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A Sociology for People

INTRODUCTION

In the previous essay, we set out Dorothy Smith's ambition to provide a radical overhaul of sociological method. This was based in the conjunction of two principles: the adoption of the feminist version of Standpoint Theory and Ethnomethodology's critique of Sociology's investigative protocols. We then traced how Smith adjusted and adapted her ambitions and how she grappled with the theoretical and practical dilemmas posed by both parts of her conjunction. Over time, her responses amounted to a significant re-positioning in which each of the original principles was severely demoted, if not set aside altogether.

In this discussion, we begin from this point and review some of the work currently being undertaken within Institutional Ethnography. This review will use as its lodestone the set of questions which emerged from the trajectory of Smith's endeavours. They are summarised in the first section. There then follows a consideration of them in relation to three different kinds of empirical investigation. We have chosen studies which are characteristic of how Institutional Ethnography is now understood and represent its current state as well as the scale of its current ambitions. Both, we suggest, bear little resemblance to Smith's original intent and have all the hallmarks of conventional forms of sociologising.

Section 1. Some Questions

A SIGNIFICANT RE-POSITIONING

Throughout her career, Smith insisted that texts are intentional social objects. Repeatedly she emphasised formulations, particularly strategically located formulations, are rarely if ever innocent. So, in turning to how she presented her position in *Institutional Ethnography* [Smith 2005], we took the drafting of the subtitle ("A Sociology for People") to be of some moment. The first thing we noted was how the gender division of labour was being given a much less prominent place. The transition from the first to the second essay in the volume completed this erasure without further explication or justification.

Having been alerted to this shift, we can look both to this volume and its companion, *Institutional Ethnography as Practice* [Smith 2006], for signals as to what is driving the change. First, and possibly most important, is the fact the original stance taken (a sociology for women) in common with the positioning of Standpoint Theory itself were subject to significant critique within the feminist movement. We know from Smith's own comments in her 're-appraisal' commentary [Smith 1992] that she took these criticisms seriously but was not entirely convinced by them. Comments made in the introductory sections of some of the contributions to the 2006 companion book indicate others were more easily persuaded. These internal critiques concerned attribution (whether real or apparent) of a monolithic 'point of view' to women as a social type. Insisting on the use of the general category 'women' was alleged to reproduce the same fallacy Philosophy, Sociology and other supposed organs of intellectual power had perpetrated, namely the reduction of the experience of women to a unified bundle which would inevitably be largely centred on domestic roles and their professional extensions. We know Smith rejected that allegation but the local politics of the feminist movement may well have made holding to the initial ambition a difficult position to take. Sonia Harding had faced similar opposition to her formulation of the principle of "strong objectivity". Over time she too softened her position. She still wanted Standpoint Theory to be part of a philosophical discipline and hence oriented to important epistemic virtues but now she was proposing...

....a logic of research that focuses attention on problems that are deeply disturbing to anyone reflecting on contemporary challenges to Western thought and practice, and yet insoluble within the philosophical, political, and theoretical legacies that they provide. [Harding, 2009, p. 198]

The core focus has become much more diffuse.

In addition, and this may have been more inadvertent than anything else, Smith's vision for a challenging version of Action Theory was proving attractive to men as well as women.¹ She was acquiring male students and they were undertaking Institutional Ethnographies of their own. The most well-known are Tim Diamond's [1992] study of nursing in a care home for the elderly and George Smith's [1995] investigation of people afflicted with HIV. Given Dorothy Smith's critique of the debilitating nature of the male gaze in Sociology and elsewhere, it would have been more than a little implausible to claim Diamond, George Smith and others were representing the standpoint of women. As in all walks of life, success required pragmatic adjustment.

The trouble is this re-positioning involved a great deal more than cosmetic refreshing. To begin with, the central organising principle in the adaptation of Historical Materialism in Smith's new sociology has been displaced. 'People' is not a gendered term. Neither is it a class one. The gender division of labour is no longer the force determining the experience from which analysis must start. However, nothing is put in its place. Because we still have the central motif, namely the elucidation of social relations of power, but without the motivating sociology of experience of an identified category premised in the social structural consequences of an appropriate division of labour, we are left with a lacuna at the centre of the methodology. Of course, it could be argued what is happening here is really a rejection of sociological interpretations of the social actor as a homunculus defined by a set of abstract postulates. But unless some explicit definition is given of what 'people' is to stand for, all those undertaking investigations (and the readers of their findings) have to call on to sense assemble texts are common sense typifications of what is usually intended by the use of that term. But, as Smith has repeated many times, such typifications feature in sociological descriptions as shared unexplicated elements of the account given. Centring the effort on such a general category, risks weakening the positioning and could well lead to the grounds of experience remaining unexamined. Such an outcome would replicate the omission she had found in mainstream Sociology.

This issue generates others. With this re-positioning, can clear lines of demarcation be maintained between Institutional Ethnography as an approach and older sociologies of experience forged in the traditions of Social Anthropology, Chicago Ethnography and Symbolic Interactionism? If gender is dropped as the organising principle and 'people' put in its place, what is left other than the task of offering a sociological description of what it is like to be ahunter

¹ Action Theory had undergone its own moral career and was by this time an all-purpose term for interventionist sociologies of almost any stripe.

gatherer, witch, participant in a cock fight, alcoholic, hobo, jackroller, factory hand, HIV sufferer or nurse in a care home? Any such study faces the challenge of providing a sociology which fills the contents of the relevant ideal type actor's Brentano-intentionality. It has to show how they see the social world they are in and what it means for them. One point of difference might be that in other sociologies, a standpoint is not simply of identifying a point of view which enables a description of the configuration of a social *Gestalt*. It also endorses that point of view's legitimacy by hiding the facts of constraining institutional power. But if that is the case, aren't we endorsing an assumption we should give the same answer to his famous question Howard Becker did [Becker 1967]? A constant theme in ethnographic reportage has been the striving to re-balance how we should see those who are marginal to any segment of society. If the form and contents of the ethnographies are similar and the motivating attitude is too, what is so new about Institutional Ethnography? This is another question we will need to see if we can answer.

A NOTABLE ABSENCE

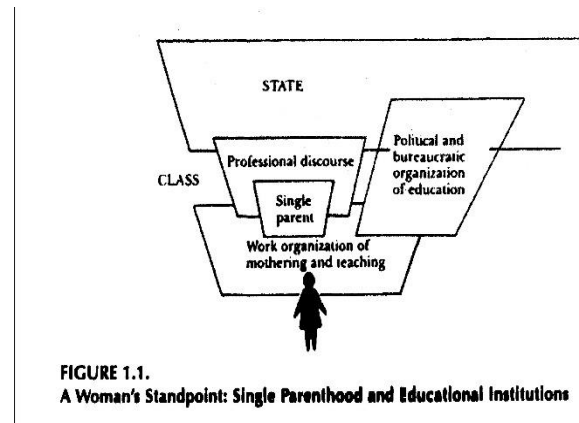
Associated with the above re-positioning is the disappearance of ideology as a leading analytic concept. In earlier accounts, ideology was produced by the intelligentsia as a normative account of the structure of ruling relations. Sociology was a purveyor of ideology about women; an ideology which shaped and defined the sociological point of view. With the dropping of gender (class got dropped earlier, remember), there is no work for ideology to do and so no place for it. The net result is the 'point-of-view point of view' loses its analytic edge. As we commented, Smith recognised this in her 1992 responses to her critics and commentators.

The net result is that a variety of alternative, equally valid accounts of some setting can always be developed (since there is no singular truth) and we cannot claim any one to be better, fuller or preferred. Definitive conclusions are put beyond reach because the transcendental mechanism has gone. What is being espoused is just one among an array of points of view. The danger here is of being left with a situation in which Sociology does what Sociology does and, if some our questions have no convincing answers, Smith's sociology will also do what Sociology does. Both translate daily experience into theoretical categories. The only difference is Smith likes her version better because it is faithful to its point of origin in people's experience. But is it? That is another question we will have to answer.²

² There was and still is a major debate in feminist epistemology over the need for a transcendent position or some other criterion for allocating preference to forms of knowledge. One version was championed by Patricia Hill

RECOGNISABLE CONTINUITY

What the re-positioning hasn't dropped is the assumption of epistemological dualism. Its latest manifestation is in the analytic pairing of primary and ideological narratives. Its grip is brought out by the repeated use of a diagram in a number of Smith's own accounts of Institutional Ethnography and its positive referencing in the studies of her colleagues.



Here we see the “hero” (Smith’s term and, given the backstory to all this, we assume an idealisation of Smith’s scenario of herself in her early life) confronted by a series of configured social spaces. We are to take the point of view of the experience of this person (i.e., social actor) negotiating these spaces. But, of course, that is not all.

The reach of inquiry goes from where actual people are in their own lives, activities and experience to open up relations and organisations that are, in a sense, actually *present* in them but are not observable. Institutional ethnography aims to discover and make visible so that from where our small hero stands, she can see things are coming about for her as they do. (Smith 2005, p.4)

Standing where she does and with the experience, understandings and context she has, the “hero” struggles to make out what is going on *and what she could, should and must do*. The social spaces are configured worlds of power relations whose logic is hidden from her. All she has are the misleading appearances which her institutionalised culture provides. It is the task of Institutional Ethnography to allow her to transcend her state and see things as they really are. In her

Collins in her critical comments on Institutional Ethnography [Hill-Collins 1992]. Kathleen Lennon [Lennon 2004] and Helen Longino [Longino 2017] offer others.

introduction to *Institutional Ethnography*, Smith talks explicitly in terms of the need to enable the hero to make a Kuhnian paradigm shift. The social world is constituted by the "hero" in one way. Having been informed by the insights of Institutional Ethnography, the constitution of social space will be configured in another, putatively more recognisable, salient, or preferable way. Given the issues we have just been discussing, there is a real possibility the sociology of experience we are to be offered will amount to little more than an epistemology of relationism and hence be heir to all the troubles such an approach brings. How is the new epistemology supposed to work? That's another important question we will have to answer.

THE EQUIVALENCE CLASS PROBLEM

Our initial discussion noted Smith predicated her initial critique of Sociology on Ethnomethodology's identification of a fundamental methodological problem in that discipline, namely the inadvertent entanglement of formal, theoretical classes and their common sense, culturally embedded counterparts. The failure to address this entanglement made it impossible to separate out when, where and for what purposes, terms were being used in virtue of their informal, flexible cultural meanings rather than formally defined and delimited theoretical meanings. As a result, sociological investigators had to resort to practical work arounds ("tricks" she called them) to achieve adequate sociological description. These work arounds rendered the reliance analysis placed on common sense understandings invisible and led to categorisation by fiat.

By shifting the locus of research to the life world of daily experience and the relations of control displayed therein, it was hoped that the equivalence class problem might be avoided or at least nullified. The experience of the subjects of investigations was not to be translated into decontextualised sociological abstractions trading on unexplicated, contextually defined meanings. Institutional Ethnography is the method by which this approach is made systematic and replicable. The question is: Has it worked? Has Institutional Ethnography managed to wriggle free of classification by fiat? To judge by the analyses of sociology's textual practices and that of Quintin Bell's description of Virginia Woolf's suicide, it is hard to say it has. The descriptions offered trade in standard sociological tropes such as the distinction between appearance and reality and its disciplinary organisation into structured levels. In Smith's case, it is the levels of Primary and Secondary Narratives. Quintin Bell thinks he is describing the inevitable trajectory of Woolf's last months. Dorothy Smith thinks he is providing a Secondary Narrative premised in psychiatric diagnosis.

Section 2. Studies and The Documentary Method of Attribution

Not surprisingly, a number of the themes which preoccupied Smith during her career are central to Institutional Ethnography. There is, of course, the ubiquitous motif of the social relations of power together with experience, institutions, work and texts. Not every study majors on them all, but they are all mentioned at some point. We will look at three examples of Institutional Ethnography to see how these themes are both explicated and used in actual sociological investigations. We have chosen them because they have been identified as illustrating the best work done in the genre. As such, they should provide a representative base for determining the extent to which Smith's initiative is likely to be successful.

NARRATIVES AND THE "COLONISATION OF MINDS"

Total Quality Management (TQM) was a fashionable management theory in the last third of the 20th century.³ Marie Campbell [Campbell 2006] studied a community care hospital for the elderly which was adopting versions of some of the practises associated with TQM. In her description, she picks out two aspects of the TQM approach for particular attention: the determination to drive decision-making as close as possible to the point at which such decisions are enacted and the introduction of 'customer and supplier' metaphor for the organisation of service provision. What is perhaps most important for TQM, namely measurement of customer satisfaction, doesn't get addressed. Campbell presents the consequence of the introduction of the TQM approach as the "creeping colonisation of minds" whereby management interests and relevances for the provision of patient care are superimposed on or even displace the nursing interest and relevances of the ward staff who provide that care. Interestingly, Campbell does not talk of these outlooks as 'primary' and 'ideological' narratives though she does want to show how this substitution is visible in "the actualities of people's lives" which make up the real-worldly experience of nursing. Footnote 17 makes explicit the lens through which we are to look at these actualities.

The Canadian public care system has not until recently been directly subject to competitive capitalism. This paper shows how, within the nonprofit (publicly funded and administered) Canadian hospital system, market relations are being established and are becoming the legitimate basis of caregiving decisions. (Campbell 2006, fn. 17, p. 107)

³ We should probably declare some sort of interest (or knowledge at any rate) here. We were closely involved with one of the Companies (Xerox) touted as demonstrating the value of this approach. Our experience means we can certainly recognise many of the patterns brought out in this study, though whether we would construe them in the same way is not so certain.

The case concerns the unexpected consequences of introducing a new practice for managing nighttime incontinence. This initiative had been developed jointly with ward staff and was justified both in terms of improvement in comfort and care and of reduction of cost. Unfortunately, the envisaged reduction in bed linen laundry costs had not been realised. Indeed, those costs had risen. The experiential 'actualities' we are presented with are two sets of field notes made by one of the researchers observing meetings of the hospital staff. The first summarises a meeting between senior staff and the nursing assistants who deal with patients. In this meeting, it was made clear the increased cost of the new practice was not sustainable. Having received this announcement, the nursing staff went on to discuss what changes might be made to achieve the needed cost re-balancing. The second set of notes summarises a later meeting held among 'Team Leaders' which also discussed the problem of rising costs and budget limitations. These Team Leaders (whom we assume are experienced nurses) drew up a new practice which the nursing assistants were to be instructed to carry out.

Let's just remind ourselves of what taking people's experience as the standpoint from which to begin analysis is supposed to mean. The approach

...is disciplined by the relations that organize or co-ordinate what actually happens among those involved—what they experience. The procedure is to make problematic (or a topic for inquiry) those everyday experiences to which the observer makes us privy. (ibid., 2006 p.98)

Such experience is the "sense making" which those involved in some course of action go through. The trouble is Campbell does not offer us any direct access to the sense making of any of the staff. Neither are we given anything that could pass for one of Smith's 'oral histories' of either meeting. Instead, we get the flow of the action as interpreted by the field worker. There is no detail on the actual exchanges in each meeting, the questions asked and answers given. Neither are we offered any detail on the options considered and the process gone through by either the nursing assistants or the Team Leaders before they settled on the choices they did. The only sense making to be seen in the notes is that of the field researcher. Similar considerations apply to the reports which Campbell gives of her own interviews with a member of senior nursing staff concerning the basis for the original decision. Here we get Campbell's reconstruction of the reconstructed logic which the member of staff provided. In this second order construal, we are told that to justify the new practice the person concerned pointed to the principles of the Quality Initiative which were set out in a widely distributed document (in particular, the meeting of customer needs) and the cost reduction plan she herself had produced. For Campbell, this is significant evidence managerial

considerations were driving the decisions. In both these sets of renderings, we, as readers, are kept at least two steps away from the “actualities” of the occasion on which they occurred.

The introduction of the Quality Initiative documentation and the ‘business plan’ for the new practice allow Campbell to move her focus to the managerial mode of discourse as exemplified by the ‘customer/supplier’ vocabulary being used. Once again, though, how these terms are being used in each of the documents is not shown to us. Instead, Campbell works up an elaborate account of how this pairing *must have been interpreted differently* by managers and nurses; the former being assumed to have had an ‘organisational’ conception which depicted relations among members of the hospital as a market while the latter are assumed to have a more common sense one of patients as the receivers of care rather than being customers of the hospital. No doubt both conceptions were in play in the organisation and no doubt there were times when they were counterposed or used to justify alternative viewpoints. But, yet again, we are not offered evidence of occasions when anyone actually expressed these views, how they were exhibited and how such occasions fed into the flow of the ongoing experience of those there. What the approach taken does allow, though, is an unsurprising summary position.

I see the Harmonie Brief story as an extension of the social relations of ruling into the individual effort of caregivers in the hospital workplace.
(ibid, p. 102)

Having arrived at this conclusion, Campbell launches into a general complaint concerning how the provision of care is being changed by the replacement of ward-level local ways of knowing and thinking by management-level ways of knowing and thinking and how the two frames of reference are inevitably at odds if not directly contradictory. (These are Smith’s ‘narratives’ in disguise). Such a depiction of constrained control, however, sits rather oddly alongside Campbell’s comments on p.100 to the effect the nursing staff were far from ‘captured’ by the controlling mode of thinking and had a variety of ways of pushing back against it.⁴ These “rituals of resistance” (as the Birmingham Cultural Studies Group called them) are not called out and explicitly examined. We find this odd since everything Sociology has learned about the cultures of organisations would lead us to expect such rituals to be an important locally operated control mechanism and hence vital to preserving the independence of ward-level (in this case) sense-making.

As a piece of ethnography, what does Campbell’s study consist in? We have the presentation of a very familiar management issue, one which is found in every organisation,

⁴ Something we can certainly confirm was the case in Xerox.

budget slippage. This issue is reviewed through the lens of TQM simply because, at that point, TQM was used to frame the way the organisation felt it should respond: TQM as an 'ideology' or 'mechanism of control'. This sociological conceptualisation is scrambled together with TQM's vocabulary as a practical, day to day, way of talking encountered in this organisation. The local occasioned usage of TQM's terms is read as exhibits of the sociological classification.⁵ However, it might equally well be suggested that TQM provides an eminently re-configurable kaleidoscope. Each re-configuration scatters management components and their consequences in different ways. Organisational initiatives have consequences. They are supposed to, though not all the consequences they have are desired or planned. Re-configuring the relationships and perceptions of actual events and courses of action across the organisation through the lens of a management initiative is an interesting way to bring out the diversity of interests, relevances and orientations which any organisation exhibits. In fact, it is a tried and trusted mode of ethnographic reportage and is precisely what Campbell has done.

GEARING INTO THE INSTITUTION

We said Campbell promises to present the experience of her nurses but doesn't. Liza McCoy's [2006] study of HIV patients doesn't even try. For her, what is important is to show how institutional considerations shape the detail of everyday activities. To do this, she talks of everyday activities as "work". This expanded notion of work was long championed by Smith as moving the concept beyond the paid/unpaid dichotomy. The concept of 'work' as an analytic device like this owes a very great deal to the pioneering work of Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks. This usage is rooted in Garfinkel's discussions of the views of Schutz and Kaufman regarding concept and theory formation in the social sciences and in Sacks' attempt to build 'naturalistic' sociological descriptions. To exemplify it, we will just point to the way Garfinkel [Garfinkel 1967] used it in his study of 'Agnes', a transgendered person. In describing Agnes' mode of being-in-the-everyday-world, Garfinkel refers to her as "doing being a woman". Similarly, in his lecture *On Doing "Being Ordinary"* [Sacks 1985], Sacks recommends the adoption of an observational stance which treats persons engaged in ordinary everyday activities as displaying the work of "doing being ordinary". This analytic attitude of treating ordinary activities as exhibiting the work of getting those activities

⁵ We suspect Campbell would say you cannot unscramble the two and this is the source of the controlling power. But if you can't unscramble the two, what is the basis for claiming there are two distinct narratives in play here in the first place?

done in a recognisable normal and unproblematic way is what Smith was drawing on and McCoy takes over.

McCoy's data are taken from answers given by HIV patients to questions about their use of the public medical system. These are oral histories in which patients recount how they manage their engagements with medical professionals. However, the excerpts are brief and sometimes very brief. As McCoy points out, what they attest to is the range of experiences which these patients had. We are not given an extended section of any transcribed interviews, so we cannot follow the re-construction of experience as it unfolds. Instead, we have multiple layers of interpretation between what is being talked about and what we are offered.

In her earlier study [McCoy 2005], the 'stories' McCoy presents are gathered into types labelled in terms of the assessment the patient made of the attitudes expressed by the medical professionals who dealt with them. As one might expect, they are found to fall mostly into a 'heroes and villains' pairing; such judgements being based on the tolerance, respect and trust which the medical practitioner appeared to display in the story told. The later account works in the same way. This time, though, the focus is on how the patients tried to manage—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—the medical encounters they were engaged in. She calls this the work of "gearing into" the social form of the medical appointment. This work took the form of patients presenting themselves and their symptoms in particular ways in order to fit into what they knew from prior experience was the format of 'medical consultations'. They had learned only some things were medically relevant and only some attitudes were likely to be acceptable. Some patients had also learned to use relevant medical terminology to describe their symptoms, physical states and so on and had found this made the interaction more like a dialogue and less like an interrogation. In undertaking this work, McCoy says they have adopted the institutional discourse relevant to their condition. To the degree such adoption took place, the patient had become compliant with or had subjugated themselves to the demands of the medical institution. This, she suggests, means they had objectified themselves as 'cases' defined by medical relevances. The abstract and general institutional narrative had taken over from the local, particular experiential one.

Even though her topic is the patient's experience of and within the medical system, the content of the two ethnographies concentrates on the interpretation of that experience. This is deliberate. McCoy is keen to avoid any chance of "analytic drift" (2006 p. 114) away from the focus on the relevant systems of institutional control and onto the character of the experience of individual patients. This is puzzling since the experience of HIV patients as 'people' what was we were led to believe this was all about. However, the result of following such a strategy is

predictable. The history of sociological investigations of hospitals as organisations and their medical practice as a social institution is replete with analyses just like McCoy's. It is true that her concern is with HIV patients, not a group very widely studied before her time. But the point and tenor of her findings and how they are structured as a mode of sociology is in direct line of descent to such masterpieces *Psychiatric Ideologies and Institutions* [Strauss et al. 1981] and *Boys in White* [Becker et al., 1977] with its analysis of the acquisition of what it called 'medical culture'. The vocabulary and relevant medical conditions may be new but the sociology served up is precisely the same.

DOCUMENTARY POLITICS

Susan Turner's [2001; 2006] studies looked promising for two reasons. First, starting with the magnificent *K is Mentally Ill*, Smith's (1978) description of the social organisation of diagnostic facticity, we have long admired Dorothy Smith's technical analysis of texts as institutional objects, even if we haven't always agreed with the interpretations she feels impelled to give on their basis. Turner's analyses, we hoped, would be of the same order. Second, the cases are about public sector administration and the history of a public consultation over a proposed planning application, processes we too have spent time with.

The background to the cases is straightforward enough. The local Municipal Government issued a planning proposal and consultation document concerning Turner's own neighbourhood. Obviously of personal interest to her as a resident, she decided to follow its progress and examine how the various participants in the process (most importantly, the residents) engaged with and understood its documentary processes. Right from the start, then, Turner seems to be a paradigm case of that "bifurcated consciousness" which Smith defined as the central requirement when undertaking Institutional Ethnography. Her approach is classic Dorothy Smith.

I am approaching planning as involving speech genres and textual processes. I treat the organization of the dialogic in planning relations as such a secondary sphere of activities that actively organizes what people say in the institutional mode. I treat texts as in the action as active participants in the organization of planning relations and its public discourse. Representation is similarly understood as dialogic in character. Participating in these relations means entering into their routine practices, in time and in space, and becoming competent in them. (2001, p. 307)

The two studies take different cuts through the unfolding process. The first, which might be thought of as an autoethnographic 'subjectifying' view, tracks Turner's gradual understanding of the

process by tracing her reading of the consultation document and her role as a representative of the residents. This is accompanied by an 'objectifying' view which looks at how the residents came to represent their concerns about the proposal in planning relevant terms. This parallels McCoy's account of how her HIV-patients subjugated their personal engagement with their illness to an institutionalised processual one. The second study provides a synoptic view of the documentary mode of development planning, consultation and decision making. Here the aim is to provide a map of the formal processes and their outcomes. Both studies are rich in detail and replete in acute observations. We will take a single theme from each. Both relate to Turner's own bifurcated experience of the processes: 'learning to read the consultation document' from the first study and 'mapping the text flow' from the second.

Reading the Notice

The act of receiving the Planning Notice is how residents first encounter and thus enter the process. Even those whose determination of the contents as 'junk mail' have nonetheless entered it since they can be deemed to have been served with its notice. The encounter, then, is uninvited. Those who chose to open the letter and read the notice are confronted with a sense assembly task. From the diagrams, descriptions and vocabulary, they have to construct 'a place' which is familiar to them and about changes to which they are being consulted. Although she doesn't talk of it this way, what Turner is interested in is how the performativity of the Notice has been designed to construct a particular response. Residents are to 'see' the area under discussion in planning relevant terms and respond appropriately.

The arrival of the Notice is clearly a communicative act. Turner begins by suggesting Bakhtin's dialogic metaphor might be a fruitful place to start. In responding to the Notice, residents, including herself, can be seen to be in a dialogue of social action with and within the planning process. Not surprisingly, she finds this to be a bit of a one-sided dialogue. We suggest an alternative framing might be in terms of the misfiring of the reader's reasonable expectations. A quite normal expectation for those in receipt of letters and the like is that they are the intended recipients of missives which are relevant to them and have been designed for them. This is the conjunction of recipient design and the reciprocity of perspectives. You might call the stance the reader takes in the normal course of things, an 'egological' one. For the planning process, the Notice is 'regiological' (an ugly neologism, we know, but it captures the thought). It is not directed at any one in particular, but to everyone for whom some area or place may be a relevant interest. It is for the reader to determine if they are such a person, a position which is the antithesis of assuming the communication is for and to themselves.

Instead of a dialogue, we have a broadcast. Various features of the Notice provide the clues to its character. The most important of these is the salutation. The addressee is not an identifiable person but a member of a category defined regiologically. Second, in the penultimate paragraph those who may wish to self-identify as relevant recipients should identify themselves as having been “invited” to the public meeting and hence those who do not so self-identify should not. The ambiguity of the quantification of “you” in both the penultimate and final paragraphs plays into this. Third, there is the formatted character of the Notice. Self-identification as “interested” and “invited” does not define the relevance categories those so designated might have. The format of the document provides for alternative reading routes through the information presented. Some, for example residents such as Turner, may go through it from beginning to end. Others, for example developers with competing proposals in the area, may start from the specification of use. The formatted character allows for this non-prescriptive plural sense assembling.

The disjunction of the personal and planning stances towards the document underpins the two main clusters of points Turner makes about ‘her’ reading of the Notice. The first is about the vocabulary and associated semantics carrying the descriptions. Turner as resident finds a disjuncture between her way of knowing the locale and the planning processes way of knowing it. For her, it is a favourite walk or a refuge. For the process, it is a site or a zone and the values defined for the parties are ‘rights’ and ‘ownership’ not enjoyment and identification. The second cluster is about process momentum and the scripted engagement provided for the reader. The places at which the reader can intercept the on-going proposal are pre-defined and the form of their interception (questions and comments) is also pre-defined. Dates for consultation and consideration are fixed. Whilst this may be the beginning of the reader’s involvement in the planning process, the process itself is well underway and is following a prescribed schedule, tied no doubt into other related schedules. Whilst you can see the disjuncture as a confrontation between a local experiential and global administrative ways of knowing where⁶

People’s utterances are scripted and formed within the relations in which the text is embedded; ‘subjectivities’ and capacities to act are organised (2001, p. 313).

such a view reifies the differences of outlook and relevance into competing *welantanschauungen* and the engineering of relations of control.

⁶ Note “utterances” in this quotation refers to the Bakhtin notion of social action as dialogue.

Deconstructing Document Flows

The second study reinforces this reification. Starting from the belief it would be useful to show what “doing planning” as a routine manner consisted in, Turner finds

(t)he standardised working relationships and forms of language and text-based sequences of action through which democratic planning and governing processes operate.....(as) replicable forms of social action that actual situated textual activities produce. When they are put together they *are* the acts of the institution. (Turner 2006, p. 140 emphasis in original)

Her questions are clear enough. What are texts designed to do when, where, how and for whom in the planning process?

Residents wanted answers to their questions—“what happens next?”, “where?” and “who does it?”—and to see just what “it” was they would be doing and did. I also wanted to see just how and what texts or parts of texts could be activated, how and by whom, to produce the characteristic power in these relations, and move “the process” along so inevitably. (ibid., p. 142)

The Municipality had defined a 6-step process for planning applications, their approval and initial implementation. Turner takes this shell and using it as a representational device, places the relevant documents (or as many as she can collect or find out about) in sequential order within the steps. She then marks where residents are expected to be involved in the document-driven flow of activities. These are the points where residents as members of the public ‘experience’ the planning process. As can be imagined, this “map” is both humungous and highly detailed. Whilst numerous relationships are picked out, Turner accepts what she has tracked is not exhaustive. This is a document-centric world and documents touch off other documents, rely on further documents and are consequential for even more documents, many of which fall outside the scope of her scheme.

To help us make sense of this first “sense assembly”, Turner offers higher order representations. One picks out the institutional texts being processed and those texts to which these processual texts are related. This is the process as ‘text production and management’. Such sorting brings out the diverse array of administrative functions which ‘have an interest in’ any planning application. What is revealed is not ‘the’ structure of the organisation (conceived as a planning process) but one way of structuring it. No doubt the residents would find such diagramming a revelation, but we are not told if they were ever shown it and what they made of it if they were. What the ‘map’ does bring out is the multifaceted character of the planning function as a democratic, legally constrained, politically imbued, administratively managed process with real

worldly consequences for a range of stakeholders, all of which have to be 'co-ordinated' if the process is going to work effectively as a stable, routine, accepted and trusted system.

A second higher order representation picks out the process through which (some) conflicts articulated in the consultation process were resolved. This is the document process as an instrument of "governing". The resolution device used is the attachment of 'conditions' to the planning agreement made. Once again, the consequentiality of the texts is drawn out. They mandate certain actions or determine sequences of actions which municipal employees must follow or the business practices developers and others might undertake. Eventually we get the highest representation of all, a summary flow chart the administrative evaluation and political approval process and an indication of the kinds of performativity the document bundles used at each stage can have.

At each 'level' of representation we get further and further away from the experience of the residents as participants in this process. But do we get further and further away from the actuality of the experience of other 'people' engaged with undertaking whatever aspects of the process we might be focused on? For the Minister signing off the decision, the package he or she is presented with is something that they will have to engage with and make sense of, even if only superficially. Their engagement is not so different to that of the residents with the original consultation document which was sent out to them. Equally, the agreements arrived at with developers, contractors and whoever else is involved are no doubt the product of their (long drawn out and difficult) negotiating work and now have to be engaged with as practical matters and hence sense assembled by their own planning and engineering groups.

It would be fair to say that Turner does provide us with direct access to the actuality of the document structures she is concerned with. The problem is the actuality she presents is a pre-theorised one. In the case of the Notice, we are offered a preliminary 'phenomenology' of its initial reading but that reading is couched in terms of an opposition of narratives. With the document flow mapping, the description is wholly in terms of the organisation of a co-ordinated and controlling process. If we reflect on both features, it becomes clear that what we are being given access to is Turner's bifurcated consciousness as an investigator and resident. It is that bifurcated stance which generates the readings she gives not the 'ignorance' of the process which one could reasonably expect a resident to have. In both cases, we have a reconstructed 'narrative history' of how the documentary order was experienced once it had been placed within the administrative relations of governing and control.

To have pulled this feature out of her investigation would have been a radically reflexive and hence very interesting exercise for Turner to have gone through, one which is all too rare in interactional and ethnographic studies.⁷ However, that opportunity is missed and instead we are given admirably dense detail of a formalised administrative process where each step is legally constrained and politically charged. In such circumstances, any document management process will be carefully constructed in response to the relevances these features impose. However, it is hard to see what sociological news there is here either in the mode of representation or in the analysis. They are virtuous enough. But innumerable studies of organisations, public and private, have attested to the labyrinthine ways of administrations and the various states of 'negotiated order' which exist across them. From the rich materials she had at her disposal, in the end Turner offered up what is now a routine analysis.

Section 3. The Management of Accommodation

The story of Institutional Ethnography is a familiar one and one perhaps Ethnomethodology should reflect on and learn from. Youthful exuberant radicalism evolves into middle-aged determined pragmatism and then eventually retreats into assimilated quietude. This happens so often and in so many different guises and locations, one might be forgiven for thinking it a natural process. And perhaps it is. But, natural or not, when seen in Sociology the process does have some common features. So, by way of concluding this whole discussion of Institutional Ethnography and looking forward to Part IV and its concerns with Ethnomethodology and its future, we'd like to pick out a few of the most prominent of these features and the trickiest to manage.

The features we point to do not manifest themselves as distinct lines of argument or analysis. They infuse almost every quandary an emerging research endeavour has to resolve in order to acquire and then shore up its position in a disciplinary field. In fact, it is the interactions across these resolutions and the interdependences among them which constitute the realities of the management problem. They are encountered as unlooked for and generally unwelcome but seemingly necessary trade-offs, where the making of one decision inevitably results in the need for others as the consequences ripple their way through the project's theory and practise. Among the cluster, though, the first two stand out. Somehow, all the other major and minor adaptations and adjustments made over an initiative's trajectory usually lead back to them and the way they were handled.

⁷ The only one we can think of is Weider and Pratt [1990]

METHODOLOGICAL GRAFT FAILURE

The initial conceptual core of Institutional Ethnography was a fusion of Standpoint Theory (itself a gluing of the political aspirations of feminism to the Historical Materialism of Marxism) with the investigative orientation of Ethnomethodology. Our review of the early to middle stages of Institutional Ethnography's history pointed to the instability of this conjoining. Such instability had its source in *the way* the groups of ideas were brought together and *the reasons* they were felt to be both necessary and complementary. Both, it turned out, were less than robust. The fusion was achieved rapidly on the basis of hoped-for cross-fertility but without step-by-step testing for compatibility and what, in other domains, is called 'interoperability'. Over time, the core motivations of each pulled in different directions and choices had to be made over which of the once key concepts, methods and objectives would have to be demoted and eventually laid aside.

RE-TUNING OF EPISTEMIC VALUES

Although every academic or broadly scientific investigative endeavour will aspire to evidential adequacy, conceptual coherence, aesthetic attractiveness and methodological sturdiness, routine practicalities ensure not all of these virtues can be displayed to the same extent at the same time. There will be adjustments in the light of what, at any point, it appears must be done as opposed what can be treated in a more relaxed manner. With Institutional Ethnography, this tuning followed the increasing importance of *applicability* as the primary epistemic value. It was applicability to revolutionary ends of feminism that motivated Standpoint Theory and it was applicability to the investigative ends of Action Theory and its use of ethnographic field work which required the shift to a diffuse sociology for people. With applicability as the leading value, issues of coherence, evidential and causal adequacy, simplicity, reproducibility and the like, all shifted around in the background.

PLYING THE RELEVANCE OF DIFFERENT RELEVANCES

In Institutional Ethnography's case, the tuning of epistemic values is most visible in the working through of how to formulate of the relevance of relevance. Whilst the concern was always couched in terms of the experience of the oppressed, disposed and marginal, the determination of to whom those designations should be applied gradually broadened. The major shift, of course, was from a sociology for women to a sociology for people. But once that shift had taken place and, resonating with the similar adjustments taking place in feminism and Standpoint Theory, Institutional Ethnography's criteria of relevance became increasing loose and its definitional

boundaries porous. At the moment, what determines relevance, namely the identifiable discourses of power in institutional contexts, has all the market advantages of capaciousness and all the brand disadvantages of indistinguishability.

SUFFERING THE PUSHES AND PULLS OF SUCCESS

No-one should begrudge a novel research domain its success; and Institutional Ethnography certainly has been and continues to be a success in the ways which are marked in academic circles. It is well established in University Departments. Its members publish frequently and it attracts lots of enthusiastic students. But with this success come challenges and dilemmas. Perhaps the most universal are how to maintain quality control, how to solve the 'loaves and fishes' trick and how to optimise selective amnesia. Whilst each of these may be experienced at the personal, project and programme area level, the commonality of methods for dealing with them mean they are disciplinary in character.

Success brings interest, attention and sometimes a degree of faddishness. Not everyone who wants to 'do' Institutional Ethnography has had or will have the personal or intellectual skills to rise to its research challenges. But at the same time no-one wants to turn away the willing and the well intentioned. The result is that standards of undergraduate, graduate and sometimes even professionally qualified work can slip as research topics are selected on the basis of personal inclination or situation, as investigative short-cuts are taken and as less than meritorious work replicated, cited and celebrated. The point we are making here is not that similar challenges were not present right at the start. They certainly were! But the issue now is one of scale and the need for methods to control quality at that scale.

The management of quality is closely tied to the need to feed the five thousand. Increasing numbers of students wanting to join the research ranks creates the need for increasing research funds and that means generating more project opportunities and shaping them so they are fundable. When needs must, picking and choosing, especially picking and choosing in order to achieve strategic disciplinary and research programme objectives while ensuring fit to available skill sets, is no longer an option.

Selective amnesia arises in the context of the discipline's auto-historiography. How it tells its own story. The wish to adopt a rhetoric of continuity is quite understandable. After all, there is not much profit to be gained by emphasising how one's own work, that of colleagues and even the discipline more broadly, has veered and tacked in the stormy seas of changing academic fashion

and professional practicalities. An example of just such amnesia can be found in Freeden Blume Oeur's recent summary history of Dorothy Smith's work [Blume Oeur 2023]. In laying out the driving forces behind Smith's determination to form a new sociology, Ethnomethodology is introduced as a purveyor of "blob ontology of categorization" implied by a shift in focus from gender to difference. Its role in helping shape Smith's challenge to conventional Sociology seems quite forgotten. This matters because it signals that what is being erased from the collective memory are the questions which Dorothy Smith posed to Sociology and her rejection of the answers she found there. They were heavily influenced by her understanding of Ethnomethodology and the stand-off over them eventually led her to argue for a change in the questions a sociology should address and hence the answers it should provide. It is precisely the loss of this questioning among the research community and hence an acquiescence to the questions and answers enshrined in the accommodations made with the broader discipline which are the hallmarks of normalisation. Selective amnesia leads to backward and forward projections of coherence, continuity and unity and with them both an underemphasising of the degree of critique embraced at the foundation and an overemphasising of the potential for radical impact of what is currently being done.

Perhaps the most telling feature of any normalising mode of sociology is its lack of concern for its own new model and whether it actually has solved solve the problems which generated it. In what is to-day an almost forgotten and certainly much unappreciated essay, A. R. Louch [Louch 1966] suggested Sociology, as a putative science, had a rather peculiar way with its abstractions. In the physical and natural sciences, theories and other abstractions are designed to facilitate the understanding of phenomena which are not at that point well understood by science—if they are understood at all. As descriptions of the physics of the natural world, matter, mass and motion were barely scientifically understood before the development of Classical Mechanics. To-day, the mind-boggling intricacies of Quantum Mechanics are evidence of the struggle to organise a systematic account of the basic components and forces from which matter is constituted. With Sociology, almost the reverse seems to be the case. Sociological descriptions of activities, topics and patterns of behaviour like child rearing, voting, T.V. watching and the organisation of working life, most of which are thoroughly well grasped by everyone whose lives are taken up with them, can only be understood by translating the abstract sociological concepts and terminology in which they are couched back into the terms of familiar discourse.

Institutional Ethnography doesn't propose to break with this strategy. The purpose of abstraction is to be able to offer general descriptions. As Gilbert Ryle [Ryle 1954] once put it, it doesn't matter to Physics whether a falling body is a wheel bearing, a house mouse or a man

wearing a Panama hat and striped braces. All will fall at a velocity of $v_f = gt$. Velocity, gravity and time are all Physics is interested in. Since Sociology also is in the business of giving general descriptions, it too will have to use selective abstractions. It is not the abstractions themselves but the relationship between what we understand and the description we give of it which is important. And it is this which Institutional Ethnography has not appreciated. As a result, it too trades in obscure abstractions, albeit ones which are different to those given currency in conventional Sociology. It takes abstractions such as standpoint, ideology, gender division of labour and empowerment and bends them to its ends thereby reproducing the very problem of which Dorothy Smith complained.

At one point early in the development of Institutional Ethnography, it looked as if a thoroughgoing re-setting move could be on the cards, though exactly what that might have been and how it might have evolved out of the amalgam of Standpoint Theory and Ethnomethodology was not clear. Alas that moment passed, and Institutional Ethnography set off down the well-worn path to normalisation. The adjustments, re-orientations, re-shaping and re-definitions found to be necessary as more ambitious analyses were attempted and the scope of the field grew, gradually blunted the approach's distinctiveness and pulled it closer and closer to the mainstream. In the end, the original motivating and radical components disappeared and an innovation which had begun as a high-minded attempt to reconstruct Sociology turned into yet another exercise in well intentioned sermonising.

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