Conducting Analysis in Institutional Ethnography: Analytical Work Prior to Commencing Data Collection

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Abstract
Institutional ethnography (IE) is an innovative approach to research that requires a significant shift in researchers’ ordinary habits of thinking. There is a growing body of methodological resources for IE researchers however advice about how to proceed with analysis remains somewhat scattered and cryptic. The purpose of the first of a two-paper series is to contribute to publications focused exclusively on analysis. The aim is to provide practical tips to support researchers to shift their ordinary habits of thinking. This first paper outlines how this must happen at the outset of the research design. Analysis of the phenomenon under study commences as the research is being formulated. The approaches to analytical thinking outlined in this paper are based on my own IE research and also my experience working with graduate students since 2008. In this first volume of the two-paper set I provide a brief background to the method and direct readers to important IE resources. I outline three core methodological concepts: standpoint, problematic and ruling relations. I discuss how these concepts guide the early analytical thinking that is embedded in the research design and the critical analysis of the literature that is part of the process of analysis in IE. The second paper provides practical advice for working with data.

Keywords
institutional ethnography, analysis

What Is Already Known?
Institutional ethnography (IE) is an “alternate sociology” and research method that is gaining increasing popularity. Sophisticated analysis in IE is not easy, especially for novice researchers and for those scholars and activists who do not have a sociological background. In IE, important analytical thinking begins prior to the start of formal fieldwork and data collection.

What This Paper Adds?
In this article, I contribute to existing advice on how to use IE to examine people’s problems. The advice is built on insights gathered while conducting my own IE research and also from my experiences supervising students. This first of a two-paper set guides the necessary analytic process of conducting a literature review and planning the research design. It is written with novice IE researchers as the primary audience.

In this article, I share insights about doing analysis using institutional ethnography (IE). Considered a relatively new approach to inquiry, IE has gained increasing popularity over the past 20 years. Despite its growing reputation, there is little published work focused exclusively on practical advice about how to proceed with analysis. This article, and its companion (Conducting Analysis in Institutional Ethnography: Guidance and Cautions (Rankin, 2017)), addresses that gap. At the risk of rendering Smith’s (1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1999, 2005, 2006) “alternate sociology” to an overly simplistic set of directions, I rely on my own research and my experience supervising students as a resource for researchers using the method. Despite my modest goals and practical intentions for these papers, they are important contributions both independently and together. They provide essential insights and examples. This first of the two-paper volume outlines the preparation for analysis that must happen long before data collection begins. In this article,

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I explain three key IE terms. I direct novice researchers to core resources that provide practical advice about how to apply IE’s unique theoretical framework. I suggest ways to approach the topical literature about the issue under investigation. Finally, I provide advice and examples for conducting fieldwork.

Smith’s (2005, 2006) institutional ethnographic method is an approach for scholarship and activism. It is a sociology that is built on core epistemological and ontological premises. The IE method relies on an epistemic assumption that all knowledge is socially organized; knowledge is socially constructed and carries particular interests that are embedded in its construction. Knowledge is never “neutral.” The ontology at the core of IE study insists on empirical descriptions of a social world happening. Data collection and findings must consistently focus on the materiality of people’s doings in locations that have substance and matter. In IE, references to any “reality” are descriptions of an empirical “world in common” (Smith, 1999, p. 127) that can be agreed upon. The core ontology of IE is part of what makes it unique among qualitative approaches.

IE is focused on discovering how people’s purposeful actions (their work) are linked into coordinated circles of activity that extend into distant places. In this description, it is important to avoid abstracted or theorized explanations that conceptualize what people are doing (and why they are doing it thus). Using a variety of ethnographic practices that are guided by IE’s conceptual framework with its emphasis on the materiality of texts, the aim of IE is to investigate how people working in a particular place are coordinated by work going on elsewhere. The research goal is to amassed evidence that is used to describe and to empirically explicate how disparate interests are activated or subordinated.

There is a growing body of published work that supports researchers to design and implement an IE study. Many of these publications are developed around examples of the ways that IE researchers have approached an eclectic array of investigative projects. Smith (2005) emphasizes that the goal of sharing methodological insights is to develop “effective research practices rather than methodological dogma” (p. 2). IE research maybe as diverse as the problems researchers study; however, in my view, the research must always maintain integrity to IE’s core ontology insofar that it must avoid applying topical theories; those theoretical formulations circulating about the issues under investigation, such as, lateral violence theory (Roberts, 2015) or cognitive continuum theory (Fawcett & Desanto-Medeya, 2013) that activate a prior theoretical framework and distract the researcher from being able to describe and examine what people actually do. In the same vein, the researcher’s findings must not abstract from data into theory— unlike grounded theory, the research goal is to empirically link, describe, and explicate tensions embedded in people’s practices not to theorize them. While this core tenet may seem dogmatic, it is what makes an IE an IE. Work that fails to adhere to this foundational precept fails as an IE.

As in other research approaches, in IE, doing analysis is demanding. In my experience, a sophisticated analysis often takes much longer than most graduate programs allow. One of my purposes in writing this article is to open possibilities for graduate students to move from data to thesis more quickly.

### Key Terminology for IE Analysis

All research approaches require a terminology that communicates the philosophical paradigm and conceptual framework of the approach. Here, I provide a necessarily brief overview of three technical terms that, in my view, are foundational to IE and maybe key to avoiding taking a wrong turn during analysis. The terms I highlight are (1) standpoint, (2) ruling relations, and (3) problematic.

#### Standpoint

A “standpoint” is an ontological concern. An IE researcher is advised to adopt a standpoint—a stance that has an empirical location, where a group of people are positioned, within a complex regime of institutions and governance (the practices that construct the “regime” are the ultimate focus of the research). The IE researcher must stay grounded in descriptions of things happening—and the observed tensions and contradictions that arise there for those people (who occupy the standpoint). Researchers must discover: What do these people know about how things work? What do these people do? This interest includes all the formal and informal things that contribute to the sum of something happening. The interest in the standpoint informants’ knowledge is ultimately empirical—to build an account of how things that are happening are being organized and coordinated. However, standpoint informants will know about their work both “ideologically” (the theories and explanations that circle discursively that they use to name and explain their problems) and “materially” (the empirical data critical to an IE analysis—what people know about what goes on, knowledge gained from doing the work). Most often, these “two modes of knowing” (Smith, 1987, p. 82) are incongruent. The IE researcher probes into the knowledge of the standpoint informants and positions it analytically. The standpoint informants’ knowledge is not valorized, made special, or even accepted as “true.” Standpoint informants are positioned as “expert knowers” about what happens in their daily work; however, their knowledge is examined for its social construction and its embedded contradictions. What is regarded as “true” is the material description of things that happen—that loosely agreed upon “world in common.”

A standpoint is not a “perspective” and an IE researcher is not obliged to describe or accommodate “multiple perspectives.” It is assumed that the knowledgeable practices of someone who does not occupy the standpoint location will be organized differently—thus, their “perspective” will be different. Most IE research provides glimpses into the social organization of other people who do not occupy the chosen standpoint—and it is this knowledge that is contrasted to the descriptions and accounts of the standpoint informants.
Ruling Relations

Social relations and ruling relations are terms that have specific meaning in IE. They refer to particular practices that “activate” a social world of things happening among people. They are empirical and can be ethnographically described. Ruling relations are social relations that organize work from afar. Although ruling relations are generated at a distance from the “standpoint,” they are often “activated” by people in a local setting. Ruling relations shape how work being carried out at the standpoint must proceed and how that work will be represented. Ruling relations coordinate what people know about what is happening—even if that knowledge does not quite match what is known from being there. Often vested in people’s work with texts, ruling relations are activities of governing that depend on selecting, categorizing, and/or objectifying aspects of the social world in order to develop facts and knowledge upon which to base decisions. Ruling relations activate practices of knowledge that subsume how a problem is known about and experienced from the standpoint location.

The purpose of IE is to find traces of ruling relations within the descriptions of everyday work—those occasions when the work being done at the standpoint location does not seem to be supporting the interests of the people there. The ruling relations that the researcher exposes are vested in the data and it is the researcher’s job to describe them as “real” and to show how they work. It is not enough to claim that something is a ruling relation without showing it as one.

For example, a team of researchers and I conducted a research study into the standpoint of student nurses undergoing practicum evaluation (Rankin, Tate, Malinsky, & Elena, 2010). We described the ruling relations that organized knowledge about the evaluation processes. Within the ruling frame, faculty were being coached to provide early written feedback to identify a student’s shortcomings. They were to provide the students with written directions for improvement and to clearly document the consequences if the shortcomings were not addressed. If a decision was made to fail a student, this record was used in the event of a student’s appeal. The feedback, the strategies for improvement, and the students’ access to an “arm’s length” appeal were understood to be a fair and transparent process. This is not what we found was happening. To make our case, we identified the ruling relations we had discovered and used evidence from the interview excerpts with students, faculty, deans, and registrars that referenced a textual (ruling) complex of university policies and procedures (also included as evidence to support our claim) that organized the local evaluation practices. We discovered how the evaluation tools were designed (and by whom). We described all this. Ultimately, we developed a “warrantable argument” supported by the evidence in the data that showed how, paradoxically, the grade appeal process was organizing faculty’s practices of “gathering evidence to fail.” The grade appeal process was governed by a linked set of ruling relations that did not work in the interests of students. We described how the knowledge about evaluation practices and appeal processes were generated and, in so doing, we explicated the taken-for-granted formulation that the evaluation and appeal practices are fair and transparent.

Problematic

The formulation of a research “problematic” expresses the researcher’s discoveries and descriptions of when knowledge “shifts.” It encapsulates the junctures (or disjunctures) when the researcher notes when knowledge generated from “being there” is abstracted into something else. In the evaluation research above, it was those times when faculty expressed their faith in the fairness and usefulness of established processes that they believed would support students to learn. Students too placed a certain faith in the evaluation and appeal processes that did not match what we discovered and described was going on. The conceptual practices of the evaluation processes under mined what students knew about being subject to faculty evaluation. Even those students who were doing well identified that the evaluation processes did not support them to learn. We discovered a disjuncture between what actually happened during students’ and teachers’ evaluation work and how what happened was worked up (abstracted) within the official texts, policies, and understandings. A well-formulated research problematic is key to a coherent analysis in IE (in my view). However, problematics are often not obvious or easy to articulate. They must be discovered.

In working to formulate problematics, IE researcher Caroline Morris is interviewing standpoint informants about their efforts to follow medical advice geared toward the prevention of chronic illnesses. These people know about the challenges of following advice (to lose weight, to exercise, or to take medications). Several of Morris’s informants who are the objects of “prevention” report that feeling well has become more elusive and/or managing a life has become more frustrating after they have been subjected to medical regimes. This is good data to support the formulation of Morris’s research problematic. Moving from the paradox that, for some people, a diminishing sense of well-being occurs when one becomes the object of “prevention” guides Morris to describe the occasions when the standpoint informants’ knowledge is “at odds” with how professionals and policy makers know about chronic illness and its prevention. Morris has discovered junctures in patients’ knowledge about issues like swollen ankles, losing weight, or taking prescribed medications that intersect with professional forms of knowledge (ruling relations). The professional knowledge extends beyond the texts and practices of frontline health-care workers into a health-care funding ideology that is dominated by conceptual models of the prevalence gap, burden of disease, target populations and outcomes, and so forth. Identifying the junctures in knowledge that are empirically describable necessarily focuses Morris on other people’s knowledge and what other people do; people who do not occupy the “patient” standpoint. She is looking for disjunctures in knowledge that are foundational to her capacity to formulate problematics that will support her to establish an analytical
focus. Throughout her thinking about the data, Morris is actively looking for descriptions that support her to follow a specific direction in her data. As Morris considered the paradox of people’s diminished sense of well-being when they are pulled into prevention, she noted data from the standpoint informants that described being disappointed when their concerns were not addressed during their health-care appointments. They described being rushed and one informant described being repeatedly given a preprinted diet sheet at the end of each medical encounter. Morris asked: How are the knowledgeable practices of prevention at odds with what patients know? In turn, how is what health professionals know at odds with the prevention models that are guiding their practices? This is the analytic stance that is supporting Morris to identify the problematics that interest her and that she has data about. It is this approach that will support her to puzzle through the myriad of things happening.

Campbell and Gregor (2002) write:

The problematic in institutional ethnography is not the problem that needs to be understood as an informant might tell it, or as a member of an activist group might explain it. It is not the formal research question either. Institutional ethnographers do not study problems as members of settings explain them. Expressions of different theories or explanations that insiders to the setting use might, of course, help the researcher get to a problematic for study. Smith says that she uses the concept of problematic “to direct attention to a possible set of questions that may not have been posed or a set of puzzles that do not yet exist in the form of puzzles but are “latent” in the actualities of the experienced world.” (Smith, 1987, p. 91, cited by Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 47)

Step by step, within the formulation and explication of small problematics, a “bigger” problematic may be formulated. All the small disjunctures that Morris uncovers will likely hold more of the issues that standpoint informants know about—such as accessing community and social programs to support “lifestyle” changes. This may focus Morris on what she knows about a key aspect of the National Health System in Britain—how it separates “health” needs from “social” needs. She is looking for a problematic that is based on data that can “hold” (empirically link with) the “big picture” of what she is discovering. This will provide a tool for her to weave together a coherent explication of what is happening in her standpoint informants’ work. It provides her IE with a focus and helps her to manage the masses of data she has collected—much of which she will likely not include in the final analysis. She will carefully select the evidence in her data that empirically confirms what she is explicating (the problematic)—to show others how current prevention practices in health care are actually unfolding inside the lives of patients.

Problematics are critical heuristic devices that support the researcher to choose among complex threads and to handle the data. There is no rule that insists researchers must have a “statement of problematic” in their writing. However, it is important that the researcher understands how a problematic works to facilitate decisions about what threads to follow and to provide analytic coherence to support findings. Formulating a problematic keeps the IE researcher closely aligned with IE’s core interest in the social organization of knowledge in relation to how differently located people (and their knowledge) are organized differently vis-à-vis the issue.

Standpoint, ruling relations, and problematic are core terms for IE research. They are the tools that support analysis. They guide the researcher to move from conventional ethnographic description into an explication of the institutional regimes in which experiences happen. A researcher works on behalf of people who are positioned there (the standpoint) within a complex set of ruling relations to explicate a problematic.

Important Resources for Conducting Analysis in IE

Smith’s (2006) edited collection Institutional Ethnography as Practice is a trove of advice and guidance. In the introduction, Smith emphasizes the importance of empirical data such as texts and ethnographic description and she explains how concepts “freeze” analysis (p. 2). Analysis is always vested in accounts of things happening. It is a process of searching for evidence that shows how people’s work is tied together across time and location to build a bigger account about how people’s work is socially organized.

Each of the papers in Institutional Ethnography as Practice provides insight into doing IE analysis. The collection reads like a conversation with IE researchers. In fact, the chapter written by Diamond (2006) begins with an actual conversation between Dorothy Smith and Diamond. The emphasis of the chapter is on participant observation and it characterizes Diamond’s uniquely dramaturgical “storytelling” approach to IE analysis. In the same volume, Campbell (2006) cites Dorothy Smith when she highlights that “... experience is the ground zero of the analysis. The analysis begins in the experience and returns to it, having explicated how the experience came to happen as it did” (p. 91). Although the analysts’ task of moving between the accounts of the standpoint informants and broader institutional practices sounds straightforward, McCoy (2006), in the same volume, notes that “keeping the institution in view” is a common challenge for IE research. McCoy writes how she has learned that:

The period of data analysis is a time of vulnerability in an institutional ethnographic project. A kind of unintended analytic drift can occur, in which the analytic focus shifts from the institution to the informants. For example, the researcher might generate descriptions of the informants’ meanings and perspectives or develop typologies of their strategies and orientations. . . it [the analysis] will be about the informants rather than the institution. . . Or the research succumbs to what Smith calls “institutional capture” (Smith, 2005) and begins converting informants’ accounts of their experience into the terms of an institutional discourse that constitutes people and their activities as the objects of professional or
managerial knowledge. In all of these cases, institutional relations and the social organization of experience slips from view. (p. 110)

The practical supports given in Smith’s (2006) edited collection not only offer insight into analysis but also provide detailed examples of how IE has been applied to different sorts of issues that arise in everyday life. Each paper in this volume is “required reading” throughout an IE project and each paper (and each reading and rereading) provides different insights for each stage of the research: literature review, research design, data collection, analysis/writing, and dissemination.

Another important resource to support researchers new to IE is Campbell and Gregor’s (2002) “primer.” This is a short but invaluable volume. Designed for beginners, it provides a background for deeper more complex reading. As well, for experienced IE researchers, it offers reminders and practical advice on ways to approach our projects. Chapter 5, focused on analysis, opens with advice about the importance of good writing to develop a coherent account to show how settings (and problems) are linked and coordinated. Campbell and Gregor acknowledge how daunting analysis can be:

Confronted with mounds of data, you may wonder how to tell what is most important to write about? If it is all equally important, where does one begin? This is a critical moment at which many wrong turnings can be taken. (p. 84)

Campbell and Gregor expand on these “wrong turnings” cautioning researchers that one common mistake is to stay in conventional ethnographic description rather than moving to explication. They also caution researchers in the use of technological data management systems. While they recognize that these systems have their uses, researchers must guard against managing the data through themes, codes, or categories—which is the embedded design of most of the programs that have been developed to support qualitative researchers.

**Preparation for Analysis**

The “wrong turnings” that can jeopardize an IE analysis can begin in the design of the research. It is critical, from the outset of the project, that the IE researcher establishes the proper “stance” in relationship to the investigation. Part of this stance is recognizing that the researcher’s knowledge and opinions about the proposed topic and research question(s) are unlikely to remain unperturbed during the investigation. It is impossible at the outset of the research to describe the daily tensions embedded in the standpoint informants’ work or to know what will be discovered.

**A Note About the Literature Review—An Analytic Stance Preceding Formal Fieldwork**

In an IE study, the researcher takes a particular stance in relation to the literature. Reading publications about the topic is an important part of data collection and analysis. However, rather than being taken as facts that generate the background upon which new research is built, the topical literature is read within IE’s primary interest in the social organization of knowledge. Right from the outset, the researcher should develop a critical position and pay attention to how the literature rests on a scaffold of concepts and theories that have been “abstracted” from any concrete descriptions of people doing things. The IE analyst pays attention to how the issue is known about within the ruling relations and discursive practices of knowledge production. Positioning this way to the literature is one of the biggest challenges for scholars trained in other approaches.

A nursing colleague, Sarah Balcom, is using IE in her PhD to examine the social organization of two levels of credentialed nurses in Canada. Her interest is in exploring the tensions and issues that swirl around professional regulation, scope of practice, roles and responsibilities, and so forth. She has been reading the research and gray literature related to her topic and has learned to talk about her topic within its theoretical understandings. Indeed, one of Balcom’s PhD candidacy requirements was to complete a literature review to demonstrate what she “knows” and to prove that she is current and up-to-date with the topic. Balcom understood she was required to do a “flat” reading.

Balcom’s task now is to reformulate how she can think about the issues that arise for nurses. This is “analytic work” that must precede her formal entry into the field. If Balcom continues to think about the issues related to nurses’ credentialing the way the topic is organized in the literature, she will not be able to “see” what is actually happening when she enters the field. To conduct this analytic step, she must actively interrogate (and stop using) language that hides what is going on in actual nurses’ actual work. In IE, the ideas that circulate in the authoritative discourse are understood to arise ideologically inside ruling ideas. In Balcom’s research, concepts, such as “collaborative practice,” “competencies,” “roles,” “scope,” “professionalism,” “critical thinking,” and so forth, are the current ways to discuss nurses’ credentialing. They construct the taken-for-granted (ideological) language within which the topic is currently being formulated (the authoritative knowledge). It covers over what nurses know about and what they are doing in their everyday work. When Balcom enters the field, she must learn from the differently credentialed nurses themselves about what goes on during an “everyday” day. She must note when nurses activate the “ruling” discourse (language terms). During observations and interviews, Balcom must drill down into people’s accounts of what happens.

An IE researcher’s position to the literature does not absolve one from becoming a topic expert. As with any good scholarship, the researcher must know who is writing about the topic and what is being said. However, the IE researcher must position the literature as “data.” IE analysis begins with an interrogation of how the literature constructs the ruling relations that will show up in informants’ ideas, explanations, and work.
Fieldwork: An Analytical Stance

Fieldwork begins with an analytic stance that is committed to gathering evidence to build an account about how something in the world is being socially organized for particular people. Data collection is focused on learning from people about how they do their work and to learn about how problems are linked and connected within institutional processes. The analytic goal is to find and describe the ruling relations that can be shown to extend beyond the study informants. Indeed, people across the country or across the globe maybe be subject to the same ideological practices and thus will experience similar tensions and contradictions in their everyday work. These are considered “generalizing relations” (Smith, 2005, p. 39) and this term provides a distinctive way for IE researchers to situate inside issues of “generalizability” that are discussed as issues of research rigor in other empirical approaches.

An IE project does not necessarily have to generate fieldwork within the adopted standpoint. There is a body of IE work that is extending analysis deep into national and international policy frameworks, where the daily work of standpoint informants is not described. For example, Eastwood’s (2005) explanation of United Nations’ (UN) environmental policy is built on fieldwork conducted at UN meetings and conventions. While Eastwood’s research describes practices being undertaken far from the forests that are being subject to UN policy, Eastwood’s research never loses sight of real forests and the people whose lives are being coordinated within UN “forest practices.” Consistently, she keeps a standpoint in view and works on behalf of local people whose livelihoods and communities are closely linked to forests. She tracks the environmental impact of UN forestry policies on ordinary people.

Fieldwork in IE can include three important activities: (1) talking to people, (2) collecting texts, and (3) observing people at work. A great deal of IE research is conducted without observations, using only interviews and texts. Texts (any reproducible fields on a computer, photographs, forms, policy documents, etc.) are a key feature of most IE research. It is useful to have texts as a point of conversation for the interview. Luken and Vaughan (2005) who investigated the social organization of home ownership within the United States 1917–1922 “own your own home” movement took archival images and marketing texts to the interviews with the senior citizens they talked to (Paul Luken and Suzanne Vaughan with Janet Rankin, personal communication, August 22, 2015). Laura Bissailion, who was investigating Canadian immigrants and refugees’ experiences of HIV testing, asked the volunteer informants to bring any papers they had (application forms, letters, and official documents) to the interview.9

In regard to planning and commencing data collection, there is a sense among IE researchers that, following ethical approval, the fieldwork must always start with the standpoint informants. While it is true that the research problematic must be formulated on behalf of the expert knowers who occupy the standpoint, the data collection is usually more haphazard than a stepwise development from local to extra-local. Many researchers know a great deal about the institutional practices prior to entering the field—and sometimes data collection can start in the policy arena and then move into the standpoint with the aim of discovering how policies are activated—the researcher works iteratively between local and extra-local activity.

This was the case for Nicole Snow (2015) who was studying mental health legislation in Newfoundland, Canada. Her specific interest was in how community treatment orders (CTOs) were working. A mental health nurse, Snow, had participated in focus groups when the legislation was being crafted and, subsequently, had professional dealings with the treatment orders and the people who experienced mental illness who were subject to them. Thus, Snow had considerable knowledge about the extra-local practices related to how the CTOs worked. The standpoint she adopted was in the work of frontline healthcare professionals and the tensions that are generated at the intersection of knowledgeable practices being carried out within the health care and criminal justice systems that the CTOs were coordinating.

For Snow (2015), the process of data collection began with her careful consideration of what she already knew—both in the local and in the extra-local work processes. She then interviewed a relative of a person on a CTO (being unsuccessful in recruiting a person who was actually subjected to CTO), health-care workers, and bureaucrats. She formulated her problematic at the juncture of what everyone thought the legislation was producing—medication compliance, therapy (recovery), and public safety and what she discovered was actually happening—erratic consumption of medications, a frightened relative trying to cope, professionals who had massive caseloads spread over a large geographic area, and general confusion about signing a “legal undertaking,” as it bumped into issues of being legally “competent,” “informed consent,” and so forth. She was troubled by how “family” seemed to stand outside of the theoretical construct of “public safety.”

Next, Snow (2015) began filling in the gaps—identifying what she knew and what she did not know. For example, she learned about how the justice system was activated when a person’s mental illness was judged to be “unstable” and the exact processes of “revoking” a CTO and what that meant. Data collection for Snow could have been seen as haphazard as, within the bounds of her ethics approval, she grabbed every opportunity to talk to people. Gradually though, she began to be able to create a warrantable account of how CTOs work—from the legislation, into the policy documents, into the education and production of manuals for health professionals, and into the actual textual practices used to invoke and revoke a CTO. She was able to line this up with the formal “CTO plans” documentation that formalized the assigned professional supervisory team and the registered letter sent to the “family support member” whose name appears (informally) in the CTO forms and plans. This is the nature of data collection and analysis in IE. The researcher pays attention when collecting data and then works to empirically build an account of how a problematic is being socially organized—carefully amassing each
piece of relevant evidence to ethnographically describe the daily activities that “rule” people’s lives in hidden and contradictory ways.

It is a mistake to imagine that fieldwork can be completed within a set period using a preplanned timeline. Data collection, data analysis, and “writing up” the research are not distinct phases of an IE project. The researcher should always establish permission for possible follow-up with informants to elaborate on prior points or to recruit a new informant who is knowledgeable about very specific questions. My own recent work is a case in point. I conducted observations with nurses in a hospital. I became interested in their work with computers. I interviewed informatics specialists. As I was working with the data, I found a segment of an interview when the informatics specialist referred to “workflow.” Some months later, working in Qatar, I was at a meeting with a graduate student doing a project on the implementation of electronic health records. In that meeting, “workflow” was a central topic. My task now is to find an informant who can tell me what happens in regard to the work of “workflow.” Perhaps, my IE analysis will then return to the flow sheets and doctors’ order sets that I have gathered and go back to my field notes where I noted that almost every interaction a nurse had with a patient was punctuated by an interaction with a computer—are these findings part of the conceptualized practices of workflow?

Data land in our laps in various ways and are seldom a stepwise process. However, fairly soon in data collection and ongoing analysis, it is wise to begin to develop a working formulation of the research problematic, so that it can guide the ensuing interviews. It saves time when a researcher has a sense of the puzzle that is being explicated and can focus on finding out empirically how this works—rather than just conducting broad and nonspecific interviews about general work processes. Nonetheless, while having a focus is useful, if the researcher becomes committed to an analytic “thread” too early in the process, the researcher may miss important clues that cannot be predicted at the outset. The researcher must remain attentive to data that are, in Smith’s words (1987), “latent” in the setting (p. 91).

Conclusion

A researcher designing an IE study must think “analytically” about the topic from the outset. Where analysis can be pulled off track at the very beginning of the study is when the researcher does not render the research setting (and problems there) “fundamentally mysterious” (Smith, 1990, p. 26). All our prior education, experience, reading, and discussion organize our knowledge. It is these socially organized ideas and practices that coordinate how we can “think” about the problems we are committed to studying. Predominantly, the only tools we have are those that are available within the established frameworks that our professional/activist discourse provides. This is what Smith refers to as an “ideological circle” (Smith and Turner, 2014, p. 30) and what she is referring to when she cautions researchers about being “institutionally captured” (Smith, 2005, p. 155).

This “capture” happens even for those of us who have experience in conducting IE research. A former PhD student, Catherine Ringham (2017), is a neonatal nurse whose research proposal (that I approved) was designed to study nurses’ work processes with “late preterm infants” (LPIs). Ringham was doing early data analysis when she realized that “LPIs” was working as an ideological category and hampering data collection and analysis. Certainly, there were infants whose gestational age matched this medicalized category, but during observations with neonatal nurses, Ringham could not easily isolate specific LPI work processes. Were handwashing, shift handover, covering for coffee breaks, calibrating the blood glucose monitors, and so forth, “late preterm” work? The data demanded that she pay attention to what was actually happening—and there she discovered a problematic at the juncture of nurses’ efforts to feed infants in the neonatal intensive care. LPIs were not left behind in Ringham’s analysis. In fact, nurses used “feeders and growers” as a colloquial term to describe LPIs. In reformulating her thinking, Ringham has been able to contribute an innovative new analysis about the “problems” associated with the care of LPIs.

Analysis in IE demands us to suspend most of our prior understanding about what the problem is and the explanations we bring. This is particularly true for those of us who have professional training and is one of the first (and most difficult) steps to conducting a good IE analysis. Researchers must be prepared to empirically describe what is happening and then to analyze that data to see what is there. A great deal of standpoint informants’ knowledge is invisible prior to entering the field—indeed, their knowledge is often invisible even to them. In IE “analysis” directed toward the social organization of knowledge begins during the research proposal, it is an attitude that is carried into the literature review and subsequently into the field. Positioning critically inside one’s own thinking is an essential precursor to avoiding some of the pitfalls and wrong turnings that plague weak or incongruent analysis.

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Notes

1. See, for example, Brulé (2015) on student activism; Nichols’s (2014) book about homeless youth; Brunson’s (2008) study about sign language; Crist (2011) who investigated the U.S. emergency food network; Luken and Vaughan (2006) who explained how child-rearing was standardized through housing developments in

2. See, for example, Brulé (2015) on student activism; Nichols’s (2014) book about homeless youth; Brunson’s (2008) study about sign language; Crist (2011) who investigated the U.S. emergency food network; Luken and Vaughan (2006) who explained how child-rearing was standardized through housing developments in
the United States; Eastwood (2005) studying United Nations’ forest policy; and Ng (2000) who described changing gender, class, and race relations being generated through labor adjustments.

3. Applying theoretical formulations about the topic does not preclude use of IE’s theoretical framework. This can be confusing for novices. IE is itself a complex theoretical lens through which to view the social. IE is not antitheoretical.

4. Grounded theory (GT) is understood to begin “on the ground” of things happening (as does IE). I am often asked about how IE is different from GT. There are significant differences in data collection and data analysis—but the most significant difference is IE’s rejection of developing theories from data.

5. For example, Syrian refugees’ position (standpoint) inside the Canadian welfare, immigration, and citizenship bureaucracy; medical doctors’ position inside professional regulatory and insurance practices; home buyers’ position inside real estate law, property taxes, mortgage regulations; homeless people within vagrancy laws, homeless shelters, welfare systems, mental health services, and so forth. Each standpoint location can be subject to multiple institutional practices that layer and/or overlap.

6. A perspective is a way of regarding something, a point of view or an attitude. A person’s perspective is influenced by their standpoint—but standpoint (as a methodological term) and perspective are not synonymous.

7. This is not to say that technology is not useful. I have used MAXQDA to store and organize data. I have used its features to “index” work processes that I have identified in the data and to link the work processes into the generalizing ruling relations that organize people across time and locations.

8. I was on the Bisaillon’s (2012) academic committee.

9. It is possible to conduct IE research in settings where there are few texts. See, for example, work that I did with Williams (Williams & Rankin, 2015) whose research was in Thailand where he encountered a dearth of official texts.

10. The terms “local” and “extra-local” (or trans-local) are common parlance in IE. They are used to denote data collected in the standpoint (local) and data that are focused on work practices being carried out further afield (extra-local).

11. Smith (1990b) asserts that ideological circles operate in an explanatory fashion that organizes what can be considered relevant. What is already known conceptually organizes the data for subsequent analysis. The ideological circle is “a means of operating selectively” with data, it is a frame for understanding what is going on “… in ways that preserve the ideal representation. Ideology can be viewed as a procedure for sorting out and arranging conceptually the living, actual, world of people so that it can be seen to be as we already know it ideologically (p. 41-43).

12. Preterm infants who are born late in the pregnancy have physiological vulnerabilities that may be overlooked. One of the explanations in the nursing literature is that the appearance late preterm infants is similar to full-term infants. Nurses focus on infants who are obviously less stable.

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