Chapter 69

Exposing Oppressive Systems:
Institutional Ethnography as a Research Method in Adult and Workforce Education

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ABSTRACT

Institutional ethnography (IE) is a useful and systematic process for examining organizations and work data through the lens of stakeholders, at different levels, and different forces. Drawing from ethnomethodology, IE focuses on how everyday experience is socially organized. As an analytic focus, power crosses boundaries, providing researchers a view of social organization that illuminates practices that marginalize. This chapter provides the conceptual underpinnings for considering IE as a methodological tool and affords researchers the opportunity to see how IE has been used in adult and workforce education settings to make invisible practices visible to the victim. The result can often be information that leads to exploring or engaging in emancipatory efforts that lend to different and better future outcomes for other victims in similar situations.

INTRODUCTION

Institutional ethnography (IE) was originally introduced as a way of thinking about the relationships among individual activities, knowledge, society, and political action (Smith, 1987). Suggestive of general systems theory (von Bertalanffy, 1972), force-field analysis (Lewin, 1946), and stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984), IE takes a holistic approach to uncovering a problem. Notions of systems, fields, and stakeholders consider many factors, policies, and people within or outside of an organization that influ-

ence an issue or problem. IE is 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, by considering the different forces in play.

IE is part of a wave of new research methods whose underpinnings have different methodological concerns from traditional research methods. Ideological shifts move research from being viewed as purely technical and rational to a social practice "embedded in particular cultural, political, and historical contexts" (Edwards, Clarke, Harrison, & Reeve, 2002, p. 129). Awareness in academe has raised questions about "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, causing a "monolithic view to become the 'given' reality for all those who live in our society" (Rocco & West, 1998, pp. 171-172). This reality is sustained by the ideologies of dominant discourses, interpenetrating multiple sites of power, and thereby implicating the power persons have in their homes, communities, jobs, and government.

Because adult and workforce education is practiced in a highly charged political context amongst a nexus of interconnected and interdependent social processes (e.g., federal and state legislation, program funding and planning, literacy work, and employment training), discourse sets the parameters for a person's (in)ability 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 adult learning and the practice of adult and workforce education.

Therefore, the field of adult and workforce education 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 and workforce 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). Institutional ethnography (IE) offers a way of addressing these issues. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to introduce institutional ethnography (IE) as an effective analytic research tool for investigating oppressive ruling relations that intersect institutional and cultural boundaries with individual experience within a system. This chapter proceeds in four sections: (a) the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of institutional ethnography; (b) conducting IE research; (c) applications of IE research in adult and workforce education; and (d) implications for theory and practice.

Conceptual and Methodological Underpinnings of Institutional Ethnography

IE is a form of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996; Madison, 2011) committed to a particular way of seeing and investigating the institutional conditions of experience (Darville, 2002). Institutional ethnography is "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 institutional processes and multiple sites are locations where the issue under investigation can be seen and experienced from different perspectives. IE focuses on an issue that might be felt or experienced by an individual but the focus is not on the individual's experience of an issue. The focus is on explicating the social relations shaping the issue as experienced by multiple stakeholders and observers of the issue.

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