Reflecting on work practices: Possibilities for dialogue and collaborative knowledge production in institutional ethnography

The presentation explores dialogue and collaborative knowledge production in institutional ethnography (IE) as theorized by Dorothy E. Smith. I explore the issues through analysis of how participants in IE, namely researchers and research participants engage in reflection collaboratively on the institutional workers’ work activities. More specifically, I look at workshops arranged in a research project for maternity healthcare nurses where work practices as documented on video were watched and reflected on both scientifically and based on work experience in nursing. The material analyzed are field notes produced at workshops arranged for joint reflection on the nurses’ own work practices as documented on video.

The analysis shows that the possibilities for, and the difficulties of, achieving dialogue emerge from three sources. First, conflicting knowledge interests between researchers and research participants may lead to complementary projects in situations where all parties align themselves with the other’s interests. In such situations, experience-based knowledge may be co-produced through storytelling motives. Second, doing IE is about the researcher moving from one setting to another and taking up different positions accordingly. These fluid positions create constraints and possibilities for dialogue. An outsider expert/administrative power position and circumstances that reinforce it are not conducive to the articulation of multiple voices. However, it is possible to shift the overall positioning so that the participants may co-produce knowledge. In my case this was done through working with videos and researchers’ provocative commentary that bore ‘responses’ that the nurses quickly picked up and reflected on. Third, presenting theory-based interpretation that addressed an organizing element of care provoked accounts that addressed the organizing element from a different angle and specified how such organization is actually realized. Reframing the ongoing analysis through such dialogically produced experience-based knowledge means that theoretical concepts are used not to make generalizing statements on commonalities in the material but to put them to test.