WRITING WITH PRIMARY RESEARCH

5.

A FEMINIST TEACHES WRITING THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Dr. Anna Sicari

What You Will Learn In this Chapter

In this chapter, you will learn about Institutional Ethnography as a research methodology and method of inquiry to investigate a recurring issue you see happening at work, school, any organization you belong to, any "institution" you belong to, where you do work. This chapter gives background on Institutional Ethnography, defines key terms and concepts you need to know and how you can apply this to your own work, explains how IE is relevant to the First-Year Composition classroom and writing more broadly, gives tips on how to get started on a project using IE, and connects IE to feminism and instiutional change. This chapter ends with discussion questions to help you talk about IE and primary research with others.

Key Terms

- Institutional Ethnography
- StandPoint
- Social Coordination and Ruling Relations
- Problematic
- Institutional Discourse (Texts)
- Feminism

What is Institutional Ethnography?

Did you ever find yourself at work wondering why things are the way they are? For example, perhaps you are working as an intern at a publishing company and you notice that it seems the male-identified interns get more opportunities to work with the editors in working with authors, while the female-identified interns tend to the everyday: answer emails, make copies, run errands. You start wondering if it is "just in your head," but you have been talking with the female interns who all seem to share similar experiences at this company; they are complaining about doing secretarial work when they wanted the opportunity to work with authors and learn

about the editorial process. You want to investigate this experience further—to see if other female identified staff feel this way at this company, possibly at other publishing companies, too. You want to be able to discuss this problem of female staff feeling passed over by their male colleagues with your supervisor, but you want evidence to back up your claims. Clear communication, research with significant findings, and implications for change is necessary for you to make any legitimate case. However, you do not know where to start or begin and you find yourself overwhelmed.

This is where Institutional Ethnography would come in handy and is a useful sociological method of inquiry to know and learn in First Year Composition, as work is a central part of our everyday lives and research shows we learn through writing and talking about writing through and with others. Institutional Ethnography is a critical methodology that studies "how things happen" (Smith 5) through the examination of our work processes and work activities. Work, in IE, can be defined broadly: it can include working at an institution or company, or mothering, or being part of a social organization, such as a sorority or a student group. IE was first developed by socioligist and feminist Dorothy Smith, for "women, and for people," to better understand how our social relations and working activities are shaped for us. Important for readers to know is that Smith was involved in the 1970s feminist movement, and participated in and learned more about consciousness-raising; this is a process in which women/female-identified people met and shared common issues that occurred in their lives, both as part of a bonding and problem-solving process. This term is credited to feminist activist Anne Forer, when she asked a group of feminists to share how they experienced oppression as women, as she needed it to "raise her own consciousness." Smith was involved in these programs, learning from women their shared experiences with systems of oppression and power (Ritzer & Stepnisky 560-63). This concept of consciousness-raising and encouraging people, especially women and marginalized people, to speak from their own experiences is key to understanding IE and its aims, as IE asks for people to look up from their everyday experiences to understand how these experiences are linked to the translocal and organizes everyday experiences. The emphasis is on what people do–with work as a broadly conceived notion– and what individuals say and know about their work as experts, that point to larger patterns of shared experiences to uncover institutional organizations of power that influence and shape such experiences.

IE provides tools to examine our work and the institutional forces that shape what we do so that we can have knowledge and insight, from data, to reform and bring intervention to these spaces/institutions. IE draws on data collection methods typical in more traditional forms of ethnography: interviews, case studies, focus groups, textual analysis, discourse analysis, autoethnography, participant observation, and archival research. IE asks its practitioners, however, to "look up from where they are" to map up and away from just the personal to identify patterns. Two important scholars of IE, Marjorie DeVault and Liza McCoy describe the steps of IE research as this: "a) identify an experience b) identify some of the institutional processes that are shaping that experience, and c) investigate those processes in order to describe analytically how they operate as the grounds of experience" (20). IE is interested in examining how something happens and there are five core concepts, or tools, to understanding IE that this chapter will briefly uncover: standpoint, social coordination, ruling relations, problematic, and institutional discourse (or texts).

Standpoint

Standpoint is drawn from feminist cultural materialism, and we can see the influence of the feminist consciousness- movement most clearly rooted int his concept. The researcher in an IE project is part of the research experience: that is, they are participating in the work processes that they seek to discover/learn more about. Standpoint makes clear that the uniqueness of an individual shapes their experience, and research narrative; so, for the female-identified intern at the publishing company in the earlier anecdote to this chapter, their experience with the company is different than the male-identified interns, but is similar to the female-identified staff, although their stories, too, are uniquely situated to them as individuals. Those who practice IE do so with the full knowledge that all knowledge is "partial," grounded in "material experience" (the embodied and everyday work/way we live), and a reflection of social dynamics. Two writing studies scholars write about standpoint in their article, "Institutional Ethnography as Materialist Framework for Writing Program Research and the Faculty-Staff Work Standpoints Project," "The uniqueness of individual experience–the

researcher's personal experience or knowledge of a site and what has been gleaned from interviewing and observing–provides the guiding perspective for the research narrative produced" (136). In the intern example, the female-identified intern wishes to seek out evidence on the treatment of female staff based on her experience and the discussions she has had and witnessed with her fellow female-identified staff. This research narrative is grounded in her experience, which is partial, embodied, and materially situated–in IE, this is important, as the researcher acknowledges their participation in the research and how their own experiences have shaped their research narrative and project.

Social Coordination and Ruling Relation

Social Coordination is a unique core component to IE, as it discusses how both institutions and individuals participate in everyday social relations. Institutions are "social entities" (LaFrance) that are created by individuals who take up a similar practice: ie, colleges, universities, hospitals, prisons, businesses. Institutions would not exist without social coordination, and the relations/networks that people create, and yet they also shape the existing realities of relations. For example, the publishing company was created by a network of people who share similar interests in producing texts; in order for the publication of texts to occur, different relations and networks were formed within the company that produces different hierarchies in the company, with interns being on the lower-end of the totem pole (often, intern positions are unpaid with little incentives). Individuals constructed such hierarchies, and yet struggle to understand how to untangle such hierarchies when they become problematic, as certain systems/networks in place have been set up "forever." Social relations also impact the way a worker might respond to treatment at work. For example, the female-identified staff of interns who have been complaining about their treatment have formed their own network within the larger network of the publishing company; as they complain, many recognize their place within the company, that is, they have very little power or say, as interns. As this publishing company has professional codes and standards, a few of the female-identified staff are afraid to speak out, fearing that this will be seen as causing "trouble" at work. Understanding the complex social relations involved in work processes is important for those wanting to do IE research; how does one give voice to those who feel powerless and marginalized, especially if the researcher is part of that social network? What are the risks that are involved? It is also important to think about how social relations created these conditions in the first place: how does the treatment of women in society, historically and locally, play a role in the treatment of women in the workplace, more specifically the publishing industry, and even more specifically, at this one publishing industry? How does the national context shape the treatment of female-identified staff? How does the local? And how might this study help other female interns in the future, given the complex web of social coordinations? These are important questions to consider, and examining power dynamics within social relationships and networks is key in IE through the third core concept: ruling relations. Ruling relations are "that extraordinary yet ordinary complex set of relations...that connect us across space and time and organize our everyday lives" (Smith 10). Ruling relations delineate and draw on complexes of power and authority and put into focus hierarchies within institutions, such as position/rank and expertise; they also reflect ideologies, histories, and social influences. The female-identified intern also observes that many of her supervisors are white, male-identified, although her immediate supervisor is female-identified. She begins to do research on the different positions within her company, and who occupies which position, as she considers the experiences of the female interns and their concerns. Who is being promoted and what social influences might impact who is getting opportunities? How do the male-identified interns feel about their work? IE allows for the researcher to tease out these complex power dynamics and work through the nuances and coordinations of hierarchy.

Problematic

The problematic is the "cornerstone" to Institutional Ethnography, as it defines the major issue that needs to be researched, or, to quote LaFrance and Nicolas, "is a situated point of entry," and IE researchers begin with a problematic. A researcher's problematic "sets out a project of research and discovery that organizes the direction of investigation from the standpoint of those whose

experience is its starting point" (Smith 10). A problematic is used to direct attention to a series of questions or concerns that arise from the people's everyday concerns; it comes from the people on the ground, doing the work for an institution. In the publishing situation, the problematic is investigating the experiences of the female-identified interns at a local publishing company to better understand how their experiences have been shaped by institutional factors. A problematic takes into account that not all individuals will be oriented into a practice/ experience work in the same way, and starts from lived experience that competes with the work discourse to understand why an individual, or group of individuals, experiences at work compete with the workplace discourse. In the publishing company scenario, the company has a mission that it strives for inclusivity and diversity. This mission statement is posted on their website, a copy of it is in the main office, and it is often pasted in individual email messages from supervisors in their signature. The workplace discourse is one that emphasizes inclusivity, and yet the female-identified interns feel as if they are not being treated as their male colleagues in terms of opportunities in the workplace, how they are talked to, and the types of responsibilities placed on them. The people on the ground, who make up the employees of this workplace, do not feel as if they are being included in the work, and feel excluded based on their gender, and perhaps rank. These experiences of the female-identified staff are a site of contest within the larger, professional organization who work under a mission of inclusivity and diversity. While the company literature and discourse might talk about the work under the framing of inclusivity, the people who work for the company, in this case, the particular subset of female-identified interns, talk about the work in much different terms. This is the problematic, and the cornerstone to the project[1]. The problematic points to the direction of the investigation and helps the researcher frame guiding research questions to develop the study, while taking into account core concepts of social coordination and ruling relations. The problematic allows us, too, to understand how the research begins in lived and material experience."

Institutional Discourse (or Texts)

Texts, and institutional discourse more broadly, are key and central to any IE project. As IE is interested in the everyday, material world of institutions and work, the texts that socially coordinate people to the work are necessary elements in this methodology. As Michelle LaFrance and Melissa Nicolas write, "Texts are shapers of thinking, language use, and ideology. Usefulness, meaning, purpose, and accountability arise from the reality of the texts" (140). Think about how important and ubiquitous texts are at a workplace. Work documents, such as emails, text on websites, memos, policies, mission statements, coordinate and shape how we talk and think about work–how bosses talk about the work, how they talk about the work to different employees, how people talk about work to each other, how we talk about the work to ourselves. Texts also include the work that we do: medical charts, reports, lesson plans, research, any form of writing that is associated with our work. Social media posts further the importance of texts to our everyday work, as it frames the way work is discussed to so many different audiences (on a global level). These texts make up how the work is communicated to and with different people and audiences. Institutional ethnographers recognize how crucial texts are for research purposes: the work documents, the texts, coordinate activity, coordinate how the work happens, and it is through texts that institutional ethnographers can make visible the relationship between the institution and the embodied individual doing the work. For the female-identified intern wanting to understand gendered behaviors and relations at her workplace, she might also wish to analyze work documents: emails sent out to staff, memos on workplace conduct and professional attire, HR policies on discrimination in the workplace, the job descriptions of interns. These texts shape the social coordination of the workplace and also are key in creating change at an institution. The staff person can use these texts, along with the interviews, to explore how certain people, namely female interns, are being regulated to certain types of work activities and through finding patterns, bring data to the institution, and/or her boss, and discuss their findings.

These five organizing principles of Institutional Ethnography show how this framework asks researchers to approach ethnographic

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1. It is important to note, too, that the problematic does not always have to be a problem (although in this example/scenario, it clearly is) to be "fixed." In IE, it could be more exploratory: for example, the study of professional development for ICU nurses at a research hospital and examining what professional development might look like for these nurses.

work. However, it is important to emphasize that these principles can be extremely flexible in practice, allowing the researcher to address the locally situated and flexible experience and practice of their particular work situation. Dorothy Smith is objective to any idea on IE becoming an orthodoxy or a sect, as the key to IE is that it is committed to exploration and discovery. And while there are the definite principles this chapter went over, there are many ways of realizing them into practice. A central idea to IE is that, as a methodology, it "challenges the notion that work practices or experiences...are accidents of circumstances or the inevitable product of processes beyond anyone's control. IE foregrounds the relationships that exist between the material conditions of work practice and choices individuals make as they negotiate their situations" (LaFrance & Nicolas 141). IE recognizes the complexity of work as it encompasses relations, material realities, and how power and talk influences our everyday decisions and choices that we make; it also allows for researchers to start in their own experiences, to map out the many influences and structures that shape these experiences, and to conduct a study that will help us explore how certain things happen. To turn back to our opening anecdote of the female intern, it is important to recognize what a complex and difficult situation she is in at work, and how her experience is both highly situated and individualized, and yet also reflective of larger issues of female discrimination in the workplace (which is absolutely a reality). While IE will not be the answer to this young person's issues at work, as it is a methodology focused on discovery and situated practice, it will help her understand how these gendered experiences happen to a particular group of workers, interns, at this particular institution, a publishing company. Recognizing the how something happens, how forces of institutional sexism work, is key and central to revising and addressing serious systemic issues of oppression in the workplace.

Why IE in First-Year Composition and How to Get Started on Your Own Study

Institutional Ethnography, rooted in the personal and material world, is extremely relevant to any writing course, as it helps writers/researchers understand their local realities, and how they are always in relation and coordination with larger discourses and communities. The IE researcher better understands concepts of audience, genre, communication, and relationality–all key concepts that are important to writing. IE asks us to start from the everyday as we understand the problematic, and through this problematic, form guiding research questions; in this way, IE asks us to reflect and write on our experiences first before we form research questions. Textual analysis, too, is vital to an Institutional Ethnographer, as texts (which include interviews and focus groups), help us in finding patterns and "mapping up." And it asks researchers to truly think about revision; what is mapping telling us about the institutions and work that we participate in, and how can we use these findings to revise? As writing studies scholar Michelle Miley writes on IE, "The findings...allow us to draw maps, maps of intricate relationships that define our work...These maps can then guide as we advocate [for change]" (Miley).

If interested in getting started on an IE project, take the time to think about your work. This can be work in which you are employed by an institution, paid or unpaid, or this can be work more broadly defined: the work you do as a student, the work you do as a sibling, as a parent, as a member of an organization. Free-write about what a typical day at work looks like–perhaps keep a journal, even. As you write, reread your entries and start reflecting on experiences–are their commonalities or issues you want to explore? What is your problematic, or situated point of entry that you could investigate? Define your problematic. What type of questions can help you discover more about this experience? Start drafting questions and share with other people–perhaps take a visit to the writing center, or share with your friends, your classmates, or the people that you work with. Once you have done this, and revise your questions and have them be your research questions; keep in your mind concepts such as ruling relations and social coordination as you work on these questions. Make sure you are aware of your own standpoint in this research. Then, it will be helpful to then start thinking about methods to help you explore these questions–interviews, surveys, focus groups, autoethnographies, field work–what method is best for your discovery process? This can be several methods, or just one. As you start drafting interview questions, or designing your survey, it will also be helpful for you to think about important texts/documents of your everyday work to analyze. Collect the material and start coding for patterns. Continually reflect and draw notes on your data, and begin the mapping process.

If needed, seek more interviews, survey responses, stories that will help systemize your findings[2]. Draft, redraft, revise; this process is recursive and continually evolving; allow yourself to embrace discovery and not fear messiness. Allow yourself to uncover how things happen and enjoy the experience!

Feminism, IE, and Writing

Institutional Ethnography is grounded in feminist practice and its roots are founded in the 1970s feminist movement; IE encourages those from marginalized positions to speak about their experiences and to use their material world as a starting point for research. What is feminism you might ask—and it is a good question. I will let bell hooks, a renowned feminist and critical race theorist/ scholar/activist, answer this question through her simple, yet important, definition: "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks 18). Feminism asks us to imagine a world in which we can all be who we are, in a world of peace and possibility; and we must work together to fight all forms of oppression. IE asks us to think about ways to reform and reshape our work through the lens of marginalized positions, in order to create more just and equitable spaces. Writing and communication is how we spread ideas and help bring change to the world—from the local to the global; you cannot separate identity from writing. IE is one more tool for you as a writer and researcher to think about ways in which your own writing can lead to reform and change, for the good of everyone.

Discussion Questions

- How might IE help us in understanding how things happen across institutions and organizations? What concept did we find particularly useful in helping us think about IE as a methodology useful to us?
- IE, as discussed in this chapter, is grounded in feminist research. Thinking about this chapter, and its particular understanding of feminism, how can we apply feminist work to our everyday lives? Why is it important to do so?
- Brainstorm a series of issues or concerns you see taking place at a particular institution you work for and/or a member of. Share these issues or concerns with a partner and begin drafting questions that might help you investigate how these issues happen. Can you identify the problematic you wish to explore through IE?
- IE begins with your personal, lived experience. Narrate your experience at work, at this organization, similar to the anecdote in this chapter. After writing your narration, and thinking about the problematic, begin thinking about possible methods you would use to explore the research question in your study. Would you collect documents? Would you interview other people in your position? Would you survey people?
- After reading this chapter, what is your understanding of feminism? Feminism asks us to continually reflect on our ethos and ways of being in this world. How can we make sure we are ethical researchers when we use IE?
- What are potential questions you have with Institutional Ethnography? What are your questions you have with primary research in general?

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2. It's worth mentioning that if you wish to present your work at a conference or to eventually publish your study, and you are working with human subjects, you must first obtain an IRB. It is worth visiting the OSU

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About the Author

Dr. Anna Sicari
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY
https://osuwritingcenter.okstate.edu/
https://twitter.com/wc_okstate

Dr. Anna Sicari is an Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing Studies at Oklahoma State University and she directs the Writing Center. Her research interests include writing centers, feminist theory and research, and work on identity and inclusion.