

# **Institutional ethnography: pursuing a Marxist-feminist analysis of consciousness**

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In her work on feminist epistemology, Dorothy Smith (1991) challenges educational researchers to contend with the implications of ideological reasoning. Smith argues that the tendency towards idealist-based research in the social sciences obstructs a critical path of inquiry and results in a preponderance of ideological explanations rather than nuanced examination of social relations. She posits institutional ethnography as a method to contend with these challenges. In this paper, we extend this argument by offering institutional ethnography as a method for pursuing a Marxist-feminist analysis of consciousness. In order to extend a Marxist-feminist institutional ethnography into the field of critical adult education, we follow the work theorists such as Allman (1999; 2001), Ollman (1992), Colley (2000), Ebert (1996) and Ebert and Zavarzadeh (2007). We begin by locating institutional ethnography as an extension of the field of critical education and offer an examination of the ontological and epistemological foundations of institutional ethnography. We will conclude by reflecting on our own experiences conducting institutional ethnographies on citizenship education, which redirects inquiry away from the existing body of literature on non-formal and informal citizenship learning in adult education and towards an understanding of consciousness.

## **Beginning in critical education**

Critical education follows the intellectual tradition of Marx, but also includes diverse interpretations, strands, and fragmentations of Marxist theorizing from structural, cultural, humanist, antiracist, anti-colonial, and feminist perspectives. Thus, institutional ethnography is approached through a contested history of critical education theory. Rikowski (1997) provides an excellent summary of this terrain and the difficulties encountered by Marxist theorists as they've attempted to explain the relationships between schools, learners, the state, and capitalism. Rikowski's analysis extended into adult education illuminates similar difficulties. An over reliance on a mechanical interpretation of the base-superstructure model is certainly evident in reductionist political economies of adult education and the popularity of superstructural readings of Gramsci. Similarly, state functionalism figures heavily in our analyses of lifelong learning and the knowledge economy. Moving in the other direction, we see an emphasis on the relative autonomy civil society and radical democracy in much adult education literature. This is best evidenced through liberal and postmodern readings of Freire. We also have our versions of a fetishized notion of resistance and an emphasis on practice without praxis; psychological, but not material, transformation.

We would argue that with the exception of recent trends in critical education, posed by theorists such as Rikowski and Allman, inquiry in this field ensnares itself in a classic conundrum of the social sciences, the dichotomy of the individual and the social. As compelling as these analyses are, they end up privileging either the individual or the social in terms of explanatory power and they have not resolved for us two core problems. In his very early work, Marx advised that

What is to be avoided above all else is the re-establishing of the 'Society' as an abstraction *vis-à-vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*. His life, even if it may not appear in the direct form of a *communal* life carried out together with others is therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*. Man's individual and species life are not *different* (1978a, pp.86).

In Marx's vision, the individual and the social are dialectically related. Further, Marx and Engels are very clear about the relation of this individual-social dialectic to material-social relations and consciousness (1978). While the field of critical education has the enormous body of work of Paulo Freire to serve as inspiration, we have come up short in methods of qualitative research to engage with this postulation. And while the work of the re-invigorated scholars of Marx provides us with a renewed complexity, we seek ways to integrate a feminist epistemology with a deeper understanding of imperialism as the most advanced stage of capitalist development. We turn to institutional ethnography as a way to actualize the Marxist ontology of dialectical materialism, with its emphasis on consciousness and praxis, which sit at the very center of critical education.

### **Institutional ethnography as approach and method**

Any discussion of institutional ethnography must locate it within larger frameworks of research. Smith (2005) has insisted that institutional ethnography is a method and not a methodology. Some authors are quite casual with this distinction, but it is actually extremely important. We prefer to refer to institutional ethnography as both an approach to inquiry and a method of inquiry, following Prasad's (2005) framework for differentiating these concepts. By discussing institutional ethnography as an approach to inquiry we are able to fully explicate its dialectical, ontological grounding. Once we are firmly established in this base, we then see the uniqueness of the application of its method actualizing and discovery this ontology. We fear that to approach institutional ethnography in a different way would lead us to misrepresent the entirety of the project and risk reducing this approach to tips and tricks on fieldwork.

#### *Beginning with Marx's Critique of idealist ontology*

Institutional ethnography aims to reorganize 'the social relations of knowledge of the social' (Smith, 2005, pp.29). The goals of institutional ethnography are not simply to produce knowledge on a given subject, but rather to reorient our ways of thinking about social reality and how it can be known. In order to fully elaborate the ontology and epistemology of institutional ethnography, it is necessary to begin with Dorothy Smith's critique of traditional sociological inquiry. According to Smith (1990), traditional forms of inquiry in the social sciences begin in what Marx and Engels (1978) called 'the hegemony of the spirit' (pp.175), meaning that these forms of inquiry begin with fundamentally idealist assumptions. Idealist ontology, which even today can be situated within the 'positivist anxiety' of the social sciences, is the belief that social reality is brought into being through human consciousness. This perspective 'never manages to conceive the sensuous world as the total living sensuous activity of the individuals composing it' (pp.171). Social reality remains in the realm of ideas as the driving force of history rather than, as Marx and Engels propose, the material activity of individuals participating in social relations and cooperation.

It is difficult to make sense of a social reality that exists outside of people. In *The German Ideology* (1978), Marx and Engels detail these processes and Smith (1990) adopts their analysis in her critique of sociology. Idealist inquiry begins when the researcher identifies an actual phenomenon in the social world. The researcher collects data on this topic,

usually by studying 'individuals'. This 'data' is then taken as abstract evidence apart from the conditions under which it was generated. This happens by using a pre-conceived interpretative framework to make sense of the data. The data is then arranged to make sense in the context of the framework. Marx and Engels (1978) referred to this process as making 'mystical connections'. Finally, the resulting arrangement is translated into a concept, which in turn is given the ability to direct relationships between other concepts, such as causality or correlation. This method of reasoning is identified by Marx as ideological in the sense that it relies on distorted representations of social reality to generate its claims. This sense of ideology is quite different from the sense of ideology as an oppressive system of ideas (Allman, 1999; 2001; Smith, 1990).

Ideological reasoning and idealist ontology result in the generation of theoretical concepts and frameworks. These concepts 'as such are not ideological. They are ideological by virtue of being distinctive methods of reasoning and interpreting society' (Smith, 1990, pp.36). This is not to say that categories and concepts do not become laden with relations of power. Nevertheless, Marx and Engels (1978) were puzzled as to how these concepts hold such sway. Ideological categories, despite the processes of abstraction and mystification, have some resonance with actual experience. As such they are important. Smith (1990) describes categories in this way:

Concepts, ideology, and ideological practices are integral parts of sociohistorical processes. Through them people grasp in abstraction the real relations of their own lives. Yet while they express and reflect actual social relations, ideological practices render invisible the actualities of people's activities in which those relations arise and by which they are ordered (pp.36-37).

The problem with these categories is that they leave undisturbed the ground upon which they are built. The social relations that give rise to certain experiences are not the subject of inquiry; inquiry is then confined to the manipulation of concepts and speculation. The result is the entrenchment of the interpretive domain in social inquiry. Theory, not experience, is used to make sense of the world and our sense of the social world as a historical project with real social relations is lost.

This process is extremely problematic. On one level there is the simple issue of perpetuating ideological understandings of the world and the unequal social relations they naturalize and obscure. For Smith (1990) this is an obstruction of inquiry. There is also the problem of objectification. One of the central questions driving Marx was the question of how it is that human relations come to be used 'over and against' individuals. How it is that something that is merely organized human relations becomes understood as a structure or system which dominates and dictates human experience? The experience of objectified social relations is a result of ideological reasoning. Of equal concern to Smith are the results of these practices on epistemology, particularly as it relates to the experience of women. The alienation of experience and material reality present in traditional forms of social inquiry serve to subjugate women's experience in the world by erasing their materiality from what is known. The result is a sociology that explains away the experiences of women rather than locating their actual realities within social relations. Thus, ideological distortions, in the sense of reason and epistemology, become ideological distortions in the sense of power.

#### *An alternative ontology for institutional ethnography*

As an alternative to these processes, Smith (1990; 2005) argued that social inquiry should

begin with the ontology explicated by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* (1978). Marx and Engels propose that social inquiry should begin in the real, material processes of life, meaning that inquiry should be directed at actual individuals and their actual experiences and practices. This proposal asserts that social reality is constituted through the cooperative social activity of individuals. Thus 'the social' is known not as 'society', but through categories that explain how people actually work and relate and how consciousness is formed through this social activity. Therefore, ideas, theories, categories, academic explanations arise not through abstraction, but through human social relations and the material world (Allman, 1999). The individual and the social are dialectically related, meaning that individual action and consciousness have an inner connection with the social totality. This dialectic of individual-social-material relations is particularly evident in Marx's theory of consciousness, which postulates that 'we actively and sensuously experience these relations; therefore our consciousness is actively produced within our experience of our social, material, and natural existence' (Allman, 1999, pp.37).

This ontology is taken up through the project of institutional ethnography. The aim of institutional ethnography is to understand the organization of social relations, but the project extends to understanding how consciousness is shaped in this process. It is our contention that separating the social/institutional organization of relationships from consciousness results in a misreading of institutional ethnography (see Wright and Rocco, 2007). The problem faced by Smith is the question of how to 'actualize' inquiry into this conception of the social. Given our entrenchment in the abstractions and mystifications of traditional forms of inquiry, how do we go about revealing the ideological distortions in our thought and understanding the social relations in which we are bound up? Smith's (2007) answer is to begin by making 'the ontological shift'. This shift requires the researcher to work from a definite understanding of the social, which Smith has defined as individuals plus their doings plus coordination. Working from this definition, based in Marx's ontology, inquiry must always begin with individuals and their actual experiences and practice. In making this shift, we move away from understanding the social world as a collection of concepts divorced from people's everyday experience. In order to do this researchers must begin with the everyday; they must begin with a question as a point of entry and it must be something that the researchers care about. This point of entry is referred to in institutional ethnography as the 'problematic'. This problematic must be created from a 'standpoint'. The standpoint 'creates a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge of society or political economy' (Smith, 2005, pp.10).

It is important to remember that the historical condition of Marxist ontology is the understanding that social relations and social reality are not necessarily of one's own making (Marx and Engels, 1978). Individuals work within historical processes, inheriting material and social relations from the past. Thus, individuals must constantly contend with history and with the understanding that their relations take place within a larger mode of social relations. Using the language of Smith's (2007) definition of 'the social', there is some social mechanism through which human relations are coordinated and organized. This mechanism, however, is not an 'out there' entity such as 'structure', but, like capitalism, is itself a process and a relation. Here Smith moves away from Marx and identifies this 'something' as ruling relations (1999; 2005).

Ruling relations are the subject of much confusion among institutional ethnographers. Given the emphasis on institutions and texts, the ruling relations are sometimes mistaken for bureaucracy, certain individuals, or even the texts themselves. Ruling relations are not things, systems, or particular people, nor is it an equivalent concept to domination or

hegemony. The concept of ruling relations runs contrary to a structural ontology that sees power outside of social relations. The ruling relations are a 'complex of objectified social relations that organize and regulate our lives in contemporary society' (Smith, 1999, pp.73). Ruling relations are 'forms of consciousness and organization that are objectified in the sense that they are constituted externally to particular people or places' (Smith, 2005, pp.13). Ruling relations, however, do not just frame how we interpret or understand the social world, they also coordinate how we act within these relations. This process happens through the dialectical relationships between consciousness and action (praxis). As we think about the world, we act accordingly; as we experience, we condition our thinking. The exploration of the ruling relations in institutional ethnography is an exploration of the dialectic of consciousness, action, and social relations as much as anything else.

### **Institutional ethnography, educational research, and citizenship education**

Institutional ethnography directs research towards social phenomenon existing below the surface. As we previously discussed, research in education often struggles with what Smith (2005) described as the absence of and/or overemphasis on the individual. Institutional ethnography offers a way out of this dilemma by situating inquiry within the daily experiences of individuals, their practices, and work while attempting to locate their individual practice within larger institutional discourses and social relations at the same time. This allows us as researchers to see the ways in which discourses and social relations coordinate and organize educational and epistemological relations. It allows us to see the ways in which these relationships impact and shape educational practice, particularly in terms of pedagogy and curriculum. It also allows us to see the pervasiveness of ideological reasoning and ideological explanations, particularly in regards to education as a solution for social inequality within liberal capitalist democracies, at ground level. Most importantly, institutional ethnography provides us with a concrete tool to explore the intricacies of consciousness and praxis.

Our interest in critical education overlaps with our ongoing examination of liberal democracies, particularly the ways in which states engage in a politics of 'citizenship' and 'democracy'. Our interest in this area focuses on the ways in which states promote particular formations of political subjectivity among their citizenries and towards what ends these formations are directed. We are currently engaged in two institutional ethnography projects focused on citizenship education and democracy promotion in Canada and the United States. The first is a project on the experiences of immigrant children from war zones, particularly from the Middle East, with the Ontario Grade 10 civics curriculum. The second is dissertation research on the American federal government's civic engagement program. These projects focus on explicit or implicit citizenship education curricula embedded in a variety of regulatory texts.

Drawing from our own experience conducting research in the field of citizenship education and democracy promotion, institutional ethnography provides windows into the limitations of current lines of inquiry and exposes questions that are otherwise obscured. In our experience, this process began with literature review. Literature on citizenship education tends to reflect sets of fighting polemics, with different groups arguing for their own version of the ideal citizen, often by attempting to provide empirical evidence of how these processes are learned. We observed very early on the ways in which this body of literature, while significant in its contributions to knowledge, does not move beyond an idealist approach to citizenship as a category of social relations. Institutional ethnography turns the researcher's attention away from this quagmire and allows exploration of citizenship as an ideological category and citizenship education as an ideological practice. Our attention is redirected towards the actual social relations that comprise the category of

'citizenship'. We are able to question not just how citizenship education instills certain paradigms of participation or democratic aspirations in learners, but how the concept of citizenship organizes social relations and how that organization is supported through educational projects. Institutional ethnography allows us to explore in a deeper way the relationships between citizenship, the state, ideology, and democracy. The approach of institutional ethnography moves beyond questions of how one becomes a good citizen to questions of how citizenship education is 'hooked in' to other social relations. Attention is directed away from the abstraction of shaping political subjectivity to understanding how political subjectivity is shaped within existing social relations. Institutional ethnography helps to expose contradictions in ongoing social relations, particularly relations of racialized and gendered class locations.

### **Moving forward**

To summarize, institutional ethnography as an approach to inquiry begins with Marxist ontology and rejects the ideological premises of traditional forms of social inquiry. It conceives of the social as coordination of ongoing human relations and activity. As such, the focus of inquiry is the mechanisms of coordination, understood as the ruling relations. Emphasis on the ordering of social relations and the dialectical relationship between social relations, consciousness, and material practices are at the center of the project of institutional ethnography. It is our contention that institutional ethnography offers a compelling path for inquiry in critical education. Institutional ethnography allows educational researchers to move away from individualized notions of learning that not only reinforce ideological reasoning, but support a learning paradigm that colludes with capitalist project of the entrepreneurial individual and its raced, gendered, and classed dimensions (Gorman, 2007). By using institutional ethnography to advance a Marxist-feminist understanding of consciousness, we can direct educational research towards explication of these dimensions and social transformation.

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