

Introduction

Symbolic Interactionism has the notion of a “moral career” to describe the trajectory which a person’s sense of identity takes they move through the stages of assimilation into a way of life. Not surprisingly, perhaps, researchers have been more interested in the adjustments in moral alignment made by those who move from relatively conventional worlds into those which are more outré or even deviant. But, of course, the concept is symmetric. Those going in the other direction similarly pass through a moral career.

We want to borrow this idea and use it to summarise the trajectory of transitions which a sociological methodology, Institutional Ethnography, has undergone over the period of its existence. Apart from the great fondness we have for Dorothy Smith’s early work and its ethnomethodological character, Institutional Ethnography is of interest because of its role as a possible harbinger. The dilemmas faced by Institutional Ethnography as it negotiated its relationship to the rest of professional Sociology could well stand as an example to other ethnomethodological themes (such as informed ethnography, applied conversation analysis and workplace studies) of the challenges and opportunities they will face as they negotiate their relationships with Sociology on the one hand and HCI, or Welfare Studies or Management Science etc. on the other. Would they want to make the same choices Institutional Ethnography has? At the moment, this does not seem to be a question which researchers in these thematic areas are asking themselves.

Institutional Ethnography is Dorothy Smith’s self-professed radical sociology. The first essay in this Part presents a relatively conventional—but we hope even handed—appraisal from the point of view of sociological method in general. For many reasons, we conclude Smith’s initial ambition was ultimately unfulfilled. What Institutional Ethnography matured into was a mode of investigation which, at the point at which it was finally defined, looked as if it was becoming a very familiar form of normal sociologising.

The second study tacks a different tack. It looks at examples of Institutional Ethnography as pieces of mature practical sociological reasoning. Here the central theme is what has now become our key orienting device, the management of the possibility of a praxeological gap which emerges when sociological reports reason from data to findings. We have claimed this is an endemic feature of professional Sociology and sure enough our demonstration reveals it emerging in Institutional Ethnography. Its presence, then, is yet another sign or marker of its assimilation and normalisation as a conventional sociology.