INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY, THEORY, METHODOLOGY, AND RESEARCH: SOME CONCERNS AND SOME COMMENTS

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I outline the key tenets of institutional ethnography (IE) as a framework for interpretivist social research. Through drawing not only on the key tenets of IE but also on the key findings and conclusions of the different chapters – empirical and conceptual – that make up the present volume, I argue for a critical reappraisal of IE. Through turning the IE lens of enquiry onto IE itself, I foreground the problematic within IE, and also the need to attend to the standpoint of IE. Finally, I consider the position of IE in terms of theory more broadly, as well as social theory more specifically, through focussing on the ways in which IE can be augmented through the use of other, compatible, theoretical, and/or methodological perspectives such as critical discourse analysis, actor-network theory, semiotics, and participatory and community models of research.

Keywords: Actor-network theory; critical discourse analysis; institutional ethnography; interpretivist research; standpoint; theory
UNPACKING INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Institutional ethnography (IE) is a framework for interpretivist inquiry rooted in Marxism and feminism and is most immediately identified in the work of Dorothy Smith (2005, 2006). It is an approach to doing research (sometimes but by no means always referred to as a methodology (Campbell & Gregor, 2004)) that looks to answer questions about everyday life and, specifically, how everyday life is organized. Indeed, this focus on the everyday experiences and everyday knowledge of people – at work, at school, enrolled in a political event or a legal dispute – is characteristic of IE, as is a consequent focus on the ways in which these experiences are coordinated (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005; Taber, 2010; Walby, 2013). IE rejects over-arching generalizations and theoretical constructs: in keeping with the concern for the everyday, it similarly focuses on the local. IE explores the ways in which everyday work (understood in IE as being anything that people do that requires effort, intent, and some acquired competence – it need not refer to work that is remunerated) is experienced, talked about, and made sense of by people at a local level. The local, nonetheless, is always linked to the translocal: those social, administrative, or geographical spaces that are outside the boundaries of people’s everyday experience. The ways in which the translocal shapes and influences the local is understood in IE to be mediated by texts, which might be paper-based, screen-based, words, images, and so forth (Kress, 2003). Thus, institutional discourses are translated into people’s work (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; Smith, 2005; Tummons, 2010).

The work that people do is always shaped and constructed through the establishment of ruling relations: the complex and sometimes massive coordinating of work (as understood in the sense of being something that people do that requires effort, that is intended, and that involves some acquired competence [McCoy, 2006]). In many contexts, such coordination is carried out through the distribution and interpretation of institutional texts. IE, therefore, in order to make sense of these ruling relations, focuses on the explication of discursively organized social settings and the social relations that are at work within them, rather than on the participants as a population, and their understanding of the setting within which they find themselves (Campbell & Gregor, 2004). In order to achieve this, IE rests on two particular methods of inquiry. The first to be considered here is the text-reader conversation, the moment when institutional discourses (often reified into a text-based artefact) regulate local work activities. That is to say, a text-reader conversation takes place when, for example, students read their module handbooks, or tutors in the colleges receive written instructions in advance of an internal
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moderation meeting. A focus on these conversations throws a spotlight on the ways in which texts permit, legitimate or forbid particular forms of social action. IE foregrounds the situated nature of texts, which should be analyzed in the context of the sequences of action that they articulate and coordinate (Smith, 2006). A second relevant tool used by IE is the process of talking with people. Through interviews, the institutional ethnographer can explore how people are able to talk about their experiences and the extent to which they have or have not acquired those discourses that are ordering their action (McCoy, 2006). If such discourses, bound in textual artifacts and negotiated in a text-reader conversation are the focus of enquiry, then it follows that as well as exploring these texts, the institutional ethnographer has to explore people as well, through talking with them, “encouraging informants to talk in ways that reflect the contours of their activity” (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 24). Without people to read them, to activate them, such texts would be of little use (Campbell & Gregor, 2004).

In order to explore and explicate work practices, IE also draws upon observation (I shall return to “traditional” anthropological ethnography shortly), as well as text analysis and interviews. If the researcher is to understand the discursively organized setting in which the problematic of the research is located, it follows that the ways in which that setting is organized need to be observed with a particular focus on the observation of the use of texts and inscription devices (Diamond, 2006), and talked about with the people who work in that setting in interviews with a parallel focus on the texts that people use and create (Devault & McCoy, 2006; McCoy, 2006). The analysis of text, with a particular focus on the ways in which texts represent and promulgate the dominant discourses of the institution, takes place alongside these other methods of data construction.

The final distinctive features of IE as a mode of inquiry to be discussed here relate to what in IE is termed standpoint. This is defined as “a point of entry into discovering the social that does not subordinate the knowing subject to objectified forms of knowledge or political economy” (Smith, 2005, p. 10). IE places a focus on the perspectives, interests, and knowledge of people, as distinct from the overarching explanations of the researcher, reflecting the feminist and Marxist roots of Smith’s own research work. This concern leads us to the concept of work knowledge (Smith, 2005), which encompasses both a person’s own experience of their work – how they do it, why they do it, how they feel about it – and also the ways in which one person’s work is coordinated with the work of others. Work knowledge can be seen as aligned to related concepts such as everyday tacit knowledge as distinct from theoretical propositional knowledge (Eraut, 1994), as embodied within vernacular
discourses as opposed to dominant discourses (Barton & Hamilton, 1998); the knowledge of “just plain folks” who are going about their regular routines (Lave, 1988).

**INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY AND ETHNOGRAPHY**

An *institutional ethnography* is not simply an ethnography of or an ethnography that has been constructed within an institution. Instead, for Smith as well as for other proponents of IE, there are important distinctions to be drawn between the IE approach and what might be termed more “traditional” ethnographic approaches such as “anthropological” ethnography or “symbolic interactionist” ethnography. At first look, however, an argument such as this might seem to make perfect sense. If as institutional ethnographers, we are indeed seeking to foreground the everyday knowledge and work of the people about whom we are asking questions, placing their own interpretation into the spotlight and rejecting overarching sociological explanatory frameworks, then it seems right to reject the tenets of “traditional” anthropological ethnography (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, pp. 86–69). Notwithstanding the many theoretical ancestors that can be found across much social research, IE distinguishes itself from several other contemporary approaches: for Smith (2005), the sociology of Bourdieu is a particular object for criticism (I shall return to Bourdieu shortly); for Campbell and Gregor (2004), grounded theory and methodological triangulation are singled out.

However, it is – arguably – in attempting to construct a distinct ontology and epistemology through drawing comparisons with other approaches to inquiry that IE falls short or certainly demonstrates that a more nuanced critique of differing ethnographies and sociologies is needed. Notwithstanding the fact that there is no single type or genre of “ethnography” (we might add virtual ethnography, meta-ethnography, micro-ethnography, multi-sited ethnography, and netnography to the list), the postmodernist and poststructuralist turn has long been seen at work within so-called “traditional” ethnography, leading to a shift toward the partial and the situated in opposition to the “masculinist scientific stance” of detached objectivity (Crang & Cook, 2007, p. 8). Smith herself acknowledges the historical context that envelopes her work (2005, p. 7), but a parallel revision or reimagining of IE is, perhaps, lacking; hence, the importance of a collection of chapters such as those to be found in this book.
PROBLEMATIZING INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

I shall return to the notion of revising or reimagining IE shortly. Before I do so, however, I want to turn briefly to some of those aspects of IE that raise questions as to the claims that can be made for IE as a framework or methodology that is worth thinking about and then taking up. There is no shortage of methods, methodologies, and paradigms for research, and while this complex research landscape might well represent an embarrassment of riches for some, it can be seen as balkanized and needlessly repetitive to others, lacking in coherence and opportunities for consolidation. An unambiguous example of the kind of repetition/balkanization that I refer to above is the interview as a method or tool for data construction.

Within IE, interviews play an important – arguably, central – role in the construction of data and meaning-making (Campbell & Gregor, 2004; DeVault & McCoy, 2006; Smith, 2005). And within IE, the relationship between the researcher who is facilitating the interview and the person to whom she is speaking (the bifurcation of interviewer and interviewee is rejected here) is problematized and then constructed in terms of power imbalance, an imbalance that is tilted in the direction of the researcher but is mediated to some extent by the expertise of the informant (to use Smith’s preferred label) and the concomitant ignorance of the researcher (Smith, 2005, pp. 135–139). The foregrounding of textual practices and the exploration of documents during the interview itself is a further aspect of interviewing in IE that is frequently stressed (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, pp. 33–37). For IE, the interview and the accompanying talk around the text provides the informant with the opportunity, “for the first and perhaps only time […] to speak about the ordinary of their lives with someone whose focus is just that and whose job is to listen” (Smith, 2005, p. 139). And the notion of the interview as a locus for shared meaning-making, as a form of dialogic inquiry, is also of importance within IE. Through the process of the interview (a first dialogue for the researcher to engage in) and then the subsequent exploration of the transcript (a second dialogue), meaning and experience are constructed by the researcher in conjunction with the informant. The data are always produced collaboratively (Smith, 2005).

So far so good: the IE interview foregrounds the lived experience of the interviewee, acknowledges the power relationship between interviewer and interviewee, and posts a social constructivist epistemology and ontology that rests on the notion of interview data as co-constructed, not as generated through the dominant analytical stance of the researcher. But these same
issues, and more, are equally foregrounded in any number of other places that make no mention of IE. Postmodernist and radical critiques of interviews within qualitative research are, at the time of writing, both plentiful and no longer groundbreaking – notions of co-construction of knowledge, power in interviews (including those occasions where the interviewer is less powerful than the interviewee), and the need to consider reflexively the positionality of the researcher are all readily found within the research literature (Brinkmann, 2013; Fontana & Frey, 2000; Kvale, 2007; Mitchell, Prior, Bilbro, Peake, See, & Andrews, 2008). Even the places where interviews might take place are now problematized, in some cases through arguing that, should the research question demand it, interviews should be conducted on the move and not in a fixed place – a standout example of the affordances offered to qualitative researchers by digital technologies (Evans & Jones, 2011). The use of documents as a focus for discussion within an interview is also to be found in a variety of methodological frameworks other than IE, ranging from broader social practice theories that therefore entail a particular approach to research to more specialized methodological perspectives. An example of the former is the new literacy studies or theories of literacy as social practice (Barton, 1994; Gee, 1996; Street, 1984), a way of exploring the literacy practices of people across different domains of life (work, play, hobbies, study, and politics) that foregrounds an ethnographic sensibility that includes research around texts of all kinds (Hamilton, 2000). An example of the latter can be found in the growth of visual methods in qualitative research, for example, in the use of photography, where research participants are asked to take and then select a series of photographs that are then used to ground a dialogue within either an interview or a focus group (Ball & Smith, 2001; Prosser, 2011), or in the use of building blocks as a research tool (McCusker, 2014). For “standpoint” we might substitute “researcher reflexivity” while at the same time legitimately questioning the claims made within IE to cause to disappear from view the standpoint of the researcher in explicating the interests of those about whom the research/knowledge is being constructed (an argument that in fact reflects broader critiques of qualitative methodology (Hammersley, 2008: 25 ff.)).

The point that I wish to make here is that IE, as a framework for inquiry, does indeed provide several critical as well as useful and enlightening perspectives for researchers – but so do lots of other approaches. And while it is, of course, right and proper that IE should attract advocates as well as users, it is also right and proper that the flaws or other problematic aspects of IE should be discussed. Thus, following the arguments put forward most cogently by
Walby, we can raise questions about the notion of “qualitative realism” (2013, p. 151): the claim that in IE it is possible for the researcher to use “an excerpt of observational data […] to illustrate what the author sees is actually happening [emphasis added] (in contrast to what she will argue later in the paper is an ideologically constructed version of it)” (Campbell & Gregor, 2004, p. 94). The notion that the ethnographic observer is seeing what is actually happening as distinct from transcribing or otherwise recording her or his interpretation of what is unfolding before her/him, somehow diminishes the mediating role played by the researcher in representing, not perfectly capturing and recording, what she or he has observed. Alternatively, we might question the notion that the institutional ethnographer approaches her fieldwork and analysis without any prior interpretive commitment (Smith, 2005, p. 36), an argument that has much in common with the standpoint taken by grounded theory (as distinct from constructivist grounded theory – another example of methodological balkanization). Just as grounded theory proposes an approach to the sorting, classification, and analysis of data that rests on categories or codes that are arrived at entirely through an inductive process as distinct from an a priori process of theorizing (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), so an IE unfolds as the inquiry proceeds, even though “at the outset […] the institutional ethnographer may be unable to lay out precisely the parameters of the research” (Smith, 2005, p. 35), notwithstanding the demands of ethics committees and funding bodies. But, as has been cogently argued by Thomas and James (2006), the very notion of theorizing through induction is highly problematic, not only in terms of the claims made by researchers but also in terms of what might be referred to as the epistemological honesty of the researcher: it seems pretty difficult, Thomas and James argue, to imagine that when a researcher starts up some field work, that she or he does not already have some pretty fixed ideas about what she or he is looking for and why, and how they might be made sense of in terms of prior experience, attitude, and research work. To turn standpoint on itself, we might argue that IE itself constitutes a “prior interpretive commitment.”

**REVISING OR REIMAGINING INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY**

Institutional ethnography is a framework for inquiry. It is not, according to its architect, a research methodology (Smith, 2005). Rather, it is a way of
thinking about aspects of everyday life, work, experience, and practice that foregrounds the individualities of the researcher and the perspectives of the people with whom the researcher is working, all gathered together as standpoint, and the ways in which the work done by all of these people is organized at a social level. It is in the work of unpacking this work of organization that a “way in” to IE can more straightforwardly be located. It is not ethnography of institutions, nor is it anthropological ethnography. Neither is it, at the time I am writing this (and mindful of my own standpoint) a framework for inquiry that provides quantities of insights, practices, or epistemologies that cannot be found, theorized, or generated through reference to an alternative framework, perspective, or methodology. It is in a confluence of elements – a standpoint epistemology, a Marxist as well as feminist ontology, a focus on the discursive construction of everyday life and work, that – I am going to argue here – IE can be seen to be providing the researcher with a philosophy as well as methodology that can be operationalized in order to answer particular kinds of research question. It is in the work of doing social research, answering questions generated through the problematization of the everyday or the taken-for-granted, that the preceding chapters in this volume all rest. At the same time, it is important that we do not place IE within a silo. Indeed, I would argue that it is important to place IE within a broader constellation of frameworks for inquiry and methodologies. IE should not stand still, nor should it become a venerated form, protected by “a group of insiders who know how to talk and write it, and insist on a kind of orthodoxy in its practice” (Smith, 2006, p. 1). As what might be termed methodological intersection becomes ever more commonplace, it should not come as a surprise to find IE used alongside other approaches to social research. Here, of course, the usual caveats apply. If a research project is to be based on two quite distinct approaches (IE as well as, say, actor-network theory (Tummons, 2010)), then it is necessary for the researcher to establish the epistemological and ontological alignment between the approaches being used. An argument for a “pragmatic” or “eclectic” approach to research methodologies might well be convenient and may well provide a useful outlet for researchers who purport to seek to dismantle particular intellectual or academic hegemonies, but does not provide the kind of methodologically robust as well as theoretically stable platform for interpretivist, social research that is needed within an academic culture characterized by neoliberalism and performativity and which in turn values the kinds of research that speak to the cultural and social practices of neoliberalism – research that seldom comes from an ethnographic tradition.
And so in this volume, we find an IE by Peacock that has been augmented through the use of critical discourse analysis: a study of university outreach practice in Australia that starts with the evaluation form that university staff are required to complete in order to evaluate their professional practice, a form modelled on a template that foregrounds some practices and ignores others. The unpacking of this act of foregrounding, embodied within the institutional discourses that underpin the template, is characteristic of IE. But for Peacock, IE does not quite go far enough: in order to answer the research question, to explore the problematic that has emerged, he draws in addition on critical discourse analysis in order to explore how the practitioners who are enrolled within this system might appropriate the dominant discourses of the institution as a precursor to change or even resistance. Talbot’s unpacking of the ruling relations established by new professional standards for teachers in Australia (although parallel processes can be observed in other national contexts and in other professions), through focusing on how these new professional standards as texts are activated and then given meaning by teachers, is similarly characteristic of IE. But once again, a further theoretical perspective is drawn on in order to enrich the analysis, in this case Bakhtinian semiotics, which Talbot uses in order to explore and enrich both the doing of and the analysis of her conversations with teachers. A similarly rich account of everyday work and practice is to be found in the chapter by Bishop and Sanderson, focusing on the emotional labour of pastoral work among learning mentors at one school in England (an area of research that is underrepresented within the literature more generally, and therefore particularly welcome). Through exploring practices that seem at first look to be unrelated (mentors work ranges from box-ticking and formal evaluation processes, to sitting down with pupils for a hot drink and a slice of toast), conflicting institutional discourses relating to academic achievement, on the one hand, and pastoral care, on the other, emerge from the ethnography, the latter in particular being given the “respectful attention” that, Bishop and Sanderson argue, is deserved but rarely recognized.

In a more critical vein, we find, emerging from Reid’s IE of a primary school in the north of England, a problematization of standpoint (as Reid rightly points out, why should IE in itself be immune from the kinds of unravelling that IE, as a framework for inquiry, promulgates?) informed by the use of Bourdieusian sociology. IE is by no means the only sociological framework to reject the kinds of overarching sociological frameworks and concepts put forward by Bourdieu inter alia: For Smith, much “mainstream” sociology is guilty of an excess of abstraction, with a consequent
“perpetuation of conceptual distance from the local actualities of people’s lives” (Smith, 2005, p. 55). And yet for Reid, researchers who subscribe to IE run the risk of constructing an uncritical hegemonic standpoint for themselves through uncritically absorbing Smith’s dismissal of Bourdieusian – as well, one assumes, as other – sociological frameworks. The chapter by Nichols, Griffith, and McLarnon further extends the methodological tenets of IE through recourse to participatory action research and to community-based research. These authors detail the overlap between these methodologies as well as those tenets that they share with IE, before going on to use them to foreground the potential for action/activism that, they argue, is inherent in many institutional ethnographies, reflecting the foundations of IE in feminist activism. Their reflexive accounts of the workings of “standpoint” and “work” within the context of previous empirical research highlight this potential as well as provide a grounded, authentic account of IE-informed fieldwork and some of the shifts that are required in the standpoint of the researcher as she or he comes to know about the field. Reid, in his chapter on Reflexivity and Praxis, likewise unpacks notions of standpoint through returning to his earlier empirical research. And in their chapter, Corman and Barron present a theoretical dialogue between IE and actor-network theory (ANT) that seeks to foreground the theoretical common ground between the two. Through exploring the ways in which both IE and ANT set themselves apart from a broader ethnomethodological tradition, Corman and Barron demonstrate the common cause of IE and ANT: to move away from otiose or artificial sociological abstractions toward a social that is constructed and not simply applied. At the same time, they foreground the ways in which IE and ANT stand apart – predominantly in reference to respective constructions of ideology or power, and the ways in which ANT can in turn augment an IE, through an account of one of the key tenets of what has been termed “early” or “classic” ANT (Gorur, 2011): the bifurcation of human and nonhuman, and the insistence, through the principle of symmetry that the nonhuman can also have agency in the social world.

What I hope that this discussion has demonstrated is that the chapters in this book embody, unambiguously, ways through which IE can be revised or reimagined through the careful and critical use of other compatible theories of social practice or research methodologies. In this way, the conceptual or methodological difficulties that pertain to IE can be addressed and circumvented. At the same time, IE provides the researcher with three specific affordances that are quite distinctive, that allow the researcher to travel to places that other methodologies do not, perhaps, so thoroughly permit. And it is to these that I shall now turn.
THE AFFORDANCES OF INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

I have argued that IE can usefully draw on other frameworks and theories with which it shares some antecedents. At the same time, there are elements of IE that are distinct, perhaps indigenous, to it. Here I wish to outline three such elements and comment briefly on their utility not only to institutional ethnographers but also to social researchers more generally. The first element that I wish to foreground is IE’s focus on institutions and not people. Within an IE, “it is the aspects of the institutions relevant to the people’s experience, not the people themselves, that constitute the object of inquiry” (Smith, 2005, p. 38). In this way, IE shifts the focus of inquiry away from the direction that might be taken by a “traditional” anthropological inquiry (although we might legitimately question what, at the time of writing, constitutes such an approach), away from the lived experience of the people who are situated within a particular culture, and toward the ruling relations, invariably textually mediated, that govern aspects of their lives.

The second element to foreground is IE’s capacity to shift the researcher’s gaze beyond the locally observable: “translocal forms of coordinating people’s work are explored as they are to be found in the actual ways in which coordination is locally accomplished” (ibid.). This is not to deny that ethnography, traditionally, has not sought to explore or account for indigenous activities or practices that are in some ways informed by other practices that are to be found beyond the boundaries of the fields of research. However, the ways in which these translocal relations are foregrounded as objects of inquiry is distinctive and is a paradigmatic characteristic of an IE.

The third element to be considered is the focus on accounting for power and, specifically, accounting for power as it is instantiated and enacted through the production, distribution, and creation of texts. In this way, the ethnographer is able to “make social relations and organization based in or mediated by texts ethnographically observable” (Smith, 2005, p. 199) – and to this we might also add that these ethnographic observations are augmented by interviews (McCoy, 2006). In rejecting the abstracted conceptualizations that, IE argues, are characteristic of much sociology, this focus on how power is accomplished through texts provides a compelling empirical alternative to the more nebulous references to “power” that Smith singles out for criticism (2005, p. 185).

Now, I am not arguing that these sensibilities or insights are necessarily unique to IE. Nor am I arguing that IE does not contain a number of flaws that are methodological (as have already been discussed) as well as theoretical...
(to which I shall return). A focus on how power is accomplished at a social level as well as how the local and the global are materially or semiotically connected are both characteristic of actor-network theory, for example (Latour, 2005; Law, 1994; Tummons, 2014). Conceptualizing the ways through which ethnographers might work beyond the geographical or institutional boundaries of the ethnographic field has more recently been extensively explored within multi-sited ethnography (Falzon, 2009). What IE offers, however, is a framework for expanding what ethnographers might do, conceptualized within a particular ontology and epistemology. That is to say, IE offers the researcher a framework for inquiry that is sufficiently robust to be able to withstand those criticisms of partiality or lack of generalizability that are often made against social research more generally.

THEORY AND INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Finally, I turn to theory in education research, and specifically to considering the ways in which theory is used and sometimes misused. Issues surrounding the variable use of theory in education research are well established in the literature (Tight, 2004; Tummons, 2012), and I will briefly touch on two key themes here. The first problem to consider is the definition of “theory,” a word that is used in different ways. For Gee, a theory is a body of generalizations, which can be drawn together to offer explanations and descriptions of the phenomena being researched, which in turn inform peoples’ beliefs about things (1996, p. 16). Tight has argued that theories are suppositions that explain something, or seek to explain it, and posits theory as the ability to explain or understand the findings of research within a conceptual framework (2004, p. 399). Ashwin, likewise, has positioned theory as informing the conceptualization of research: the framing of research questions, the analysis of the data that is created, and understanding the significance of the findings that are drawn. At the same time, he warns against using theory to structure research in such a way that the research simply consists of a tautological restatement of the theory in question (2009, p. 133). Our problem, simply put, is that “theory” is, all too often, poorly defined and poorly operationalized (Thomas, 2007).

If the first problem is defining theory, then the second problem is in how it is used and written about. Here I consider this problem in two ways. The first rests in the relationship between theory and research. Hammersley (2008) has argued that one of the failings of qualitative research during the last five decades and more (my own research is undoubtedly “qualitative” from the
point of view of advocates of randomized control trials in education, as is all of the research that is written about in this book, but I reject the spurious divide between qualitative and quantitative research) is in the failure of qualitative researchers to develop and then test theory in a systematic manner, a failure that he links to the broader issue of generalizability (and, specifically, the lack thereof) in qualitative research. The second way in which I want to consider this problem is through thinking about the ways in which some people write about and/or cite from or refer to theory that sees theory treated as a veneer, a layer of sometimes needlessly complex language, sometimes dropped into an empirical study with relatively little thought as to its applicability or relevance. This has resulted in what Thomas has described as a use of theory now superseded by an excess of *theory talk*, erroneously used to claim “epistemological legitimacy and explanatory commentary” (2007, p. 85).

The reason why “theory” – what we do with it, how we understand it, how we construct it – is important, is because within IE, theory is sidelined: “the institutional ethnographic approach to empirical investigation [fits] less comfortably within academic sociology because its focus is not on theory building but on ‘what actually happens’” (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 42); rather, theory-building is part of the problem: it is “implicated in ruling relations” (*ibid*, p. 44). This rejection of theory building is, I argue, problematic, not least as it might be seen as being somewhat disingenuous: the roots of Marxist and feminist theory run deep within IE and to argue that accounting for “what actually happens” within the social world does not somehow also involve theory work – whether explicit or tacit – seems to me to be predicated on a very narrow construction of “theory” that fails to account for the experiential as well as the empirical. While the feminist standpoint epistemology might well lead the institutional ethnographer to eschew attempts to generate overarching explanations of the Bourdieusian type (the “blobontology” (*Smith, 2005*, p. 56)), it seems to me troublesome to claim that the paradigmatic elements of IE – mapping, plotting the movement of texts, constructing the movement of institutional discourses through people’s everyday work and talk – are not, in some way, practices that are suffused with theoretical foundations.

**WRAPPING UP: IE, SOCIAL RESEARCH, AND METHODOLOGICAL INTERSECTION**

What is the overarching message of this book, and of the empirical as well as conceptual work that has been presented within the chapters that precede
this one? I suggest (standing on the shoulders of the other authors who are present within this volume) that there are three key messages to take forward as we continue with our own research. The first is that IE continues to offer a serious model of social inquiry for researchers across a range of different contexts – and certainly within the context of educational ethnography (which is the field with which I identify). The second is that IE continues to offer insightful tools for the researcher to investigate her or his own standpoint, foregrounding the politics of social research as well as the ongoing importance of researcher reflexivity. And the third is that IE deserves to be more widely used, to be drawn on by a wider community of researchers than is currently the case. The caveat to this three-part message is that IE needs to remember not to retreat within itself, but to be willing to work alongside other research frameworks and be willing to problematize its own practice, to attend to its own standpoint. An ambition to design “a sociology that aims at extending people’s ordinary knowledge as practitioners of our everyday worlds into reaches of powers and relations that are beyond them” (Smith, 2005, p. 49) is entirely laudable, and as researchers committed to asking questions as well as accounting for power or providing a voice for the researched, IE can continue to provide a framework for critical and emancipatory inquiry, a framework that deserves to find a wider audience.

REFERENCES


