because it can include insights about the disempowerment of women, racial minorities, gay men and lesbians, and other disadvantaged groups (Swigonski, 1994). Furthermore, because members of marginalized groups live within the dominant culture as well as their minority culture, they may have knowledge which is not available to members of the powerful groups in society (Riger, 1992). Thus, standpoint research can add to understanding not only of a specific minority group, but of the larger society as well.

The major criticism of standpoint theory from a positivist perspective is that research conducted from a particular social location is not objective. Sandra Harding (1991) and Donna Haraway (1988) counter that such knowledge is more accurate than that developed according to conventional criteria for objectivity because the social position and values of the researcher are made explicit. A criticism from a postmodern perspective is that standpoint theory is flawed by essentialism in that it implies that all members of a group share the same values and experiences (Brown, 1994; Riger, 1992). Furthermore, Charles Lemert (1992) argues that while standpoint theory rejects the possibility of knowing objectively from the position of dominant groups, it simply substitutes another location, that of marginalized groups. However, given the proposition that all knowledge is partial, standpoint theorists maintain only that it is possible to obtain a clearer understanding of society from a marginal standpoint than is possible from a dominant position.

Institutional ethnography. A unique contribution to standpoint theory has been made by Canadian sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987) in her development of institutional ethnography, a strategy

for investigating institutions from the locations of disempowered groups. Smith contends that the provision of education, health care, and social services is influenced by the values of dominant social groups, systematically disadvantaging members of marginalized groups. Furthermore, she argues that because the policies and practices of these institutions are presented as objective and universal, the links between social and material privileges and the factors upon which social stratification is based, are rendered invisible. For instance, Smith maintains that although mainstream institutions claim to ignore gender differences, in fact, they implement a patriarchal ideology which handicaps women. While Smith focuses on institutions from the standpoint of women, she recognizes that other groups such as aboriginal peoples, ethnic and racial minorities, as well as gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals are also disadvantaged.

Smith (1987) ascribes particular importance to the role of organizational and professional texts in ignoring and invalidating differences. By texts, she means not only documents such as legislation, organizational policies, and procedures, but also the social relations which flow from such documents. Smith uses the concept social relations, to refer to the processes by which people's lives are shaped to conform to dominant ideologies. She argues that texts shape social relations, including the delivery of services, to be consistent with dominant ideologies, thereby excluding issues related to race, economic status, gender, sexual orientation and other differences from discourse (Griffith & Smith, 1991). This lack of recognition of diversity forces individuals to conform to abstract definitions of reality contained in institutional texts. The result is that members of marginalized groups experience contradictions between their own lives and the version of reality upon which service delivery is predicated. Drawing on ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967), Smith holds that traces of oppressive organizational practices are reflected in how people talk about their experiences in relation to the institution being studied. Studies regarding a wide variety of institutions and from the standpoints of various marginalized groups have been conducted using this approach (e.g., Campbell & Manicom, 1995).

The first step in the process of institutional ethnography is an examination of the experiences of members of the group from

whose standpoint the inquiry is being conducted, in relation to the institution under study. The focus is on identifying discrepancies between allegedly neutral and nondiscriminatory institutional practices and individuals' experiences of marginalization. Subsequent steps entail identifying the social relations, particularly those emanating from institutional texts, which determine the contradictions identified. By exploring the links between respondents' experiences and the social relations which shape them, institutional ethnography can reveal how oppression is created and maintained through the functioning of social institutions. In order to illustrate the implementation of institutional ethnography in social work research, the next section describes a study of social work education from the standpoint of a marginalized group, gay men.

Canadian Social Work Education
from the Standpoint of Gay Men

Although it has been recognized that gay people may have special social service needs, needs particularly related to discrimination (Shernoff, 1995; Woodman, 1995), there is evidence that the effectiveness of social services is limited by social workers' lack of awareness regarding same-sex sexual orientation (DeCrescenzo, 1984; Peterson, 1992; Rabin, Keefe, & Burton, 1986; Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987). This deficiency is significant because at least 10 percent of the population has some degree of sexual attraction to members of their own sex (Binson, Michaels, Stall, Coates, Gagnon, & Catania, 1995; Harry, 1990; Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Sell, Wells & Wypij, 1995). Furthermore, in Canada discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is prohibited by federal and most provincial human rights codes, as well as by professional ethics (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASSW], 1994). In part, social workers' of lack knowledge, negative attitudes, and inadequate skills for serving gay, lesbian and bisexual clients may be due to gaps in social work education, given that social work students apparently receive little training regarding same-sex sexual orientation, despite previous identification of the need for curriculum content on the topic (Cain, 1996; Newman, 1989; Weiner, 1989). In order to better understand the factors which contribute to this shortcoming, O'Neill

(1994) examined Canadian social work education from the stand-
point of gay men. [A description of this study is available in
O'Neill (1995)]

Methodology.   The design of this study was based on institutional
ethnography. Data were gathered through interviews of gay men
and examination of public documents related to Canadian social
work education. Because the goal was to understand issues in
social work education rather than to generalize about gay men,
a purposive sample was used; respondents were selected on the
basis of having had experience relevant to social work education.
Lesbians were excluded from the study because their gender
places them in a different social location than that of gay men
(D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; O'Brien, 1994). The respondents were
37 gay men, including students, graduates, and faculty members
from 11 schools of social work in 6 Canadian provinces, as well
as clients of professional social workers. Most respondents were
white, Anglophone, and middle-aged.

    A committee of four gay men who had experience relevant
to social work education provided consultation regarding the
development and implementation of the study. The investigation
entailed two phases. During 1992 and 1993, in semi-structured
individual interviews, respondents were asked to recount their
experiences related to social work education and to make any
recommendations they felt important. These data were then an-
alyzed to identify problematic issues for further investigation.
Subsequently, national accreditation standards (CASSW, 1992),
and policies, programs, and curricula of schools were exam-
ined to identify the determinants of these features of social work
education.

Findings.   O'Neill (1994) found that issues associated with same-
sex sexual orientation were silenced, ignored, or marginalized
within social work education. The men interviewed perceived
the climate within their schools of social work to be unsafe for
open discussion of same-sex sexual orientation and the curricula
to lack appropriate content on the topic. Respondents reported
occasional overt discrimination related to sexual orientation with-
in schools. More frequently, these men experienced subtle and

indirect pressures to conceal their sexual orientation and to avoid discussion of gay-related issues. Specifically, respondents encountered covert threats to their careers, limited tolerance of openly gay men, resistance to discussion of same-sex sexual orientation, and denial of the seriousness of anti-gay discrimination. The respondents encountered few members of schools of social work who were open about their same-sex sexual orientation and a lack of course content on gay and lesbian issues.

The examination of organizational documents revealed a similar pattern of omission of gay related issues. Although discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation was prohibited by the accrediting body (CASSW, 1992), inclusion of gay related issues in the policies, programs, and curricula of schools of social work was not specified. This omission was reflected in official descriptions of schools of social work, which included only three references to sexual orientation. In contrast, both the accreditation standards and the descriptions of most schools specified policies and curriculum content regarding other differences, such as those related to ethnicity and gender.

Implications. O'Neill (1994) provides empirical evidence of the discrepancy identified by Dorothy Van Soest (1996) between official policies, which proscribe discrimination based on sexual orientation, and actual practices, which either ignore gay and lesbian issues or inhibit their discussion within schools of social work. Furthermore, the findings augment James Martin's (1995) call for social work education policies and programs that create a safe climate for open discussion of same-sex sexual orientation by identifying objectives for change. Specific implications are that policies should affirm acceptance of same-sex sexual orientation as a valid expression of human sexuality and require effective measures to counter anti-gay discrimination and harassment; sexual orientation should be explicitly addressed in faculty recruitment and development, and in student selection and support; and content related to same-sex sexual orientation should be integrated into the core curriculum. In the next section, this use of institutional ethnography is assessed in relation to the criteria identified by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988).

Evaluation of Institutional Ethnography

How well does institutional ethnography meet the standards identified by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) for choosing theory to be used in social work research? Below, each of these criteria is discussed in relation to O'Neill's (1994) study of social work education from the standpoint of gay men.

Explicit criticalness. The first criterion proposed by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) is that the theory be expressly critical. According to these authors, critical theories challenge beliefs about the objectivity of social processes by pointing out that accepted explanations reflect the values of dominant groups. They argue that critical theories are particularly useful in revealing the functioning of oppressive ideologies such as those based on class, gender and race. Institutional ethnography is explicitly critical. Smith (1987) advocates investigating social institutions from the standpoint of marginalized groups specifically for the purpose of revealing how hidden subtexts, or ideologies influence organizational processes, disadvantaging those who differ from dominant groups.

Both the research design and findings of O'Neill (1994) demonstrate that inquiry based on institutional ethnography can meet the criterion for criticalness. The research design was critical in that the focus of the study was on social work education rather than the problems of gay men. The findings were critical in that they contradict beliefs that social work education is neutral with respect to differences of sexual orientation. For instance, a gay faculty member reported:

> . . . I get students all the time . . . coming to me about . . . homo-
> phobic remarks . . . made by professors . . . and the refusal to allow
> gay and lesbian issues to come up, or the invalidation of those
> issues, . . . teaching that it was an illness to be gay . . . (O'Neill, 1994,
> p. 86)

O'Neill (1994) provides evidence that a subtext with respect to sexual orientation functions within this institution, allowing the social relations of heterosexism, the systemic promotion of heterosexuality and suppression of same-sex sexual orientation (Neisen, 1990), to be examined.

Recognition that humans are active agents. The second criterion identified by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) for judging the consistency of theory with social work values is whether the theory takes into account that human beings can reflect on their lives, make choices, and influence events, rather than being simply reactive. Such theories promote individual and social change. Institutional ethnography implicitly meets this criterion in that its purpose is to provide information which can be used for institutional change. According to George Smith (1995), institutional ethnographies provide " . . . the scientific ground for political action" (p. 32).

The data gathering process, findings, and recommendations of O'Neill (1994) illustrate that research based on institutional ethnography can recognize that humans are active subjects rather than passive objects. In the interviews, respondents were asked to reflect on their experiences and to make recommendations regarding social work education. In their responses, the men interviewed consistently expressed the conviction that gay people can and must be active in bringing about changes. For example, a student asserted:

> I don't know who's going to bring these things to the agenda of social work schools . . . if its not gays and lesbians themselves. (O'Neill, 1994, p. 137)

The study provides an empirically based understanding of the social relations within social work education which can be used to advocate for change. For instance, the findings reveal that the relative silence experienced by gay men within schools of social work regarding same-sex sexual orientation echoes the absence of policies requiring schools to actively address issues of same-sex sexual orientation. O'Neill (1994) provides data which can be used to advocate for specific amendments to the CASSW accreditation standards and points to gay faculty and students, as well as supportive heterosexuals, as key participants in the change process.

Grounding in life experiences. The third criterion specified by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) is the extent to which theories accommodate the meaning which people ascribe to their experiences. They contend that it is particularly important that social

work studies incorporate the values, language, traditions, and perceptions of members of marginalized groups. This principle is central in institutional ethnography, which aims to " . . . explicate the actual social processes and practices organizing people's everyday experience from a standpoint in the everyday world" (Smith, 1987, p. 151).

O'Neill (1994) shows how research based on institutional ethnography is grounded in the lives of the respondents. The data were gathered exclusively from gay men, documenting their experiences regarding social work education and the significance of these experiences to them. Furthermore, the data were interpreted in collaboration with an advisory committee of gay men, which contributed to an understanding of the data informed by their experience.

For instance, traces of oppressive organizational practices were identified in respondents' repeated use of words such as "scared," "invalidation," and "unsafe" in describing their everyday experiences in schools of social work. A respondent commented that he knew gay students at his school:

> . . . who were scared about coming out, and scared about revealing who they were . . . this should be a safe environment . . . it wasn't . . . (O'Neill, 1994, p. 84)

The advisory committee recognized the significance of the language used by respondents and suggested that the way that issues of same-sex sexual orientation are excluded from discourse is through the maintenance of a social climate which is perceived to be dangerous for open discussion of gay-related issues. Subsequent analysis of social work education policies and procedures was shaped by this understanding, resulting in recommendations to make the climate safer for discussion of same-sex sexual orientation in schools of social work. The value of research grounded in the experiences of marginalized groups is demonstrated by the identification of this issue, which had not previously been reported.

Promotion of social justice.   The fourth criterion defined by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) is the potential contribution the use of a theory can make to increasing respect for diversity and lessening

the exclusion of groups and individuals from full participation in society. This goal is the ultimate purpose of institutional ethnography. Smith (1987) asserts that for research to be emancipatory, it must be conducted from the standpoint of marginalized groups in order to expose the actual processes by which members of these groups are disadvantaged.

O'Neill (1994) exemplifies how knowledge gained through the use of institutional ethnography in social work research can promote social justice. In examining social work education from the standpoint of gay men, the study exposed evidence that oppression based on sexual orientation was of less concern in social work education than oppression based on other differences. As a professor commented:

> . . . I don't think that we've taken a stand in terms of social work education that heterosexism is on the same level as racism and patriarchy and all these kinds of things that are much more clearly defined as being something social work has to confront. (O'Neill, 1994, p. 122)

Thus the study contributes to the promotion of social justice by identifying the need for greater attention within social work education to heterosexism and homophobia. By providing detailed information about the systemic barriers which impede gay men's full participation in social work education, the study also reveals how members of minority groups may be marginalized despite official prohibition of discrimination. These findings point out the need for policies which do more than simply proscribe overt expression of intolerance. Because the study explicates concretely how heterosexism subtly shapes social work education, it provides an empirical basis for developing strategies to effectively counter oppressive social relations and to enhance inclusion of issues of same-sex sexual orientation in schools of social work.

Conclusions

Evaluation of institutional ethnography in relation to criteria proposed by Witkin and Gottschalk (1988) suggests that this research theory is consistent with social work values and can contribute to the production of knowledge useful in practice.

Institutional ethnography involves the formulation of new questions about institutions based on the experiences of marginalized people. The findings of such studies can provide insight into how oppressive ideologies shape social relations within social services and social work education, disadvantaging certain groups. This understanding can be used to promote social justice through the development of more inclusive and emancipatory organizational policies and practices.

Institutional ethnography can be an effective approach to investigating various social institutions from the standpoint of diverse groups. For instance, it could be fruitful to investigate child welfare from the standpoint of aboriginal peoples, health care from the standpoint of ethnic minority groups, and rehabilitation services from the standpoint of persons with physical disabilities. Studies of social services from the standpoint of marginalized groups could enhance program evaluation, identifying unmet needs and unintended effects on members of these groups.

This review also suggests that institutional ethnography should be included in the research curricula of schools of social work, particularly in providing a link between research and practice at the organizational level. It could be used in identifying and addressing questions related to social policy, as well as program development, management, and evaluation. To gain a deeper understanding of the strengths and limitations of this research strategy, it would also be useful to compare a study of an institution done using a positivist or postpositivist research theory with a study of the same institution using institutional ethnography.

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