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Institutional Ethnography: A Tool for Interrogating the Institutional and Political Conditions of Individual Experience

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Abstract: Institutional ethnography is described and benefits and implications for adult education are discussed.

Theoretical and qualitative methodological research approaches in adult education have gained increased attention over the last two decades (Cocklin, 1996). 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). Although at its heart adult education embraces a liberatory aim, its research and practices serve as a weapon of social control by supporting and being influenced by dominant white Western – European culture, maintaining systems of privilege, and by denying the humanity and worth of individuals who fall outside the socially structured norm (Cunningham, 2000).

Cunningham (1992) has charged adult education with excluding the cultural experiences of marginalized people and prescribing a dominant universal perspective for all groups to comply with. This explains why adult learning theories (behaviorist, humanist, cognitivist, and liberatory) derived from the dominant culture have been ineffective for learners on the margins because they “often exclude the types of learning that best suit some women, people of color, and people from the working class or those who are unemployed” (Amstutz, 1999, p. 19). 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 degree of power persons can appropriate in their homes, communities, jobs, and government. Adult education is practiced in a highly charged political context, among 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. These external contexts shape and influence adult learning and the practice of adult education. The importance of attention to discourse in the profession of adult education is threefold: (a) adult education research is embedded in dominant cultural views that limit and decrease production of credible research unless intentional efforts are made to include marginal voices, (b) adult education practice is carried out by referencing ‘authoritative’ discourses that give limited attention to practice that is relevant for those outside of the mainstream, (c) adult education

participants have unmet needs when subjected to programs that are planned and implemented with a hegemonic theoretical, contextual, and individual context.

Adult education needs (a) an alternative vision of the traditional adult education setting, its students, and the profession of adult teaching (Cunningham, 1989) and (b) an analysis of adult education that merges social and cultural dimensions with microsocial theories of learning and teaching (Amstutz, 1999; Cunningham, 2000; Ettlign, 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 & Grahame, 2000), yet extending investigation to the larger social and economic processes that shape individual experience (Smith, 1987).

This paper 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. The paper will begin with a discussion of the philosophical premises of IE. This will be followed by a presentation of the conceptual and methodological basics or the steps involved in using this method. The next section will discuss how adult educators can apply IE using examples from work done in urban adult education such as adult literacy and employment training.

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). Originally introduced by Dorothy Smith (1987), institutional ethnography is a direct style of thinking about the relationships among individual activities, knowledge, society, and political action. Institutional ethnography is described as ‘the empirical investigation of linkages among local settings of everyday life, organizations, and translocal processes of administration’ (Devault & McCoy, 2001, p. 751). *Institution*, does not imply that the research is conducted on a particular type of organization but is directed at understanding how institutional processes extend across multiple sites to coordinate local activity (Devault & McCoy, 2001). “The term *ethnography* highlights the importance of research methods that can discover and explore these everyday activities and their positioning within extended sequences of action” (Devault & McCoy, 2002, p. 753).

The central premise of IE research is the idea that (a) people’s individual experiences are organized, connected to, and shaped by larger power relations, known as ruling relations. *Ruling relations* are the textual venues (such as legislation, governing boards, program planners, management, administration) where power is generated and perpetuated in society across multiple sites (translocal). IE asserts that these relations must be uncovered i to reveal and combat “the ideological and social processes that produce experiences of subordination” (Devault & McCoy, 2002, p. 754) for individuals. The guiding question for an institutional ethnographer is “how does this [experience] happen as it does? How are these relations organized” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 7)? Drawing from ethnomethodology, IE uses people’s everyday experience to uncover how experience is socially organized and how the coordination and intersection of work processes, activities, and relations that are organized around a specific function (such as education, welfare, law, social work, health care, etc.) and occur in multiple sites form part of the ruling apparatus in society (Grahame & Grahame, 2000). Social relations are not viewed as chaotic, but as purposefully organized systematic processes and practices used to manage and control people’s lives through ruling relations “more or less mysteriously and outside a person’s knowledge” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 18). Power becomes critically

important as an analytic focus, illuminating practices that marginalize others and making visible how ruling relations are transported through knowledge, experience, discourse, and institutions.

Research Methods in IE

In merging micro and macro relations, institutional ethnographers are concerned with the uses of data and its analysis. Institutional ethnography, like other forms of ethnography, begins with fieldwork and relies on observational methods, interviews, and documents to establish the problematic of study. Where traditional ethnography uses data to produce descriptive accounts, IE uses data as a means of co-investigation to build understanding of an activity's coordination across sites. Because an institutional ethnographer is unsure of what angle or thread needs to be examined, interviews serve as directors toward identifying the problem or towards people who are experts (because of experience or relationship with the activity). Because institutional processes are viewed as standardized across settings, focus groups may be used to "generate conversation about shared experiences (Devault & McCoy, 2000, p. 757). IE departs from other ethnographic approaches by treating those data not as the topic or object of interest but as "entry" into the social relations of the setting.

Experience is the ground zero of analysis. The analysis begins and returns to it, having explicated how the experience came to happen as it did. The objective of making the analysis is to open up possibilities for people who live these experiences to have more room to move and act, on the basis of more knowledge about them (Campbell, 1998, p. 56).

This capacity is achieved by aiming at (a) entry level data (level one) and (b) translocal data (level two). Entry-level data is about the local setting and the individuals that interact there. Translocal data is data that extends beyond people's experiential accounts to include extended social relations. To obtain this data, institutional ethnographers proceed through three main phases of data collection: (a) investigation of local experience through the person's standpoint, (b) analysis of processes and larger social organization through the person's account of the experience, and (c) establishing the interconnection between macro and micro relations (Griffith & Smith, 1990; Smith, 1987).

Phase one is about entry into the experience under study to set "gaze on the macro structure from the micro level" (Brotman, 2000, p. 109). Bearing in mind that experiences or situations are not free-standing, data is collected that captures the details and discovery of "material connections between what actually happens to participants in a research setting and what triggers those particular events" (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 70). While phase one brings the problem into view, phase two is a way to "explicate how the local setting, including local understandings and explanations, are brought into being- so that informants can talk about their experiences as they do" (p. 90). Important to this phase of data collection and analysis is the notion that power is carried through the ideological constructs of texts. Analysis is about deriving particular meaning from the data as to their social construction across multiple settings. In their many forms, texts disclose how power is embedded within social institutions and structures. Materially, texts are documents (any kind of document on paper, electronic file, artistic representation, law, academia, policy) or representations. They have the ability to be reproduced, copied, transferred, and disseminated by different users at different times (Grahame & Grahame, 2000). Symbolically, texts function to organize and dictate social and cultural space for particular individuals and groups because they rely on shared beliefs and ways of expressing those beliefs.

Phase three aims to bring the other phases and levels together. Institutional ethnographers analyze interviews and documents for their internal structures and also for their connections to institutional activity. The researcher investigates power first on an institutional level where institutions transpose what really happens to people into abstract categories. Conceptualizing “what happens in a form that makes it administrable...these categories are embedded, for example in case reports, report cards, application forms, tickets, etc.” (Darville, 2002, p. 61). Secondly, on the level of public and policy discourse that articulates “a generalized language for describing and explaining society, its problems and solutions...This discourse, in the form of editorials, news coverage, policy research reports, position statements and discussion papers, cuts across specific organizational settings” (p. 61).

Benefits and Implications

IE makes an important contribution to the field of adult education by demonstrating its ability to (a) acknowledge the masked political and social power relations embedded in experience, (b) uncover the ability of texts to shape and control lives in unrecognized ways, (c) provide practical tools to foster change at the federal, state, and local levels, and (d) address dual contexts, connecting issues across multiple sites. As a research tool, IE challenges the researcher to examine the context of his/her own research. Because dominant modes of knowing have placed us on an intellectual leash without a critical conscience (Thomas, 1993), we must struggle to realize the implications of ideology on how we approach research, form analytical categories, situate subjects, construct advance meanings, and justify our actions and the actions of others. Researchers have become domesticated, useful for studying things in isolation from their processes and objectifying their subjects- failing to explore “the ironic and emancipatory potential of [their] research” (p. 8). IE offers adult educators a way to change our lives and the lives of others- individually, organizationally, and socially. IE offers the understanding needed to organize an advocacy strategy that produces fundamental change (Pence 1997). The change occurs when the particulars (micro-level) of a case are attended to, providing activists with a means of grasping the social relations (macro-level) that organize the everyday world (Pence, 1997). IE provides a map, “not a definitive account, but the best map at the moment--to chart specific practices that operate systems of oppression and thus ought to be useful for activist groups deciding on strategies for change” (Devault, 1999, p. 52).

Because institutional ethnography reaches outside academia (Campbell & Manicom, 1995, xiv), this research strategy, in and of itself, is a tool of social justice. IE offers a way out of the limitations of regular ethnographic approaches that are generally tied to particular settings and explicates the institutional relations that shape the everyday world (Pence, 1997). Research participants are afforded a methodology that produces knowledge for them rather than about them (Devault, 1999). As a research tool, IE could assist in negotiating and designing effective workplace education programs by having knowledge of participant’s context, barriers, and the ruling relations that influence their individual lives. Because program interests are negotiated “within a complex set of personal, organizational, and social relationships among people [with] similar, different, or conflicting interests,” it is a significant practice issue when planning programs (Cervero & Wilson, 1996, p. 1).

For organizations, uncovering ways that ruling relations operate within organizations is fundamental for understanding issues of learning and performance- how learning may not be taking place for certain groups of people. How knowledge and power interact across multiple settings to inhibit performance or effective interpersonal relations related to team learning is an important topic of study (Brooks, 1997). Understanding how federal policies, such as The Family

and Medical Leave Act of 1993, shape the way that women are treated in organizations may reveal factors that impact women's work performance and career advancement opportunities within the organization. With increased interest in domestic violence at work, IE can also serve as an effective framework for investigating how the administrative practices of the criminal justice system collide with organizational processes to influence women's educational and employment success. Using IE can contribute to our understanding of micro and macro social systems and institutional relations that shape or exclude individual experience.

As adult participation along cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines becomes more diverse, the field's challenge is to think more politically (Amstutz, 1999), making the issue of learner and social context more critical. IE can address long-standing concerns in adult education of why some individuals do not participate by understanding the ruling relations that shape and organize learners' experiences. IE research can illuminate how policy or administrative procedures carry dominant ideologies into program planning, design, and instruction in workforce education and training programs that stifle participants' learning and autonomy of participants. Additionally, IE can provide a practical map, outlining current adult education practices or pedagogically driven techniques that are ineffective for learners on the margins.

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