

Reflections of a Novice Institutional Ethnographer

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Institutional ethnography (IE) was developed by Dorothy E. Smith, a Canadian sociologist, in the 1980s. This method of inquiry helps to uncover how the everyday experiences of people in local settings are organized by and linked to the work of others. The purpose of this article is to provide newcomers to IE with insights gained from the first author's learning as a novice institutional ethnographer. These insights stem from her doctoral thesis, which examined how the promotion of physical activity is socially organized in long-term-care homes. The benefits of using IE are considered and the challenges encountered in trying to understand and use this method of inquiry are examined. Strategies used to overcome the challenges are discussed.

Keywords: physical activity, institutional ethnography, long-term care, nursing homes

Réflexions d'une novice en ethnographie institutionnelle

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L'ethnographie institutionnelle est une méthode de recherche élaborée par la sociologue canadienne Dorothy E. Smith. Elle permet de découvrir comment l'expérience quotidienne des gens dans un milieu donné s'organise et se coordonne en fonction du travail des autres. Le présent article vise à faire profiter les novices en la matière de réflexions sur l'apprentissage de la première auteure en tant qu'ethnographe débutante. Son projet de doctorat consistait à étudier comment s'organise, dans les centres d'hébergement et de soins de longue durée, la promotion de l'activité physique d'un point de vue social. Les auteurs analysent les avantages de l'ethnographie institutionnelle et les difficultés que présentent la compréhension de la méthode et sa mise en œuvre. Elles discutent de stratégies susceptibles de surmonter celles-ci.

Mots clés : activité physique, ethnographie institutionnelle, soins de longue durée, maisons de soins infirmiers

This article describes the first author's experiences in learning institutional ethnography (IE) for her doctoral research into the social organization of personal support work (PSW)¹ and its influence on the promotion of physical activity in long-term-care (LTC) homes (Benjamin, 2011). Primarily using examples from this research, we discuss IE concepts, the benefits and challenges of using IE, and strategies for addressing these challenges. Use of the first person refers to the first author. The second author was a consultant on the methodology and contributed substantively to the article.

Overview of the Doctoral Study

Data were collected at two LTC study sites in the Canadian province of Ontario through participant observation and interviewing of PSWs and other individuals such as nurse managers and representatives from the Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC). Institutional texts such as forms, policy statements, and memos were also collected. The data and the process of data analysis resulted in the researcher focusing on two significant work processes — the PSWs' work in the dining room and their handling of transfers (e.g., lifting a person from bed to chair). The PSWs' work involved in lifts and transfers has an obvious relation to physical activity, while work processes related to the dining room seem unrelated to how PSWs promote physical activity for residents. We show how examining the social organization of the PSWs' work processes leads to a new understanding of the social organization of physical activity in LTC. It produces an analysis that departs from many of the currently circulating explanations concerning physical activity (Benjamin, Edwards, & Caswell, 2009; Benjamin et al., 2011; Chen, 2010). Rather than examining education, attitudes, awareness, and time limitations, we link these work practices to MOHLTC standards for LTC homes.

The purpose of standards of care is to produce something *good* for residents. However, some of the standards result in practices that actually constrain the efforts of PSWs to support residents' daily physical activity. Moreover, the standards organize not only particular work processes but also a mindset among staff in LTC homes. This mindset relies on assumptions about how physical activity can be achieved — for example, activities of daily living are not viewed as physical activity or exercise. This understanding contradicts our knowledge of how elderly people living

¹ Personal support workers (PSWs) are also known as health-care aides or personal care attendants (PCAs). They are unregulated health-care workers and provide most of the direct hands-on care in LTC homes, where typically they are supervised by registered nurses or registered practical nurses (RPNs).

independently maintain their physical strength by performing activities of daily living. The LTC setting organizes physical activity as separate from its routine dailiness and regards it as a program add-on that takes place a few times per week. Consequently, the promotion of movement and physical resilience is professionalized, mainly under the purview of physiotherapists or activity aides. Known as a ruling relation in IE, this formulation of physical activity limits the ability of PSWs to integrate it as a feature of residents' daily routine. More information about the concept of ruling relations is presented below in the subsection titled *Texts and ruling relations*.

Institutional Ethnography

IE is a method of inquiry developed by Dorothy E. Smith, a Canadian sociologist, in the early 1980s. It selectively uses Marxist and feminist philosophy (Smith, 1999). Smith's feminist consciousness rooted in the women's movement of the 1970s and her work as a professor in a male-dominated sociology faculty informed her thinking about IE (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005). She recognized that her knowledge and her experiences as a single mother were largely invisible in the sociology that she taught and realized that the everyday work of women (e.g., housekeeping, child care) was essentially concealed in the male-dominated academic world in which she participated (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b, 2005). Smith began to question the official positioning of single mothers as deviants from the norm. She determined that single mothers' deviance was socially organized within a school system that relied on the work of mothers — for example, helping with homework. In exploring the everyday work of single mothers, Smith discovered many competing demands on their time. Within dominant systems of schooling, troubles were generated for both the children and their mothers when mothers were unable to produce *their* homework in its expected form. Influenced also by her reading of Marx, Smith embarked on a sociology that could account for women's knowledge-based work that had heretofore been subordinated. Her project was an activist enterprise invested in social justice. She established a sociology directed towards learning about how the social world is organized. Incorporating what she learned from Marx, her method guides a material discovery to uncover how certain forms of knowledge are overlooked in the authorized formulations of what counts as knowledge.

The materiality embedded in Smith's method of inquiry directs the careful examination of texts and people's activities related to texts (Smith, 1987, 1990b, 2001, 2005). Smith recognized that textual practices

contribute to the social organization of knowledge and are powerful coordinators that produce dominant and subordinate knowledge practices. Commonly, texts such as policy statements and memos mediate this organization across geography and time and coordinate practices among multiple people (Smith, 2005). Nursing is heavily regulated by textual practices — in their daily work, nurses in Ontario activate the standards of practice developed by the College of Nurses of Ontario.² Embedded in the annual registration processes, and taken up by health-care authorities in policy documents or hiring practices, the textual coordination that arises within nurses' regulatory framework organizes the practices of nurses, clerical staff, and managers across Ontario.

A tenet of IE is that all knowledge is socially organized (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). Considering that knowledge about the world is a social entity, we can discover how it is structured within practices of dominance and authorization and how contradictory practices become taken for granted (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). For example, a PSW's knowledge about the individual needs of a resident is overlooked because it does not fit within the routines and knowledge that officially organize that work. In the next section we present the first author's personal reflections at various stages of the research.

Reflections at the Various Stages

Introduction to Institutional Ethnography

Prior to my doctoral research, in 2006 I conducted a study to examine factors that influence the promotion of physical activity in nine LTC homes in Ontario (Benjamin et al., 2009, 2011). Although the study captured influencing factors at the individual, environmental, and organizational levels, it did not adequately capture those originating outside of the LTC setting (e.g., legislation). Based on my experiences as an LTC nurse and researcher, I knew that LTC homes were highly regulated environments and that the promotion of physical activity did not happen haphazardly. Unlike conventional ethnographic approaches, IE allows a researcher to look beyond the local setting and what can be known from there, to discover other factors that shape and organize people's everyday actions. Thus, the utility of IE made it an appealing and promising method of inquiry that could extend my previous research work.

Understanding the Key Concepts of Institutional Ethnography

Problematic. The utility of a research problematic is a key concept discussed by institutional ethnographers. In order to focus the doctoral

² Governing body for RNs, RPNs, and nurse practitioners (NPs) in Ontario.

research, I spent a considerable amount of time trying to formulate a research problematic at the outset of the research. The problematic is neither the research question nor the problems that people are experiencing (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). It is those instances when a researcher notices a disjuncture (contradiction) between the official explanation of how things happen, or even the explanations provided by people who are experiencing the issue, and the observations of what actually goes on (Bisaillon, 2012; Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 1990a). For instance, the PSWs spent a great deal of time providing a particular form of dining service (e.g., unhurried, one course served at a time). The official explanation for using this approach was to provide *pleasant dining experiences* for residents. Official reports and accreditation practices also contained this explanation. However, this explanation did not represent what was actually happening. Despite devoting a considerable amount of time to the dining experience, the PSWs sometimes rushed residents through their meals. The dining room work also placed pressure on other types of work, related to toileting, bathing, and dressing. The problematic arose at the moment when the official version of what was happening in the dining room (pleasant dining experiences) was at odds with what was actually happening (residents being rushed).

Standpoint. Conceptually, standpoint is an entry point for the researcher to position himself/herself in the everyday expert knowledge of people's daily activities (Rankin, Malinsky, Tate, & Elena, 2010). It is a particular location within the institutional order. Typically, an institutional ethnographer "takes the standpoint of those that are being ruled" (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 16) and works on behalf of the people who are experiencing the problems (Rankin et al., 2010).

I took the standpoint of PSWs, for two reasons. First, PSWs are unregulated providers who deliver the largest proportion of direct resident care — they are the backbone of the labour force in LTC. Although they are in a prime position to assist residents with their physical activity, my experience indicated that typically this does not happen. Understanding the social organization of PSWs within the roles and responsibilities of nurses who are regulated and within the other relations that organize their employment appeared to be the optimal way to learn how the physical strength of some elderly people declines when they enter residential care. Second, based on my research and clinical practice, I speculated that the problem was not a lack of awareness of the benefits of activity. Despite PSWs' positive beliefs about physical activity, their heavy workloads made it difficult for them to assist residents with their physical activities. PSWs' explanation that there was *not enough time* to promote physical activity did not explain the complexity of the issue nor provide the direction to address it. As the doctoral research progressed, I

interviewed participants other than PSWs (e.g., nurse managers) at the LTC study sites. Their official explanations of how the PSWs' work was organized were often convincing and compelling. Keeping sight of what the PSWs told me in the interviews was challenging, because my training and work experience as a registered nurse is positioned in a ruling relationship to PSWs. The use of standpoint helped to refocus my attention on what the PSWs were saying. Observing the PSWs in their work also helped me to stay firmly grounded in the research standpoint. For example, some of the nurse managers explained that residents were encouraged to eat in the dining room because it provided opportunities for them to socialize (official explanation). This explanation seemed perfectly logical because I was trained in this ideology as an LTC nurse. I learned how to pay attention to the occasions when the official explanations were activated, trailing with them all the professional ideology.

Social relations. In IE, social relations are distinct from interpersonal relations, as they are often understood outside sociology. A social relation is "something happening that links individuals together" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 335). Conceptually, social relationships are the intersections of people's actions and their practices (Bisaillon, 2012). The texts that people produce and use mediate many of these intersections — they are material forms of social relations (Smith, 2005). For example, I gathered and analyzed texts used or produced by the PSWs in their daily work, in search of the material links that connected their work to the work of others outside the local setting (extra-local). After observing and interviewing PSWs, I spoke with other people to see how their work intersected with that of the PSWs. Thinking of social relations as something other than personal relations and as something *happening* that included the talk and actions linking people's actions across settings were two conceptual challenges for me.

Texts and ruling relations. An institutional ethnographer views a ruling relation as a practice occurring in a local setting that infuses institutional interests into the setting (Rankin et al., 2010). For example, the administrative requirement to meet meal-service standards did not seem to make sense in the daily lives of the PSWs and residents. The PSWs sometimes wheeled residents to the dining room rather than helping them to walk, because wheeling is faster. Although wheeling residents is necessary in order for PSWs to get their work done, the practice arises as contradictory and may not be in the best interest of residents. It not only reduces opportunities for physical activity but may override residents' personal preferences and PSWs' informed judgement. With regard to ruling relations, institutional ethnographers view people as active participants in the ruling relations and not as passive bystanders (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). People in the local setting are often completely cap-

tured by the ruling relation and its apparent rationality. For example, an MOHLTC standard mandates that residents be offered two baths per week. PSWs participate in this ruling relation by taking up and activating the standard as they implement the practice into their daily work. They understand it as a best practice that is necessary. However, when looking at this practice with a critical eye, it does not always make sense when contrasted with how bathing practices unfold in real-life conditions and with people's individualized and personal bathing needs.

Institutional ethnographers pay attention to texts in order to explicate ruling relations. It is important to emphasize this point. In contemporary societies, people's activities are often mediated by their work with texts. The materiality of Marx guides IE researchers' attention to texts that are the material threads of ruling relations that can be discovered (Marx & Engels, 1976; Smith, 2005). People's activation of texts can be observed and analyzed for their institutional traces. Texts include all media that can be replicated across time and geography. An example of a text that organizes PSWs' daily work is the bath list — a taken-for-granted document that PSWs often do not even look at. It complies with the textual directions of the MOHLTC standard related to two baths per week and works behind the scenes, introducing the ruling relations into the LTC setting, as it unfolds in PSWs' daily work.

Looking at the LTC Literature Differently

My research training taught me to review the literature to identify gaps and to use this knowledge as a basis for developing a research project. However, institutional ethnographers do not review and use the literature as fact. They position themselves as questioners within the popular discourses of authorized knowledge and empirical evidence. Even studies judged to be rigorous, interesting, and useful are analyzed for their epistemological and ontological premises. Institutional ethnographers read the literature with a critical eye to discover how the dominant discourses, which conceptually operate in a confining circular pattern, reproduce over and over again, explanations that appear rational and logical. They read published studies to discover how people's activities carry traces of the literature and where the ideas in the literature appear in the texts that organize people's daily experiences. Pragmatically, I read the literature to identify the paradigm in which it was generated and the practices it reproduced. The first paradigmatic view contained the official theorized explanations about how things happen and the second included the rare paper that framed the issue as socially organized and held traces of the material world. These were the papers where people's *doings* could actually be seen before they were abstracted into categories, concepts, and theories.

Looking for the Right Type of Data

I had to learn what type of data to look for and what questions needed to be asked. Institutional ethnographers do not study subjects' individual perspectives (McCoy, 2005). Instead, they focus on work processes. I began by observing the PSWs as they went about their typical day and interviewed them about their work. I looked for the contradictions, the things that seemed to make sense until one really looked at what was happening, as well as the linkages that connected the PSWs' work to the work of others. Most people lack a useful analysis of how their daily experiences are socially organized in contradictory ways. They may recognize that some things are at odds, but often, over time, people's daily experiences become routine taken-for-granted practices. For instance, the PSWs' explanation for why meals were served in such a manner was *this is the way things are done around here*.

In IE, data collection moves back and forth between what is learned from observing and interviewing the standpoint informants and work going on outside the purview of the local setting. What I learned from the PSWs informed me about who to talk to next and what types of questions to ask. When I directed my attention beyond the local arrangements of the PSWs and their knowledge, I began to talk with other individuals (e.g., nurse managers).

I was initially overwhelmed by the huge amount of text-based materials in the study settings and did not know what texts to collect. However, as my research progressed I gained clarity about the work processes that became my focus and directed my attention towards the texts that intersected with that work. I identified pertinent texts by listening for clues in the participants' interviews and by observing texts used or produced by the participants in their daily work. For example, I watched and talked to the PSWs as they completed the basic care flow sheet at the end of each shift, paying particular attention to what was included and what was left out. When I directed my data collection to texts outside the setting — with the puzzle related to the dining room work and how it appeared on the basic care flow sheet — I asked a manager about how all this worked. I was told that there were standards related to how the meals were to be served in the dining room. I then went searching for a copy of those standards.

Understanding Data Analyses

Understanding how to proceed with data analysis was the most challenging aspect of doing an IE study. My prior experiences with content or thematic analyses differed from those of the data analysis used in IE. An IE researcher does not assign labels or nodes to segments of the data to

identify emergent themes, because those processes abstract the data from its material work processes (social relations), which are central to an IE study (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). IE researchers avoid categorizing data in any way that might serve to conceal their materiality (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). One must steadfastly ensure that people and their *doings* remain visible in any data-analysis approach, in order to avoid the very disjunctures that IE researchers problematize. Several strategies were used to facilitate data analyses and analytical writing.

When reading the transcripts and field notes, I asked questions of my data such as *what are the PSWs doing and how is their work connected to the work of others?* I searched for traces of the institution in the talk and work of the PSWs so that I could understand these intersections. To remain focused on the social relations during my analytical writing, I frequently asked myself the question *how does this (work) happen?* (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). After collecting preliminary data from the standpoint of participants, I mapped out how the activities of PSWs connected to the activities of other people. I excerpted data from the transcripts and pasted the excerpts onto large sheets of poster paper (Smith, 2006). This process helped me to visualize the organization of a PSW's typical workday and how the work of PSWs connected to the work of others. For instance, one excerpt described a PSW's work related to meal service. This attracted my attention because in order to organize their work in the dining room, the PSWs had to rush to complete their other work (e.g., bathing). This observation linked to a manager's reference to the written standards related to meal service. I located these standards in the LTC program manual and pasted the excerpts onto sheets to visualize the connections.

I used the analytical writing process as another strategy to assist with the data analyses. I began the analytical writing process immediately after the first observation. I read the transcripts or field notes, reflected on the data, and then wrote an account of what I saw in the data and anything missing that remained curious and unexplained. Each repetition of this process resulted in greater clarity about the PSWs' work. For instance, I found several instances in the transcripts of PSWs describing the meal service work as challenging, hectic, and demanding and explaining why this was so. Excerpts from my field notes and transcripts described the PSWs offering meal choices, clearing tables, and scraping plates between courses, all the while noting who was eating and who needed help. All these excerpts were included in my analytic chunks of writing.

Primary in an IE analysis is how people engage and use specific texts. Smith (2005) guides researchers to think about how texts are used and how they shape and organize people's work, a process she refers to as text-action-text sequences. To help me think of these sequences, I asked

questions such as *what is this text used for and what does it accomplish?* I retained a copy of the daily basic care flow sheet that PSWs completed at the end of each shift. This form documents the care provided to residents in the areas of personal care, skin integrity, repositioning, use of assistive devices, and urinary/bowel elimination. A PSW explained that she had to do this work because the MOHLTC could come and check the sheet to see what care was done. Notable in the analysis of this accountability work and what it produced was that there was no section on the form related to the promotion of physical activity. It was at this point that I began to realize that physical activity was being textually organized as something other than an activity of daily living. I do not imply that we should work to capture physical activity in the theorized accountability practices of the other aspects of daily living. Rather, I mean that it was during this process of textual analysis that I began to see the ruling relation that organized physical activity as something other than an activity of daily living.

Engaging in conversations with other researchers who shared the IE ontological position was the most successful data-analysis strategy. Fortunately I had an experienced institutional ethnographer on my thesis committee. She used two key strategies that were especially helpful in flushing out the data and pushing the analyses forward. First, she helped me to refocus my attention on the knowledge provided by my stand-point participants (PSWs) when I activated my tendency to move to the abstract or theorized explanations of how things worked. For example, according to some LTC managers, the meal service was designed to provide pleasant dining experiences and opportunities for residents to socialize. This official explanation was compelling. However, I did not observe many residents talking to each other in the dining room. In fact, what I observed could be framed as bizarre. When I was redirected to my field notes describing the linen tablecloths, restaurant-like meal service, and frail elderly people routinely enjoying an idealistic *five-star* dining experience, I was able to refocus on what the PSWs were showing me and telling me. Refocusing on the actual observations helped me to drive my data analyses and writing forward.

The second strategy that my IE advisor taught me was how to render the instances of work as fundamentally mysterious (Rankin et al., 2010). She consistently reminded me not to take any of the practices that I was seeing or hearing about for granted. For example, PSWs mentioned that their assignments were especially heavy on the day shift because they had to care for eight to 10 residents. Since I had worked as an LTC nurse, I initially took this statement at face value and did not pay particular attention to it. My advisor guided me to investigate it further by asking ques-

tions such as *who makes the decisions about resident assignment?* This process helped me to flush out the data and to explicate the ruling relations.

A final strategy involved a back-and-forth reflexive process. I read the transcripts, reflected on what I had read, wrote notes and questions, and then repeated the process. This helped me to see the institution in the data and how the ruling relations shaped and controlled the contradictory work of PSWs as it was organized to unfold in the dailiness of residents' lack of physical activity. In the next section I provide an example of my initial thought processes and reflections, which supported my analytical writing.

My Reflections Regarding the Work in the Dining Room

I noted that the PSWs on the day and evening shifts spent a considerable proportion of their time working in the dining room. At first I did not pay particular attention to this because at the outset of the study I saw dining in its ideological form, as it is organized in the LTC industry. However, as I wondered why the PSWs were rushed and why some residents who could walk with assistance were wheeled to the dining room, I realized that these dining activities were intricately connected to everything else going on in the LTC setting and paid close attention to this work organization. In my chunks of analytic writing, I noted that a PSW working a 7.5-hour day shift spent about 2 hours in the dining room. As previously noted, the dining rooms were rather formal and the way the PSWs served the meals reminded me of a restaurant. The PSWs spent a lot of time transporting residents to and from the dining room, which meant that meal times were especially busy for the PSWs. My transcripts contained data about the PSWs' dining room work. I wrote this into the analytic chunks I was preparing, including their explanations that this work was difficult to complete, especially if they were short-staffed. I made a note to follow up on this institutional feature of being *short-staffed*. In my writing, I included the PSWs' interview comments describing the many rules and regulations they had to follow (e.g., one course at a time). *The one course at a time rule* meant that the PSWs had to wait until the residents finished each course and then clear the dishes before serving the next course. This lengthened the time that the PSWs had to devote to dining room activities. I then turned to the managers' and nursing supervisors' data to locate their comments about dining room work. I wrote about their understanding of the PSW dining room work and how they saw it as providing a pleasant dining experience and a home-like environment for the residents. I began to articulate and write about the obvious contradiction in the way the PSWs described their work (and what I had observed) and the way the supervisors and managers talked about it. Slowly, in my chunks of analytic writing, I began to

locate the contradictory practices that I could formulate as a research problematic that directed further exploration.

To advance my analytic writing, I described the standards that shaped the PSWs' work in the dining room and identified instances where I could trace the activation of the textual directions that the standards organized, such as the standard that meals be served one course at a time. Beyond the *one course at a time*, I could see and write about the detailed and complicated work this apparently simple standard produced, under conditions where meals were transported on hot trolleys to satellite kitchens and PSWs worked with residents, some of whom had cognitive impairments, to mediate the *one course at a time* rule. I was able to see and write about how these standards, intended to produce pleasant dining experiences, produced something contradictory and hampered the PSWs' efforts to promote physical activity. For instance, some of the PSWs used a mechanical lift to transfer residents from bed to chair instead of using a more independent type of transfer such as stand and pivot. They believed that the mechanical lift was faster, and getting residents to the dining room on time was a priority. However, this practice limited opportunities for the residents to bear weight and to use their bodies to assist with the transfer. Based on this reflective process, I identified the second work process that became the focus of my analysis — the organization of work that supported PSWs using a mechanical lift to transfer residents. The PSWs commented that there were several policies related to the use of mechanical lifts. Foremost was the policy that two staff members had to be present when operating a mechanical lift. I turned to my field notes and learned about the complicated arrangements related to finding and waiting for another PSW when a lift was needed, the concurrent work of preparing for the helper, and the contradictions that were embedded there. Similarly, I followed the clues in these data to the MOHLTC standards and occupational health and safety discourse that organize the work related to resident transfers.

Conclusion

The above reflections are based on my doctoral research. My journey as a novice institutional ethnographer produced occasions when I was caught between my previous training, the advice of my supervisors, and the significant differences that the alternative IE approach demands. It is my hope that this article, a stepwise reflection of the process of data collection and data analysis, will be helpful to others who take up the IE method of inquiry. I decided to use this method because I believed that it would help me to better understand how physical activity happens in LTC homes. Lacking a background in sociology, I grappled with some of

the complex writings of Dorothy Smith. Data analysis was initially a daunting process, partly owing to the fact that there are limited written resources on how to do data analyses when using an IE approach. The most useful strategy that helped me to flush out my data and drive the analyses forward was having conversations with other researchers who shared the IE ontological position, knew how to keep me grounded in the materiality of my data, and helped me to resist the propensity to make the shift into abstract theorizing. Despite the challenges, IE provided a framework that enabled new insights about the promotion of physical activity by PSWs.

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