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## 9 Institutional ethnography as a feminist approach for social work research

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### Introduction

As a feminist social work academic, I have argued over the years that social work practice and research in Finland are rather ‘gender blind’ (Kuronen et al. 2004) and that social work research has ignored not only gender-specific issues but also feminist theorising and methodology (Kuronen 2009). Even if the interest in gender studies has increased among younger social work researchers, there is still much to do. In this chapter, my aim is to show that institutional ethnography (IE) is a valuable feminist approach for social work research, which should be better known and more widely used in Finland and the other Nordic countries.

For me, IE is primarily ‘a feminist sociology’ or ‘a sociology for women’ as Dorothy Smith formulated it in her early work (Smith 1988, 1990a). Since then, it has been used more widely, and Smith herself has more recently defined it as ‘a sociology for people’ (Smith 2005). Even as a feminist approach, it does not mean studying only women. It is not so much what to study but how. Its main commitment is that instead of abstract scientific concepts and theories, the inquiry should start from a standpoint in the everyday world, where we are bodily and socially acting as knowing subjects. Thus, social sciences should be grounded in the local actualities of people’s lives and their material conditions, which is ‘a point of entry’ to larger social and economic processes and the relations of ruling organising these actualities (Smith 2004, 2005, 54–57).

Ever since my doctoral research project in the 1990s, where I was studying professional advice giving to mothers in maternity and child health services (Kuronen 1999), IE has inspired me. It has provided a feminist approach to study women as service users in different welfare service institutions; first as mothers, and more recently as women in vulnerable and marginalised positions in the Finnish society, as well as their encounters with the welfare service system and how it meets (or fails to meet) their needs.

This chapter focusses on the special value of IE for my own academic field, social work research. To contextualise that, I will first return to the early 1990s to look at how IE found its way to the academic arenas in Finland, and how it has influenced my own research projects.

### **Institutional ethnography finding its way to Finland**

Ever since Smith published her first three books, *The Everyday World as Problematic. A Feminist Sociology* (1988), *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (1990a) and *Texts, Facts, and Femininity* (1990b), IE has been widely adopted, discussed and debated not only in sociology and women's studies (gender studies) but also in education, nursing and social work research (Malachowski et al. 2017). Considering this, it has been surprisingly little recognised and used in Finland, despite Smith's work being introduced through Finnish women's studies in the early 1990s.

Women's studies established itself as an academic discipline in Finland during the 1980s. At that time, the first national research networks were founded (Rantalaiho 1986; Julkunen and Rantalaiho 1989), the first courses were offered at universities and the Finnish journal of women's studies *Naistutkimus-Kvinnoforskning* was established in 1988 (in 2014 its name was changed to Finnish journal of gender studies).

In the 1980s and 1990s, many researchers studied the Finnish welfare state and its history from a gender perspective. Nordic feminist research has been shaped by the notion that the welfare state is woman-friendly, as was argued at the late 1980s by Norwegian researcher Helga Maria Hernes (1987). This means that the state has been perceived as an important ally for the women's movement, and women's concerns, needs and interests have been taken seriously in policymaking. In the Nordic countries, women have historically been important actors in the development of social policy, and the welfare state actively supported professionalisation and labour market participation of women. This woman-friendliness notion stands in opposition to the Anglo-American feminist understanding of the patriarchal state enforcing women's role as unpaid care providers, who are financially dependent on men (e.g. Anttonen 1997; Borchorst and Siim 2008).

These welfare state researchers, many of them doctoral students at that time, were supervised by Professor Liisa Rantalaiho from the University of Tampere and Senior lecturer Raija Julkunen from the University of Jyväskylä (both emerita now). They formed a national network called 'Women of the Welfare State' and made a research proposal 'Gender System of the Welfare State' (Julkunen and Rantalaiho 1989), which received funding from the Academy of Finland and was initiated in the early 1990s. Many doctoral dissertations grew out of that network, and it published two edited volumes based on its findings (Anttonen et al. 1994; Eräsaari et al. 1995). I was then in the early stages of my post-graduate studies, and it was an advantage to join such a network.

Funding from the Academy of Finland allowed the network to organise seminars and invite international established academics. Dorothy Smith was invited to one of these seminars. During that week, she gave lectures, supervised and commented on papers. Meeting her personally and reading her texts influenced and encouraged many of us. However, very few

eventually adopted IE as their main research approach. Among the younger generation of social scientists in Finland, there are two noteworthy exceptions: Riikka Homanen (2013) and Rebecca Lund (2015), who both used IE in their doctoral dissertations.

Through the 'Women of the Welfare State' – network IE also found its way into social work research in Finland, but rather marginally. Mirja Satka, currently professor of social work at the University of Helsinki, was the first one to adopt it. In her doctoral dissertation, she used IE in studying the history of social work in Finland (Satka 1995). More recently, together with her colleagues, she has discussed and tested whether and how Foucault's and Smith's methodology and conceptual tools could be used in parallel to study the historical transformation of child welfare social work (Satka and Skehill 2012; Skehill et al. 2012). She has also supervised doctoral students using IE, among them Ulla Jokela (2011) and the forthcoming thesis by Susanna Hoikkala. However, Satka's work is a rare exception in Finland, in that it adopts and discusses IE in the field of social work research. Sometimes any ethnographic case study of a specific institution, such as a hospital, a shelter or a residential institution, is referred to as an IE, even if there is no reference to Smith. This also shows how little IE is known in social work research in Finland.

### **Institutional ethnography, welfare services and women service users**

As mentioned above, it was through the Finnish women's studies network and not social work research that I first learned about IE. In my doctoral dissertation, I studied a topic only indirectly related to social work: namely, how maternity and child health services in Finland and Scotland, and professional advice to mothers, were socially organised, including how motherhood ideologies shaped the work of mothers (Kuronen 1999). I was inspired by the research on mothering and schooling that Smith had done together with Alison Griffith (Griffith and Smith 1990; also Griffith and Smith 2005). Moreover, IE provided an approach to overcome the apparent conflict between the woman-friendliness of the Nordic welfare state, on the one hand, and ideological control of women's mothering, on the other hand. It allowed me to critically analyse the service system and the social organisation of motherhood without placing the blame or responsibility on female professionals as control agents of the state.

My work was particularly influenced by what Smith in her early work called the *ideological circle* and *ideological practices*. The ideological circle is related to her conceptual framework with two 'worlds'. First, there is the 'ruling apparatus', or 'relations of ruling' as she prefers to call it in her more recent work (e.g. Smith 1999, 77), which is a '*complex of management, government, administration, professions, and intelligentsia, as well as the textually mediated discourses that coordinate and interpenetrate it*' (Smith 1988, 108).

Second, there is the 'everyday world', which '*we experience directly, and in which we are located physically and socially*' (Smith 1988, 89). Smith also identified different narratives or discourses related to these 'worlds': primary narrative and ideological discourse. Primary narrative uses lived experience as its resource while ideological discourse refers to professional or scientific discourse. This ideological discourse was the main interest in my doctoral dissertation.

Smith described the ideological circle as a process where primary narratives are used as the material of the institutional, ideological discourse (Smith 1990a, 141–173). She has identified it in the process in which the concept of 'single mother' is used as an interpretative schema in defining and explaining children's behaviour and possible problems (Smith 1988, 167–178), or in how SNAF (Standard North-American Family) as an ideological code intervenes in different local sites by influencing how family is understood (Smith 1999, 157–171; Kuronen 2014). I found ideological circle as a useful conceptual tool for analysing how professional definitions and categorisations were used and constructed within the welfare service system in describing their (female) service users, for example as 'lone mothers', 'homeless women' or 'female drug abusers'. Such institutional definitions influence how the women are seen and what kind of services are provided for them.

More recently, Smith has increasingly emphasised the importance of texts, language and discourses as mediators of social relations and their role in creating and maintaining these definitions (Smith 1999, 2005, but already Smith 1990b). My approach in adopting IE has been less focussed on analysing texts or textually mediated relations and has been instead closer to 'traditional' ethnographic research (see also De Montigny 1995; Nichols 2014). In studying mothering and child health services (Kuronen 1999), my point of entry was (participant) observation of the work of health professionals and their encounters with mothers. I combined ethnographic methods in data collection and IE as the general framework of my research. Jonathan Tummons (2017, 150) states that '*An institutional ethnography is not simply an ethnography of or an ethnography that has been constructed within an institution*'. Still, there is often some confusion of what 'ethnography' means in IE as it is not what is more commonly understood as ethnographic research in the methodological literature, which refers either to the method of participant observation or to cultural studies in anthropology and sociology (e.g. Atkinson et al. 2007).

It took many years after my doctoral research project before I got the opportunity to return to IE. Currently, together with my research team, we are studying how the Finnish welfare service system meets the needs of women in vulnerable positions in society.<sup>1</sup> The women whose standpoint we have taken are drug users, lone mothers living on basic social benefits and ex-convicts. We want to find out what they hold in common in terms of their relationship to the welfare service system. The wider context of this project are the recent and ongoing reforms and transformations of the welfare service

system in Finland, including new models of service delivery and management, austerity policies and growing requirements for cost-effectiveness, marketisation and prioritising, which might make access to and availability of services even more difficult for these women.

By using the concept of vulnerable life situations, instead of referring to these women as vulnerable individuals or groups, we want to emphasise temporal, situational, relational and structural nature of vulnerability. By using IE, we turn the attention towards the society and its institutions, including social work and the entire welfare service system, which compensate for, but possibly also generate and (re)produce, vulnerability in these women's lives (Fineman 2010; Virokannas et al. 2018).

We have adopted IE also to 'bridge the gap' between two distinct research traditions and to escape their flaws. The first tradition, common in feminist research but also in social work, seeks to give marginalised women or people a voice. However, according to Smith, engaging with women's experiences is not enough. Instead, feminist research should provide them with 'maps' of how their experiences and everyday lives are organised by social relations of ruling (Smith 1988, 151–154, 1999, 96–97). The second tradition can be coined as a more macro-level and social policy-oriented approach. It is important in focussing on structures, processes and alterations of the welfare service system (e.g. Martinelli et al. 2017). However, this approach does not delve into how these systems and policies are experienced in the daily lives of women. We are arguing that as social work researchers, we should critically analyse the welfare service system, but we should do this without losing the standpoint of women and the connection with their experiences as its service users.

### **The value of institutional ethnography for social work research**

I have already discussed the influence of IE for my own research. Besides, I want to consider more generally, what IE has to offer specifically for social work research. Therefore, in this section, I will discuss with and refer to other social work researchers beyond Finland about how they have seen it. These researchers have rarely discussed IE specifically as a feminist approach even if many of them have studied issues such as how mothers are met in child welfare or analysed the work of social workers, a vast majority of whom are women.

Social work research often focusses on the experiences of either service users or social workers or the encounters and interaction between them. What I want to show is that IE can provide an approach for studying and problematising social work instead as a social institution, in its wider social context, where both service users and professionals are positioned in its ruling relations, yet as social actors, they can also resist these positions.

Social work research using IE is often asking how the everyday world and experiences of people who for some reason have become social work service

users are transformed into categories, definitions and labels that serve organisational purposes as part of the 'organisational order' (Hicks 2009) or 'ideological practice' (De Montigny 1995) of social work. It demonstrates how ideological discourse shape individual lives and experiences (e.g. Winfield 2003). This has also been the aim of my research projects even if the institutions I have studied have been others than social work. This is comparable in focus to Smith's article 'K is mentally ill' and her other work where she has analysed the processes in how women are diagnosed or defined as having mental illness (Smith 1990a, 1990b). Studying such processes provides possibilities for alternative meanings, which are closer to people's own understanding of their situation (e.g. Brown 2006).

Several researchers have studied how different guidelines and procedures not only organise the lives of the service users, but of the work of social workers as well. Social workers are expected to follow and use, for example, risk reduction strategies in child protection work (Brown 2006) and child custody planning procedures (Kushner 2006), make individual rehabilitation plans (Breimo 2016) or assess who can qualify to be foster carers or adoptive parents (Hicks 2009). These studies show that IE offers a framework to analyse the connections between work with individual service users, the organisational contexts of work and its guiding principles.

In its focus on institutions instead of individuals (Tummons 2017), IE helps to avoid placing service users and professionals against each other, as easily happens in social work research when taking the perspective of one or the other. Instead of blaming individual social workers or other welfare professionals, it is important to show how professionals and service users are embedded within the same institutional relations of ruling (Høgsbro 2017). As Stephen Hicks (2009) has put it in his research on how lesbians and gay men are assessed as possible foster or adoptive parents:

Institutional ethnography does not ask about 'bad attitudes' towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people [or any service users – mk], but rather asks how versions of these categories of knowledge circulate within a given context. That is, rather than seeing the problem as merely 'homophobic individuals', institutional ethnography investigates the complex, frequently disputed, practices in which all of us – to some extent – participate and which are part of the organizational order of social work.

(Hicks 2009, 235)

Using IE, some authors (e.g. Parada et al. 2007; Hicks 2009; Arnd-Caddigan 2012) have also shown how social workers are able to oppose and resist the institutional order and use their professional agency. For example, Margaret Arnd-Caddigan (2012) has studied how clinical social workers respond to evidence-based practice policy they are expected to follow in their work and shows that in their actual practice they adopt to this policy in a selective,



reflective and critical manner. I find recognising and analysing possibilities for professional agency important especially as in the Nordic countries social work is one of the female professions of the (woman-friendly) welfare state (e.g. Satka 1995).

Furthermore, IE offers an approach that takes the standpoint of the local and particular actualities of people's lives and begins from their experience. Its approach to experience is still different from most social sciences, including social work research. Studying experiences, narratives or life stories of different service user groups or marginalised people is common in social work research, at least in Finland. I appreciate such research as it might help to see them as 'entire persons', not merely as clients due to their social problems. What is particular about IE, however, is its focus on the social organisation of these actualities, not on the experiences as such (Smith 1988, 151–154, 1999, 96–97). I see this being especially important and valuable when doing research with and for people who are in the most marginalised, vulnerable and powerless positions in society as social work service users often are. This commitment shares the emancipatory and empowering aims and ethical values of social work practice and research, especially those of critical and feminist social work (e.g. Healy 2000).

Related to its emancipatory commitment, Smith's approach is linked to materialism and realism in its aim to tell 'how things work' (Smith 1988, 160–161, 2005, 29–38). I find that this is highly important in social work research in order to make a change in people's lives and to improve social work practice. Smith has criticised not only 'traditional sociology' but also postmodernism (Smith 1999, 96–130) for its relativism, its focus on discourse and performativity and its separation from the actualities of people's lives. Hart and McKinnon (2010) assess that a special value of Smith's work is that she has managed to avoid the opposite dangers of naive empiricism and relativism of social constructionism. According to them, her work '*provides a means of conceiving the discursive nature of social life (and the operations of power) without giving up the notion of "truth"*' (Hart and McKinnon 2010, 1040).

Finally, I find the way in which Smith understands and underlines the role of texts and textually mediated social relations in how the ruling relations work important for social work research. In social work, different texts have a crucial role in categorising and defining the needs of service users, regulating the work of social workers and even organising social work itself and its place in society. Social work depends on legislation, national and local regulations and guidelines, but it also produces documents concerning the lives of its service users. Case files are 'telling the case' and defining and classifying the person behind the 'case' for years or even decades ahead. In Finland, service users have the right to access and read their case files, which can be a traumatic experience, for example, for the clients of child protection, both for parents whose child has been taken into care and for those who have been into care as children. Based on her empirical findings, Tarja Vierula



(2017, 12) concludes, '*the transformation of information not only signifies a linguistic and a conceptual modification of information regarding their personal lives, but it also shifts the control and the ownership of that information*'. That is why documentation in social work should be critically analysed, as should also the role of other texts in organising social work and its professional practice. IE provides an approach to study institutional texts, such as those used and produced in different social work contexts, not just in their written form but also as active texts that coordinate and mediate people's actions translocally (e.g. Smith 2005, 101–122).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued and tried to demonstrate that IE is a valuable approach for social work research. In the other social sciences, it has already made a substantial contribution worldwide, including the Nordic countries, especially Norway. One reason why it has not found its place in social work research in Finland might be that until recently feminist research in general has been rather marginal in this field. Smith originally developed IE as a feminist sociology (Smith 1988, 1990a) but since then it has been adopted more widely and maybe even lost some of its feminist origins. What makes IE a feminist approach is not so much, or not simply, the topics that are studied but rather its commitments and the standpoint in the everyday world.

I have shown, referring to both my own research projects and the views and empirical findings of other researchers, that IE allows studying social work and the whole welfare service system as an institution, which tends to transform the experiences and daily lives of its service users into generalised categorisations and definitions, which can be even stigmatising. This often happens mediated by different texts, written guidelines and procedures and textual practices of recording and documenting. In social work research, it is important to analyse and problematise such institutional categorisations and how they work. In both social work practice and research, we should instead begin from what people tell us about their lives and their needs for support and services.

In its focus on institutions and social relations of ruling, IE also allows to see how social workers and other professionals are positioned in the same institutional relations and practices as the service users. These are difficult but not impossible to resist and change. Social work practitioners often feel that not only the service users but also researchers blame them and criticise their work. Adopting IE could be one solution to avoid this and to do research that benefits both the service users and professionals alike.

In my own research, introducing and using IE has been the way of bridging feminist research and social work research. More than 30 years ago, US social work researcher Barbara G. Collins argued that '*In numerous ways the values, ethical commitments, purposes and philosophical systems of feminism*

and social work converge and impart added meaning to each other' (Collins 1986, 214). For me, the strongest argument for using IE is that it shares and fits well with the critical, emancipatory and empowering aims of social work practice and research, especially those of feminist social work.

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