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► **To cite this version:**

Fabien Hildwein. Institutional ethnography as a critical methodology for care organizations. *European Review of Service Economics and Management*, 2024, 1 (17), pp.151-182. 10.48611/isbn.978-2-406-17198-0.p.0151 . hal-04755989

**HAL Id: hal-04755989**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04755989v1>**

Submitted on 28 Oct 2024

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# Institutional ethnography as a critical methodology for care organizations

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**Abstract:** This methodological essay encourages organization scholars to pay attention to institutional ethnography, a rich and critical methodology to study (health)care organizations. Institutional ethnography aims at making the standpoint of invisibilized people at the bottom of organizations matter in science, and at unveiling how institutions influence, transform and constrain everyday life and work, resulting in violent power relations. Reviewing those goals of institutional ethnography reveals the common roots shared between institutional ethnography and care ethics, and how, on this basis, institutional ethnography can serve as a critical methodology for organizations in the care sector or employing care workers. The conclusion suggests avenues for research on alternative organizing and on emancipation through text interpretation.

**Keywords :** Institutional ethnography, care ethics, critical management studies, feminist methodology, ontology.

## 1 Introduction

A key feature of neoliberalism is its dual influence on both institutions and individuals. In the healthcare system (in France and elsewhere), the austerity policies are not limited to a reduction of resources under the pretense of cost optimization. They also signify a cultural shift, influencing the expected behaviors of individuals within a specific institution, such as a hospital, whether they are caregivers or care receivers. It directly impacts their subjective experience of work and/or care. This has been analyzed, for instance, as a destruction of solidarity as a founding principle of hospitals (Batifoulier, Domin & Raully, 2023 ; Domin, 2015), as a transformation of private practitioners through remuneration to foster optimization and “performance” (Da Silva & Gadreau, 2015), or as a mutation of patients towards consumers (Batifoulier, Domin & Gadreau, 2008). This is also exemplified by the many recent social movements in hospitals, expressing the exhaustion, the pain and the difficulty of caregivers and nursing staff to simply work well and normally. In the mental health sector, this led in 2018-2019 to spectacular actions: a two-week hunger strike at Rouvray hospital, voluntary confinement by seven strikers on the roof of the Pierre Janet psychiatric hospital in Le Havre, or the long-term strike dubbed “*Pinel en lutte*” at the Philippe Pinel hospital in

Amiens.

On the other hand, neoliberal anthropology portrays humans as radically autonomous (Dardot & Laval, 2017; Laval, 2007), while the shared dependence and vulnerability have become more evident in recent years. Therefore, in sharp contrast to some founding principles of organizations, we require sustenance, shelter, social interaction (especially at the beginning of our lives), and will inevitably experience suffering, illness, aging, and death, akin to all living beings (Paperman, 2005, p. 189-190)'. This vulnerability makes us dependent on each other and makes us responsible for others: our children, our parents, our friends and family, and even our colleagues. It also creates two forms of power relations: first towards highly vulnerable people (children, old people, sick people, people with disabilities, etc.) and second towards caregivers whose work is routinely made invisible and depreciated in both in the domestic sphere and in organizations, as feminist thinkers have pointed out (Arborio, 2001 ; Molinier, 2005 ; Simonet, 2018).

For all these reasons, it has become a pressing issue to expose how care works really happens in institutions and how institutional rules, texts and standards constrain or prevent this work, particularly neoliberal institutions. We, as organization scholars, need to be able to show and analyze how institutions and everyday work are articulated, especially on vital issues of healthcare.

Institutional ethnography represents an essential methodology and ontology to research these questions, and bears a strong actuality with current economical, social and organizational issues. Ethnography, as method, is characterized by an embodied and long-term fieldwork; interviews and observations constitute the two main modes of data collection (Beaud & Weber, 2010 ; Ybema et al., 2009). The singularity of institutional ethnography is to hold a strong ontological and reflexive posture, to focus on unveiling the role of institutions in everyday life, and – in addition to interviews and observations – to consider institutional texts as a central elements of the fieldwork. Many excellent presentations of institutional ethnography have been written over the years (Campbell & Gregor, 2002 ; Devault, 2006 ; Malachowski, Skorobohacz & Stasiulis, 2017 ; Malbois & Barthélémy, 2018 ; Rankin, 2017a, 2017b ; Rankin & Campbell, 2009 ; Townsend, Langille & Ripley, 2003 ; Tummons, 2017); ours focuses on the critical potential of institutional ethnography for organization studies and its links with care ethics. Research in management employing institutional ethnography exists (Billo, 2015 ; Pekkanen, 2021), but its full critical potential for organization studies still needs to be entirely deployed.

To show the importance of institutional ethnography as a critical method to study care organizations, we will explore two interlinked goals it pursues: 1. unveiling the power of institutions in everyday work, and 2. making the standpoint of invisibilized groups matter in science. Each of them represents a critical dimension of institutional ethnography. Through this review, its ontology and methodology will reveal themselves, as well as its common roots with care ethics. Empirical results from fieldwork in institutional ethnography will be used punctually as examples of what it can accomplish.

## **2 Unveiling the power of institutions in everyday work**

Institutional ethnography first aims at being a “sociology for people” (to quote the title of its main book: Smith, 2005, 2018 for the French translation). Its founder, Dorothy Smith (1926-2022), starts her reflection in her experience of women’s groups in the 1970s (2005, chap. 1), in which women discussed and debated, and became aware first of their common material oppression, and second of the difficulty to find the right language to discuss their issues. Common sense and dominant language, being made by and for men, would ignore or

erase women's experience, making them invisible. In particular, the effort of domestic work is trivialized and devalued. Solving the issue of the invisibilization of women's everyday experience represents the starting point of Smith's work. Her sociology seeks to show the material living conditions not only of women, but of every social group, in particular groups invisibilized because of their marginalization and/or for working at the bottom of organizations. The scientific project of institutional ethnography inquires: "[...] *how to design a sociology that aims at extending people's ordinary knowledge as practitioners of our everyday worlds into reaches of power and relations that are beyond them.*" (Smith, 2005, p. 49). Coherently, "*the analysis is meant to be 'usable' in the way that a map can be used to find one's way.*" (Devault, 2006).

Within the ethnographic tradition, institutional ethnography distinguishes itself by its interest for institutions and how they influence everyday life:

In its concern to produce careful and detailed analytic descriptions of social phenomena, institutional ethnography is similar to other forms of ethnography. However, unlike much ethnographic research, institutional ethnography is not empirically focused on 'experience' or 'culture'. Instead, it addresses processes of social organization. Institutional ethnographers are primarily concerned with exploring and describing the various social and institutional forces that shape, limit and otherwise organize people's actual, everyday/night worlds. (Mykhalovskiy & McCoy, 2002)

Specifically, institutional ethnography belongs to the tradition of critical sociology as it aims at unveiling power relations. It takes a critical stand on the influence of institutions on people's lives and is built around the goal of revealing the power of ruling regulations on people.

Conceptualizing the operation of power such that it can be discovered in people's everyday actions is a crucial theoretical feature of institutional ethnography (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 43).

The purpose of institutional ethnography 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. (Rankin, 2017a)

The aim [of institutional ethnography] is to generate knowledge about invisible, interconnected, taken-for-granted forms of governance that rule everyday life. (Townsend, Langille & Ripley, 2003)

Institutional ethnography can be fruitfully articulated to critical management studies. The latter reveal power relations in collective action, consider numerous factors in organizational evaluations, and explore alternative forms of organizing. They are characterized by a strong reflexivity, an orientation toward interdisciplinarity and a personal engagement from the researcher to foster positive change in their field (Allard-Poesi & Loilier, 2009 ; Fournier & Grey, 2000 ; Nizet & Pichault, 2015 ; Taskin & de Nanteuil, 2011). Both institutional ethnography and critical management studies share an interest in institutions and organizations, and both aim at denouncing power relations (Nizet & Pichault, 2015) or at denaturalizing social elements (Fournier & Grey, 2000) in that case, the institutional power.

To do so, institutional ethnography starts fieldwork from the problematic of the actors of the field; then it calls upon an ontology divided between experiential and institutional regime; finally, it connects those regimes through ruling relations and institutional texts, exposing the influence of institutions in everyday work.

### **1.1 *Starting from a problematic of the actors of the field***

Dorothy Smith develops the notion of *problematic*, borrowed from Louis Althusser (Smith, 2005, pp. 38-43), as the starting point of any fieldwork in institutional ethnography.

The initial problematic of fieldwork always comes from a problem perceived and formulated by informants in the field, and which they cannot solve. It arises from a question that cannot be explained by observing the experiential regime only (Townsend, Langille & Ripley, 2003). Thus the ethnographer needs to call upon the institutional regime to get a full explanation. The problematic is then gradually developed and explored to understand the institutional field, by exploring the differences between the problematic and the institutional arrangements that the fieldwork exposes (Rankin, 2017a). It is often in those “disjunctures” that the analysis may unveil institutional power relations.

To illustrate her approach, Smith provides an example from one of her initial fieldwork experience conducted with Alison Griffith. (Griffith, 2006 ; Smith, 2005, pp. 33-38). As single mothers, they start with a personal problematic concerning their children’s school, the network of parents and educative institutional context: “*We decided that we wanted to understand why we had the kinds of problems with the schools our children attended, problems that we associated with being seen by educators as defective parents of actually or potentially defective children.*” Based on this initial issue, they meet other mothers, single or not, from the same neighborhood or not, interview representatives of the school system and parents' associations, and study 20<sup>th</sup> century discourse on the educational role of mothers. They gradually raise their level of analysis to consider their problem from the point of view of the school institution. They come to the conclusion that they feel like deficient mothers because the schools their children attend consider them as such. Indeed, the strength of middle-class schools is to benefit from the free work of mothers at home in (heterosexual) couples. This free work extends and supplements the work of the teaching staff, which maintains the school level above that of schools of lower classes, where both parents are forced to work. The educational system therefore benefits from the patriarchal gender roles and the free domestic work of women. However, as single mothers having to provide for themselves, they cannot provide this work, which endangers the school’s social superiority.

Thus, a problem at the level of people can only be elucidated by placing it in a broader institutional context and in the games of economic and social power that structure and condition it.

### 1.2 *An ontology of the social to study the social*

It is important to understand that institutional ethnography does not constitute primarily a theoretical explanatory effort. Smith builds a set of concepts in order to understand the social and to reveal it; she insists to think of it as an ontology and not a theory, which is something that her followers have taken seriously (Rankin, 2017b). Even its ontology is not important for itself, it exists to serve and support the methodology and its different heuristic objectives (although the essential nature of institutional ethnography remains open for discussion: Tummons, 2017, pp. 153-154 suggests thinking of it as a "confluence" of methodological, epistemological and ontological approaches). Institutional ethnography exists first to understand the social and to produce knowledge: “*Institutional ethnography wants to be a methodology for discovery, which stems not in a corpus of concepts and of theoretical texts, but in an open research position oriented towards exploration.*”<sup>1</sup>(Malbois & Barthélémy, 2018, p. 20).

Following this goal, the core of Smith’s ontology is to think of the social as coordination:

For institutional ethnography, the social, as the focus of sociological inquiry, is specified as

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<sup>1</sup> My translation. Original version: “*L’ethnographie institutionnelle se veut une méthode de découverte, qui a sa source non pas dans un corpus de concepts et de textes théoriques, mais dans une posture de recherche ouverte sur l’exploration.*”

people's activities as they are coordinated with those of others. This is what is meant by 'the social' in this context. It is not a phenomenon distinct in itself but an aspect of what people do to be explored and explicated. The focus of research is never the individual, the individual does not disappear; indeed, she or he is in an essential presence. Her or his doings, however, are to be taken relationally. (Smith, 2005, p. 59)

Thus, institutional ethnography establishes an ontology of the social split into two regimes, experiential and institutional, and reflects on the relations between those two levels. The experiential regime is local, immediate, concrete and singular, it is the reality in which people live their everyday lives. It is "[...] *the fact of a subject being present in the world through its corporeality and its language skills, a subject receptive to the events, to the sensitive tones and properties of the local environment which surrounds them.*" (Malbois & Barthélémy, 2018, p. 10) <sup>2</sup>. The institutional regime is characterized by its ability to coordinate local situations from the experiential regime, which is to say that it makes people work together without them ever meeting, separated by space and time. In that sense, the institutional level is translocal, it endures over time and it abstracts singular situations. The experiential regime and the institutional regime are articulated by *ruling regulations*, social relations and practices that shape work from afar and are locally activated by people (Rankin, 2017b). Examples of ruling relations include marriage, wage, purchase/sell or management.

Institutions, in institutional ethnography, are not reified objects, existing in themselves: "*In institutional ethnography, 'institution' is not another word for organization or establishment, nor is it an objective entity that intervenes in people's lives.*" (Rankin & Campbell, 2009). Rather, institutions are constituted by a set of coordinated complex practices, made translocal through language, knowledge and texts (cf. below). Those practices are contingent and situated in a specific (historical) context (on this point, Smith draws inspiration on Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and the idea that '[...] social structures is a human creation, and thus can be altered by humans who decide that a different routine organization is desirable' : Townsend, Langille & Ripley, 2003).

Institutional texts are particularly important for ruling relations, in both directions. From institutional to experiential regime, they abstract a local situation by selecting the elements deemed relevant, categorizing and objectifying them. For instance, police reports, expert report, journal articles, school report. This allows for local and singular situations to travel through time and space and to be compared to each other, under the form of knowledge. From institutional to experiential regime, they determine how people should work, behave, take decisions, etc. and what elements are relevant in a specific situation. For instance, standards, regulations, organizational rules. Texts should be understood as the backbone of institutions, as developed in the following section.

### ***1.3 Institutional texts as constituting elements of institutions***

The double originality of institutional ethnography is to analyze institutions and organizations through their constituting texts and to show the power relations that emerge from institutional texts.

Institutional texts, which have been shown for a long time to be core constituents of organizations (see for instance the works of the current of communicating constitution of organizing: Cooren, 2004 ; Cooren, Taylor & Van Every, 2005 ; Kuhn, 2008). In institutional ethnography, texts are approached as one of the main components of ruling relations. In this

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<sup>2</sup> My translation. Original version: "[...] *le fait d'un sujet présent au monde dans sa corporeité et ses compétences langagières, réceptif aux événements, aux tonalités et aux propriétés sensibles de l'environnement local qui l'entoure*".

view, what makes a text an *institutional* text is its ability to coordinate people beyond the local setting where they work and act. Like all texts, institutional texts travel through space and time and they endure beyond a specific context. In addition, they create a conversation with their readers that pushes them to act in a specific way – they have a certain degree of performativity (although Smith never employs this term). On account of these two characteristics, they are able to *coordinate* people who will never meet, either by imposing a certain order (e.g., via standards and regulations) or by being modified by each person and traveling through a long institutional process (such as medical records or grade reports).

The text-reader conversation goes both ways: the institutional text has a certain strength over the reader, but he or she can also resist its influence and propose diverging interpretations which depart from the common dominant understanding of the institutional text and the institution itself. From a methodological point of view, this means that the text should never be considered in the abstract, and should always be put, through observations and interviews, in its concrete context of use.

The key to incorporating texts into the ethnographic mode is to be able to recognize that their reading is situated in an actual time and place; that it is an integral part of a course of action; and that there's a text-reader conversation going on that involves an actual person (maybe more than one). (Smith, 2005, p. 168)

Furthermore, institutional ethnography studies how texts travel from place to place, from time to time and from person to person. To do so, ethnographers “map” how texts circulate and are used and interpreted (Turner, 2006), and how they influence, support or counteract different decisions within institutions. Throughout these trips, they are used in different ways, notably by trying strategically to anticipate the behavior of others and to influence them. From the work of Edouard Vo-Quang, Smith gives the example of grids to evaluate students (2006a, pp. 68-72), an institutional text which circulates from faculty members (who evaluate students in the context of the classroom) and graduate admissions officers (who decide whether to admit a student in a program). Graduate admissions officers distrust faculty members and presuppose that they grade their students higher than they are; as a consequence, graduate admissions officers consider that only the 10% higher grades are acceptable, ignore a lot of information carefully produced by faculty members and focus only on a few key elements. The concrete classroom experience of a teacher is “*reduced, specified and subject to standardization*” both by filling the grid and by the interpretation of the grid done by the graduate admission officers. In the end, the information produced leads to a decision (whether to admit the student or not) and participate to create and maintain higher education as an institution.

#### 1.4 *The power of institutional texts*

In addition, institutional ethnography analyzes the power relation between institutional texts and their readers. In general, institutional ethnography sees institutional texts as strong and capable of imposing themselves on individuals and their concrete experience:

Within the text-reader conversation, however, the text exerts significant control. It is a control exercised through how its words and sentences activate the reader's responses. In being activated, the reader becomes, in a sense, the text's agent. (Smith, 2005, p. 108)

The power of an officially mandated organization overrules personal or professional intentions and experiences. In the objectified and ideological version of knowledge being created in organizational records, there is no way back to the client's, or the professional's, own experience. The official objectified version dominates. Any experiential account that the professional makes is neither useful to the organization's action nor likely to be believed. The text replaces and “trumps” competing versions. Officially, the person exists as an object, just as he appears in organizational

documents. (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 40)

The text erases the specificities of each situation or person, in order to translate them into a translocal level of action, so as to standardize them and to coordinate similar objects.

Institutional ethnography, however, also considers the individual's power as the reading and interpretation of an institutional text creates a special type of text–reader conversation:

Reading a text is a special kind of conversation in which the reader plays both parts. She or he “activates” the text (McCoy, 1995) – though probably never quite as its maker intended – and at the same time, she or he is responding to it or talking it up in some way. Its activation by a reader inserts the text's message into the local setting and the sequence of action into which it is read. (Smith, 2005, p. 105)

Here the power of the reader is suggested, as their interpretation of the text can differ from that of its original author: the reader is not entirely passive and some degree of interpretation of the text exists which can be used and abused to reinforce established institutional power.

For instance, a policeman arresting a young man on the street can frame the encounter such that it matches the institutional criteria for a legitimate arrest and can thus use the text of the law to his advantage (Smith, 2005, pp. 115-116). Similarly, the description of a gay bathhouse by police officers criminalizes its activities by interpreting the penal code in a specific way (p.193-8). In his expert report, a psychologist may represent a woman testifying against her violent husband as irrational and therefore dangerous for her children, whereas she is in fact legitimately distressed (Smith, 2006a).

The fieldwork of Diamond (2006) in a retirement home shows how the bulletin board, announcing the weekly activities, is directed not at the residents, but rather at the visitors, and exerts power over both groups:

Lots of outsiders, visitors, doctors, state people, would come in and see the bulletin board, strategically placed to be seen right as one exits the elevator, displaying all the “Activities”: Tuesday, bingo; Wednesday: birthday party; Thursday: sewing (“Why would I want to sew?” asked Mary McGuire [a resident]. “I sewed all my life. Always hated it.”). But for the visitors, smiling and satisfied by the text they had activated it was altogether different. (p.50) [...] I can see the smiling visitors arrive to spread good cheer, indeed providing vital services of a material, social, and emotional nature, yet perpetuating the ideologies that silence residents. We could see them walking off the elevator to come face-to-face with the bulletin board, which told them of all activities of the day. “Oh, they have activities for these people all the time” was a common reading. It was with sharp contrast to those of us who lived and worked amidst the consummate boredom of it all. Visitors, as readers, brought to full circle the ideological production of the discourse of activities. The visitors, we can now say, activated those texts, became their proxy, and participated in the ruling relations that permeated the rooms they entered and left. (p.61)

Visitors sincerely care for the residents and could otherwise become their allies against the retirement home with a view to spurring greater care and support for the residents. However, the institutional text makes concrete situations abstract, erases the boredom and convinces the visitors that everything is done in the residents' interests; it thus mobilizes the visitors against the recriminations of the residents. Institutional ethnography shows that, as long as people take an institutional text for granted (visitors believe the bulletin board), they run the risk of being subjected to it and absorbing its vision of the world.

Institutional power relies either in how people interpret texts to their advantage, either by conforming to specific racial or sexist stereotypes, or – conversely – by their inability to produce an alternative interpretation, thus rendering them susceptible to manipulation by institutional texts. From a methodological perspective, this view of institutional texts is



particularly valuable as it highlights a threat to objectifying institutions. Rather than referring to institutions as general abstractions, mapping institutional texts makes them concrete and palpable, and provides clear guidelines to describe and analyze their influence.

### ***1.5 Institutional power through texts: an example from fieldwork***

To show how institutional ethnography may contribute to organization studies, let us provide the example of fieldwork in mental health in which the author of this article is involved: alternative organizing for people with mental health conditions, in underprivileged urban zones in Seine-Saint-Denis, in the North of Paris. The *groupes d'entraide mutuelle* (GEMs, which could be roughly translated as “groups for mutual assistance”) are a specific form of associations and have been instituted by a specific law in 2005. They aim at creating a place for them to socialize and to bond, without the stigmata usually attributed to mental health; a GEM is a place “in-between” medical institutions (notably the psychiatric hospital) and the rest of the city, to help its members to transition (Troisoeufs, 2009, 2012).

The bill of the specification of GEMs, which represents their main institutional text, is inherently contradictory (Hildwein, 2021). Supposedly, GEMs are directed by their own members, to encourage their autonomy and self-governance, both as a political and as a therapeutic process. However, the bill of specification also imposes on them a strong institutional framework (Barrès, 2009): each year, the funding for each GEM is reviewed by the regional health agency; administrative work is usually performed by an external organization; ethical issues have to be resolved with the help of another organization (usually an association defending patients and/or their families); and the daily activity of the GEM is organized by social workers who do not suffer from a mental health condition. This framework is justified by the emotional and psychological instability of the members of the GEM; while mental health issues do bring such difficulty, such justification also denies to GEM members any ability to be responsible for themselves and for others, thus stripping them from their capacity to participate in collective decisions. Yet, the GEMs studied in that field still manage to create autonomy for their members, which is the disjuncture that needs explaining.

Starting from this problematic, a fieldwork following institutional ethnography principles allows showing how social workers and members of the GEM manage to bypass the power of the text. They draw on other theoretical texts, such as alternative psychiatry and institutional therapy (Oury, 1970, 1986), as well as their professional knowledge from other experiences, to propose a divergent interpretation of the text. Together, they rethink autonomy: something which is collectively constructed, by working towards inclusion in the city, by developing the citizenship of its members and by taking responsibility for each other, in particular during crises, whether emotional, personal, financial, etc. (Hildwein, 2021) They also refuse to reduce mental health issues to medical problems, but rather they address it as a phenomenon which is also social, administrative, professional, linked to housing, to family, etc. Without paying attention to how texts are interpreted and produced, without paying attention to how work knowledge coordinates people, it would have been much more difficult to understand how institutions exert their power and how people collectively find ways to resist them.

We have seen how institutional ethnography can be considered as a methodology to critically study and analyze organization as it inquires the hidden power relations of the institutional regime over the experiential regime, notably through the analysis of institutional texts. This is not, however, the only critical potential of institutional ethnography: it also aims at making the standpoint of invisibilized people matter in science. This can also be seen as a form of solution or answer to the problem posed by institutions: by making their experience

see, it helps build their legitimacy and it denaturalizes institutions. This critical potential is reinforced by the common roots with care ethics.

### **3 Making the standpoint of invisibilized people matter in science**

In order to produce knowledge usable for people, institutional ethnography pays attention to the perspectives of people whose lives, work, and viewpoints are typically rendered invisible. The contempt for their work and the silencing of their voices generally comes from a combination of their gender, their race or their position at the bottom of the organization. However, the epistemological position of institutional ethnography does not make a fetish of the standpoint of invisibilized people, in a binary opposition between the bottom of organizations and institutions. Rather, it is a reflexive epistemological position, which seeks to avoid reproducing in science a new form of overbearing institutional power, and, even more importantly, show the political aspects of ordinary work. Doing so, it has developed many commonalities with care ethics, including critical ones.

To examine the proximity with care ethics, we draw upon both the foundational texts in English-speaking scholarship and the emerging French school of care, which has been developing since the mid-2000s. (Ibos et al., 2019 ; Molinier, Laugier & Paperman, 2009 ; Paperman & Laugier, 2011) and is characterized by interdisciplinarity (ethics, moral sociology, social psychology, etc.), by intersectionality, and by a strong focus on work as a central place of care (Molinier, 2020). This last feature represents an important articulation between care ethics and organization studies.

A first piece of evidence of the proximity of care perspectives and institutional ethnography is the interest that institutional ethnographers have taken in fieldwork on healthcare and care organizations (Malachowski, Skorobohacz & Stasiulis, 2017, pp. 103-105): in the fight against AIDS (Mykhalovskiy & McCoy, 2002 ; Smith, Mykhalovskiy & Weatherbee, 2006), in mental health (Malachowski et al., 2016), in nursing homes (Diamond, 2006), and in occupational therapy (Prodinger et al., 2012 ; Townsend, Langille & Ripley, 2003). The mental and physical sufferings of nurses at work have been studied several times through institutional ethnography (Clune, 2011 ; McGibbon, Peter & Gallop, 2010 ; de Ruiter, 2008), including to study how neoliberal reforms in the hospital shape the work of nurses, pushing them to subordinate themselves to norms and standardization (Rankin & Campbell, 2009). Neoliberal reforms in the hospital have also been studied regarding their effects on patients (Rankin, 2003). More generally, institutional ethnography has been recognized as an important form of ethnography for health research (Rashid, Caine & Goetz, 2015).

However, the articulations between care ethics and institutional ethnography is not only empirical. They also share three more commonalities: a wider approach to standpoint epistemology, defiance of theorization and a large definition of work.

#### **1.6 *Widening standpoint epistemology***

As already mentioned, institutional ethnography takes its roots in women movements, who worked in order to give meaning to their experience and their efforts for emancipation. This meant putting words on them and refusing the dominant language of men and patriarchy. Their reflections gave rise to the standpoint epistemology current (Espínola, 2012 ; Hartsock, 1983 ; Naples, 2003), which show how women – from a situated, specific and concrete position – can produce knowledge that is unique to them, and which strongly diverges from the dominant masculine and abstract standpoint. This starting point raised many debates on what constitutes this standpoint (essential characteristics, women's socialization, their material interest, etc.), on the dangers of considering women as a homogeneous group (an

issue raised in particular by black feminists) and on the possibility of extending standpoint epistemology to any oppressed group. The specificity of Dorothy Smith is to consider that any standpoint is situated in the social world, and to develop a methodological position that takes this into account (Malbois & Barthélémy, 2018, p. 15). This is not a relativistic methodology, as it also takes into account the power asymmetry between dominant and oppressed standpoints. Fieldwork in institutional ethnography thus have considered for instance several invisibilized standpoints, such as that of skilled immigrants (Slade, 2012), crime-processed women (Welsh & Rajah, 2014) and battered women (Wilson & Pence, 2006).

This represents a common point with care ethics. Both care ethics and institutional ethnography have been founded from feminist perspectives and the singularity of women's experience. Psychologist Carol Gilligan, a former student and research assistant of Lawrence Kohlberg, started the discussions on care ethics by revisiting his results and exposing the sexist assumptions underneath (Gilligan, 1982). He observed how boys and girls solve ethical dilemmas and justify their answers, and assessed their responses through a hierarchical grid, from the less to the most universal judgments (Tronto, 1993 chapter 3). Noting that women's moral reasoning tends to be less universal, he concludes that they are less developed than their male counterparts. Gilligan, on the contrary, considers that women – even at a younger age – are socialized to care for the people and the context in which they live; thus, they provide more grounded answers, asking for precision regarding the situation, while men can afford to remain in a more abstract level. She aims at making heard “a different voice” from that of men (from the title of her book: Gilligan, 1982). Doing so, Gilligan lays the foundations of a particularist understanding of ethics, which favors taking decisions based on contextualized care for others rather than on abstract grand principles (Gilligan, 2013). In a similar way, the situated experience of women leads to a specific form of ethics in care and to a specific form of knowledge in standpoint theory and institutional ethnography.

The importance of taking into account the standpoint of care receivers is confirmed by field studies, for instance in nursing homes (Amine, Bonnemaizon & Josion-Portail, 2022 ; Diamond, 2006 ; Molinier, 2013), in community-based research on AIDS service organizations (Mykhalovskiy & McCoy, 2002) or when studying the participation of patients with mental health issues, showing the desire of caregivers to avoid paternalism (Jørgensen, Rendtorff & Holen, 2018). Making the voices of caregivers heard means challenging the white male epistemic privilege (Molinier, 2016). For scholars studying care organization, it is therefore essential to have at our disposal a methodology able to produce knowledge from their standpoint. Standpoint epistemology also challenges management and organization scholars, pointing out the influence of our (rather privileged) social position on the knowledge we produce, and asking for whom this knowledge is produced. The importance given in management literature to concepts such as performance, leadership and control shows that it is aimed at the material interests of managers and shareholders; institutional ethnography, in that regard, provides perspectives to produce knowledge for other actors in organizations.

From there on, institutional ethnography identifies two traps leading to vertical forms of knowledge: excessive theorization and invisibilization of work.

### ***1.7 Avoiding excessive theorization***

Smith often criticizes theories for obscuring the fieldwork or biasing the analysis by forcing a specific set of concepts over a concrete and more complex situation (she has Marxist theoreticians of her time particularly in mind).

Institutional ethnography 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). (Rankin, 2017a)

Following Marx and Engels, Smith challenges mainstream sociology for replacing actual people and action with abstract concepts. She is in particular critical of more diffuse and implicit forms of theorization, which she calls “blob ontology” (2005, pp. 54-56) and which uses concepts without reflexivity on their effects. Blob ontology reifies actual actions into substantives such as *organizations*, *institutions*, *power*; through conceptualization, it isolates aspects of the social such as *rules* from the concrete social situation in which they appear; it transplant concepts such as bureaucracy from their original context of enunciation (Weber’s writing in that case) without reflection on the changes in between; it relies excessively on metaphors (the social *structure*, from architecture, or cultural *capital*, from economics), without considering the abstracting effects of such metaphors. In that regard, management science has been recently accused of employing loosely controlled vocabulary (Alvesson & Blom, 2022). Institutional ethnography’s warning against blob ontology resonates with management and its discourse, which has often been accused of being newspeak (Diet, 2009 ; Morley, 2023 ; Vandeveld-Rougale, 2017), including in care organizations (Gondonneau, 2022 ; Hirlet & Benoit, 2021 ; Richman & Mercer, 2004), thus serving to hide the violence of neoliberal policies under euphemisms, metaphors and false narratives.

The ontology of institutional ethnography discussed earlier exists to circumvent theories and to provide conceptual tools in order to observe the social as it actually happens. It seeks to give space to the standpoint of the members of the field and avoid theory that creates blind spots for ethnographer.

In that regard, institutional ethnography explicitly differs from other qualitative methods: it does not aim at producing or developing new pieces of theory (concepts, relations...).

Unlike other qualitative methods, institutional ethnographers actively avoid developing thematic analysis. We do not collapse the data into broad categories, generic concepts or generalizable patterns. Our goal is not to develop theory from the data. (Rankin & Campbell, 2009)

This is particularly true for grounded theory, which enjoys a certain popularity in organization studies: institutional ethnography does not favor the interpretation of the ethnographer over that of the members of the field (Smith, 2005, pp. 63-64). To differentiate institutional ethnography from various forms of grounded theory, she states:

The account produced relies on assemble the process as it is known by those who bring it into being. Their experiential knowledge is not subdued or subjected to an overriding interpretation. Rather it is put in a place created by the complementary accounts of others also involved [...]. (p.64)

She also insists that institutional ethnography aims to elucidate the process of constituting institutions itself through the work knowledge of informants, rather than imposing the ethnographer’s impressions or interpretations (p. 160).

Care ethics, in a similar sense, are cautious regarding overly abstract theories (as are many other feminist stances : Cunliffe, 2022). They insist on being considered not as a unified theory or theoretical effort, but as “perspectives” from multidisciplinary approaches (moral sociology, social psychology, ethics, etc.), on often ignored issues (Ibos, 2019 ; Ibos et al., 2019). Care ethics, in that sense, are centered around a concept, “care”, in a similar way as gender studies are centered around the concept of gender.

### 1.8 *Rethinking work*

Working against the invisibilization of care work is a second common feature between

institutional ethnography and care ethics. This is partly due, again, to their shared feminist roots and to the critic of domestic work (Simonet, 2018), which shows how domestic, maintenance and care work have been invisibilized and devalued, to the point of being denied remuneration and not even be recognized as work; since these forms of work are massively carried out by women of color, this invisibilization is part of patriarchal and racial exploitation.

In order to observe how work actually happens, institutional ethnography proposes a so-called “generous” definition of work, including a large variety of activities that could otherwise be disregarded:

There are problems with using the concept of work, in large part because it's treated as being equivalent to paid employment. By institutional ethnographers, “work” is used in a generous sense to extend to anything done by people that takes time and effort, that they mean to do, that is done under definite conditions and with whatever means and tools, and that they may have to think about. It means much more than what is done on the job. (Smith, 2005, pp. 151-152)

Selecting items off the shelves in a supermarket and bringing them to a cash register is work; waiting in line to speak to a teller in a bank is work; walking to the mailbox is work; so is filling in your income tax form; and so on and so on. Getting down to the everyday organization of people's doings is not as easy as you might think. Ordinary uses of the concept of work easily deflect us. (Smith, 2005, p. 162)

The beautiful thing about the generous conception of work is that it can include the doings of all kinds of things, including the work of doing nothing. (Diamond, 2006)

Institutional ethnography recognize a wide range of activities as work, in order to avoid invisibilization. It seeks in particular to capture “work knowledges” (Smith, 2005 chapter 7). Work knowledges correspond to the actual and embodied experience (often implicit) that a person gains through their work, including what she thinks and feels. Work, in that sense, is a reflexive activity. Those characteristics are common with many other conceptions of work. The specificity of institutional ethnography is also to consider how work knowledges coordinate someone's work with others (colleagues, superiors, customers, care receivers, etc.). Vocabulary, shared representations, gestures are particularly important to understand that dimension of work and to link it to institutions. Interviews are useful to understand how work is thought of, and how people consider their own activity. Observations help make explicit activities which are not considered work, even by those who perform it, and to see how they are constrained and transformed by institutions. Mapping texts makes institutions visible, in particular how the work of different people is coordinated through texts.

Institutional ethnography is particularly interested in the work of “frontline organizational workers”:

Frontline professionals, such as teachers, nurses, trainers, social workers, community agency personnel, and other bureaucrats, often become informants in an institutional ethnography. Individuals in such positions are especially important because they make the linkages between clients and ruling discourses, “working up” the messiness of an everyday circumstance so that it fits the categories and protocols of a professional regime. (DeVault & McCoy, 2006)

They are singularly important as informants in the fieldwork as they are those who transform the everyday life into institutions, they “hook” institutions into work. They are on the frontier between the two regimes.

### ***1.9 The institutional and political dimension of care work***

It is essential to understand that this conception of work never forgets the institutional context in which it happens, as is demonstrated in the attention given to work knowledges and

frontline workers.

Institutional ethnography's concept of "work" is meant to direct attention to what someone is/was doing; it wants to include the actual doings that go on to making institutions happen, whether they are recognized in institutional discourse or not. (Smith, 2005, p. 157)

In that approach to work, institutions (and theory) often obscure the concrete actions that constitute work, but these actions, chained together, constitute institutions. The institutional ethnographer has to observe, analyze and describe how people actually work and how their actions are articulated together (through language, texts and knowledge, notably), in order to show how institutions are concretely performed in everyday life.

Analysis remembers that each informant contributes only a piece of a social organization that is the coordinated achievement of people's doings. In writing the ethnography, the researcher assembles the different work knowledges of people situated in and contributing differently to the process on which research focuses. (Smith, 2005, p. 160)

The social is produced by the coordination of the concrete actions that constitute work. What is capital here is that it shows the institutional and, therefore, the *political* dimension of everyday work, which is to say, how it is linked with decisions taken elsewhere by people not concerned by the work accomplished (neither as workers nor as beneficiaries). Invisibilization is not only an issue for economics, as it creates exploitation, it is also a problem for democracy, as it hides the responsibilities of policymakers. By paying attention to the often-neglected details of everyday work while keeping the influence of institutions in mind, the institutional ethnographer produces critical and political knowledge.

The founding contribution of Joan Tronto to care perspectives is to emphasize their intricate connections with democracy and the importance of letting care receivers determine the conditions of their work (Raïd, 2009 ; Tronto, 1993 chapter 6, 2009). In her works in particular, Pascale Molinier (Gaignard & Molinier, 2008 ; 2005, 2013) has shown that care often relies on discrete and hidden practices, on "tips" and "bricolage", which only make sense in a specific context (confirmed by Amine, Bonnemaizon & Josion-Portail, 2022), dealing with the inherently unpredictable nature of healthcare (Rankin & Campbell, 2009). This means that injunctions to "professionalism", institutional standard or overbearing performance criteria destroy care practices rather than promote them, because they ignore how caregivers (allied with care receivers) actually perform care work. The only solution then is to let care workers define their own criteria of what constitutes "good" care, each in its specific context.

#### 1.10 *Making invisibilized point of view matter: an example from fieldwork*

The paradox of the GEMs, as presented in an earlier section, asks how their members can develop autonomy while their action is constrained by a strong institutional context. As seen, a first answer resides in the reinterpretation of the bill of specification accomplished by its members and its social workers.

Institutional ethnography, however, does not only attract our attention to the role and the uses of institutional texts, but also to the standpoint of the members of the organization, particularly when they are invisibilized. This is the case for the members of GEMs who suffer or have suffered from mental conditions. Stigmatization, in their case, often leads to paternalist institutional stances which consider them as irresponsible and unable to take decisions for themselves or others. In addition, in the context of Seine-Saint-Denis, they are often particularly vulnerable (financially, professionally or from an administrative point of view) and sometimes suffer from substance abuse and/or have a criminal record. Because of

their origins, their state of health and their social position, members of GEMs are routinely silenced.

To completely understand how some GEMs solve their paradox, one has to pay attention to the standpoint of their members. Fortunately, they have produced over the years many texts to explain their expectations, their success and the limits of this type of organization. It is quite rare and precious to have patients express themselves in scientific literature. A synthetic literature review of those texts showed that GEM members expect a lot from social workers: to welcome and integrate newcomers (a more difficult task than it appears in the context of mental health), to support members when they need it, and to play a role as third party in conflicts (Hildwein, 2020). Interestingly, it is only when social workers listen to GEM members that they truly manage to meet those expectations and that they help them regain autonomy. Making their voices heard, through everyday behavior or through dedicated activities (discussing collective issues during meetings, recording together a radio broadcast, writing collective texts, etc.), represents an important and hidden task of GEM social workers.

Making the standpoint of invisibilized people matter is important, both from an intellectual perspective, to understand how GEMs work in their institutional context, and from an organizational perspective, to create places of care and emancipation.

#### **4 Conclusion**

Institutional ethnography aims to firstly uncover the power of institutions in everyday life and work, and secondly, making the standpoint of invisibilized people matter in science. Those objectives articulate institutional ethnography with care perspectives and constitute a dual-critical method of care organizations. Institutional ethnography represents a methodological entry point to study and understand the influence of institutions on care practices, both for caregivers and for care receivers. By showing its connections with critical perspectives (care ethics and critical management studies), the analysis has shown the political depth of institutional ethnography. This depth is evident in its consideration of the social position of those who produce knowledge, it warns the ethnographer against their own position (particularly their language) and it inquires how institutions can naturalize power relations, especially over vulnerable and/or underprivileged populations. For any researcher, institutional ethnography advocates for a reflection on the political aspects and undertones of a given methodology, in the sense that any method is oriented and will produce a certain form of knowledge, anchored in the social.

In conclusion, two avenues for research are suggested: one on the importance of institutional ethnography for alternative organizing and the other to address a certain shortcoming of institutional ethnography.

Institutional ethnography represents a fruitful methodology not only for care organizations, but also for alternative organizations. Alternative organizations are characterized by self-governance, as opposed to the vertical power of capitalist and/or bureaucratic organizations:

The main idea about self-governance is that decisions are taken by those who will live with the consequences, it foregrounds the ability to make choice about the conditions affecting our lives, but also (re)connects these choices with responsibility and consequences. (Fournier, 2002, p. 202)

In a similar way, Parker and his colleagues insist on the autonomy of the members of alternative organizations, alongside two other characteristics: solidarity and responsibility for their collective actions (Parker et al., 2014a, 2014b). For any organization truly aiming at horizontal and collective decision-making, institutional ethnography can be immensely useful,

because it produces knowledge starting with the problematic at the bottom of the organization, and articulates it with wider institutional levels. A common justification for management and hierarchy is that there is a need for a group of people able to perceive wide issues, supposedly invisible at lower levels of action, and take decisions based on their analysis of these issues (the term “strategic” is often used to designate such position). Institutional ethnography can help produce knowledge to bypass this position and to inform organization members on the consequences of their decisions at higher levels of action. An important research effort could be done in that direction, in order to develop the link between action research and institutional ethnography, in order to develop methodologies to contribute to the development of alternative organizations.

The second avenue of research takes a more critical approach to institutional ethnography (following the efforts of Walby, 2007 and Tummons, 2017). While institutional ethnography sees itself as an emancipatory and horizontal methodology, it still has difficulty taking into account the ability of individuals to develop, by themselves, a critical knowledge of their institutional context. It is taken for granted that only the ethnographer, through a specific path, can understand the institutional implications and issues in a given field. Despite the importance given to the concept of work knowledge, it implicitly ignores the ability of people to produce their own understanding of institutions (for instance through their previous professional experience or through theoretical framework that they acquired by themselves) and that this understanding may be as valid as that of any researcher. This is clearly not voluntary and this absence is thus difficult to show in the cardinal texts of institutional ethnography. For example, when Smith analyzes the position of single mothers (2006b, pp. 3-4), she considers their standpoints, but she does not evoke how they could have built an understanding of their position in the school system. In the critical description of a nursing home (Diamond, 2006, above), it seems that neither the visitors nor the residents produce knowledge about the home’s organization. Walby (2007, pp. 1022-1025) even accuses institutional ethnography of not taking seriously the risk of misinterpreting the interviews and of projecting the biases of the researcher on the discourses of the interviewees. Activists, as a counterexample, often develop an acute understanding of systemic oppression and of the institutions supporting it. It follows that future research needs to address how people can understand by themselves institutions and how they can resist them. A possible way to do so would be the power of readers in the “text/reader conversation”: we have seen how institutional text can constrain individuals, but also how representatives of an institution can interpret the text to discriminate and oppress others. Future research could consider how people, being able to understand the weight and influence of institutions, can actively struggle against institutional texts and interpret them for emancipation, using the text against the institution itself. This would further the already powerful critical potential of institutional ethnography.



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