

Article

# Investigating the social relations of human service provision: Institutional ethnography and activism

by

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I reflect on my experiences using institutional ethnography to support socially just policy, practice and organizational change. I focus specifically on three inter-related institutional ethnographic research projects that have informed my approach to working with social workers, shelter workers, lawyers, policy analysts, community organizers, teachers, probation officers and youth to create change. Although strategic collaborations to change institutional practices and knowledge are rife with tensions, I show how institutional ethnography can be used reflexively throughout the collaborative process to create conditions for critical consciousness-raising among participants; inspire reflection and action on the part of human service professionals and inform collective efforts to create systemic change, as well as to guide the research process itself. I conclude by suggesting that institutional ethnographers seeking to influence socially just change need to find ways to balance the demands of academic writing, while being true to the activist origins of this sociological approach.

*Keywords:* community services, human services, funding regimes, institutional discourse, engaged scholarship, strategic collaboration

The decentralization of service provision, coupled with the widespread application of centrally-driven accountability mechanisms, has influenced the adoption of managerial practices across community and human service organizations in Canada. Institutional ethnographers have produced a body of critical scholarship that explores the relationship between people's work in community and human service organizations and their engagement with commonplace institutional texts and workplace technologies. This body of scholarship illuminates how the managerial concerns of the state are legitimized and operationalized in people's work to establish and monitor performance indicators, meet achievement targets, develop and implement growth plans and compare data across sites (Griffith & Smith, 2014; McCoy, 1998, 1988; Nichols, 2014; Nichols & Griffith, 2009; Rankin & Campbell, 2006; Smith, 2007). The research shows how texts and textually mediated organizational processes and routines shape how people think and act across institutional contexts, and coordinate the 'disparate activities of the state apparatus' (Ng, 1988, p. 22). By coupling descriptive ethnographic accounts of people's everyday lives with a critical analysis of the social and institutional relations that give shape to personal embodied experiences, institutional ethnography aims to make relations of ruling observable and subject to scrutiny and reform. Ostensibly, the goal is then to return findings to people whose accounts informed the study, so that participants have an improved understand of – and can seek to transform – the extended social relations within which their lives are embedded. I describe institutional ethnography's pragmatic aims as 'ostensible' because I recognize that the utility of this sociological approach is not always fully realized.

For example, much of my own research seeks to reveal how institutional processes are organized in ways that make it difficult for some people – typically those who get coded in research as 'marginalized' or 'at-risk' – to get what they want and need during their encounters with public- and community-sector organizations (Nichols, 2008a, 2008b, 2013 2014a, 2014b, 2016, forthcoming 2016a, forthcoming 2016b, forthcoming 2016c). But, it is not always the case that the people whose standpoints inform the research will want to- or should be responsible for fixing the problems their experiential knowledge points to. In this case, the 'knowledge users' – the people who can and should act on

findings – often work within the institutional settings the research critiques. This is particularly true in institutional ethnographies of human service organizations, conducted from the standpoints of people experiencing the services or interventions. In order for institutional ethnographic scholarship to contribute to the elimination of oppressive social relations perpetuated in- and by social and human service institutions, researchers need to think about how they will produce and use research as part of a reflexive social process of unpacking – or making visible – the work organization of these ruling institutions (Frampton, Kinsman, Thompson, & Tilleczek, 2006).

In this article, I produce a reflective comparison of three of my own institutional ethnographic projects, as I consider the utility of institutional ethnography as a sociology for creating socially just changes in human service institutions. To help achieve this objective, I describe how I have used institutional ethnography to map the social organization of community and human service provision, and endeavour to use this knowledge to create change. I focus specifically on the difficulties I have encountered in attempting to use the research to change unjust institutional policy, discourse and practice.

The article begins with a discussion of institutional ethnography and its utility as an activist- or action-oriented research approach. From here, I move into a discussion of three inter-related institutional ethnographies that I have conducted about the social organization of community and human services. The earliest study is an investigation of activism and funding practices in the non-profit sector. The subsequent two studies focus on the provision and management of services for youth understood to be ‘at risk’. One is an investigation of human services that begins from the standpoint of young people experiencing homelessness and housing instability. The other is an ongoing investigation of education, human services and youth justice initiatives that begin from the standpoint of youth living in an urban neighbourhood that has been designated as institutionally ‘vulnerable’. This reflexive account of my own work, situated against my reading of activist-scholarship seeks to be useful to institutional ethnographers who are keen to ensure their research delivers on its liberatory promises.

## **Institutional Ethnography and the Politics of Community Services**

Institutional ethnographers conceive of 'the social' differently than traditional sociologists do, and as such, we pay attention to different things as researchers. In institutional ethnography, the social is not *out there* to be invested and objectified through research; the social is happening in and through the coordinated activities of people, including the activities of researchers who have traditionally positioned themselves as outside of the social relations they study. Institutional ethnography seeks to discover how the social is put together, experienced and known, in historically particular moments, from standpoints within it. Smith's (1999) *Ontology of the Social* suggests a sociological orientation to:

- Knowing the social from within its unfolding;
- Explicating how our knowledge about- and categories for understanding the social are generated in- and structure everyday social relations; and
- Understanding how social relations become naturalized or standardized across time and space.

Institutional ethnography seeks to figure out how actual people are entered into the objectified relations, which Smith describes as ruling relations – that is, the relations of objectified consciousness and organization through which our lives and relations are organized. Institutional ethnography is a 'sociology that, as a systematic consciousness of society learns it from inside, from precisely the multiple standpoints from which the social relations in which we are active and that determine our lives are known' (Smith, 1999, p. 69). The final distinguishing feature of institutional ethnography is that it was conceived as a sociological project for people. As an approach to inquiry, institutional ethnography was not simply developed for researchers seeking academic outputs for tenure and promotion, but for researchers working in collaboration with other people to create socially just change. The point is not simply to understand how people's lives and social relations are co-ordered with translocal institutional, political and economic relations, but to move this knowledge into pragmatic actions or reforms.

But the activist- or engaged-aspects of institutional ethnographic scholarship remain elusive for many institutional ethnographers, despite a shared commitment to

institutional ethnography's radical sociological re-visioning. While some scholars have used institutional ethnography as part of a strategic effort to enable change (see for example, Campbell, Copeland, & Tate, 1998; Campbell, 2000; McCoy, 2005; Mykhalovskiy & McCoy, 2002; Pence, 2002; Smith, 1990, 1995; Wilson & Pence, 2006), the vast majority of institutional ethnographers – particularly in more recent years – have not worked in collaboration with others to move their research into action. In this article, I use a reflexive analysis of my own work to consider why this is the case and what needs to change in order for institutional ethnographers to deliver on the promise of sociology for people.

In my own research, people's expert knowledge of their work to access, avoid, manage, deliver, monitor, fund and lead particular organizations comprises the foundation of an investigation of the community- and human service sectors. The work begins with the observation that social coordination is accomplished by ordinary people interacting with- and through texts (Smith, 1999, 2005). These complexes of institutional action are social relations that '(a) legitimize certain courses of action, thereby rendering other (alternate) forms of action illegitimate, and (b) organize how people relate to one another' (Ng, 1988, p. 89). An investigation of objectified forms of social coordination, operating in and through institutions, is particularly attractive to researchers like myself, who are interested in understanding how seemingly benign and ostensibly helpful institutional processes can have exclusionary effects.

In different studies, I have begun an investigation of the standpoints of people who work in the non-profit sector (Nichols, 2008a), youth experiencing homelessness (Nichols, 2008b, 2013, 2014a, 2014b), youth in an 'at risk' neighbourhood (Nichols, Fisher, & Braimoh, submitted; Nichols, Braimoh, & Fisher, submitted), educators (Nichols, Griffith, & Fisher, 2016), people who do community-based research (Nichols, Gaetz, & Dyck, 2016) and parents of children with complex health issues (Nichols, Mistry, Ford-Jones, Fridman, & Ramadan, 2015). In all of these studies, my aim was to discover how the things we experience in our everyday lives are connected to- and shaped by 'relations that extend vastly beyond the everyday' (Smith, 2005, p. 1). But the degree to which the

findings from my work have been useful in creating socially just policy, practice and organizational change has varied. In the next section, I reflexively compare and analyse three inter-related projects in order to make some suggestions as to why this is the case, and reflect on how institutional ethnography facilitates scholarly praxis, even in the absence of direct research-to-action links.

## **The Research Story**

### **Activism, charitable status and non-profit funding regimes -**

My research on activism and non-profit funding regimes actually originated from a desire to understand the social relations giving shape to young people's engagement (or not) in social and/or environmental justice work. As a former high school teacher and the teacher-supervisor of a high school social justice club, I observed that school-based social and/or environmental justice efforts slid too easily into charitable service models, instead of the more complicated and meaningful work of transformative social and/or environmental activism. I was also troubled by what I read as apathy among many students, and I wanted to understand how this seemingly individuated trait was actually a socially mediated relation, and not disconnected from the charitable models of social engagement that I observed operating in schools.

And so, I set out to conduct an investigation of the social relations that shape a proclivity towards activism among some youth. As such, I began this project by speaking with people who work towards social and/or environmental justice about their work. In their stories, I began to catch glimpses of the ways in which people's work in non-profit organizations and activist collectives are brought into alignment with the operations and priorities of the State. Whether people saw themselves as working in opposition to- or alignment with the priorities and machinations of government, people's efforts to lobby city councils, fundraise for a botanical garden, implement a popular education movement or produce and publish a grassroots periodical hooked them into textually mediated social relations, through which they began to think, talk, write about and do their work in relation to (even when in opposition to) the discourses of political economy through which governments operate.

I never did learn how young people's justice work is organized relative to their involvement in school, but I did gain a clearer understanding of how activism and knowledge about activism is socially organized. More specifically, the research revealed how an outcomes-based approach to non-profit fund-seeking work and Revenue Canada tax regulations with regard to Charitable Status influence how people conceive of themselves, and how they talk about and understand the work they do (Nichols, 2008b). Like other institutional ethnographies have demonstrated (for example, Griffith, 1992; Ng, 1981, 1988), this study shows how seemingly benign administrative knowledge and procedures fundamentally shape people's frontline practices. For example, people who work for organizations that maintain a charitable status can do a limited amount of advocacy work in their professional capacities. It therefore becomes difficult for people to think about their work or the objectives of their work from within an activist frame—despite a change-oriented agenda—because textually organized conceptions of activism associated with advocacy threaten an important element of what is almost always a precarious funding base (Nichols, 2008b). My early work on activism and non-profit funding regimes suggests that the way people's work is funded, and how they are required to report on their work to funders, help shape the types of people they work with, the projects they take on, the types of change they seek to make, and perhaps most fundamentally, how they come to know and talk about their work, their clients, their objectives and their professional identities.

Although the project produced information that is useful to people who wonder how the state coordinates civil sector work in ways that diminish its activist – or change-making – potential, I produced the study disconnected from the people who might have benefited most from its findings. When the study did gain material significance, it was in the context of my own ongoing academic work. My use of the findings suggests important ways that I had not successfully made the ontological shift that institutional ethnography requires. I failed to conceive of myself as part of the social world, which the research brings into view. Looking back, it is clear that I saw myself as outside of (and even above) the social relations the research revealed. I remained committed in



important ways to working from a Cartesian standpoint, transforming people's stories and my analyses of policy documents and funding application processes into findings. This project was not about me. It was about them – those people who work in the non-profit sector – and how their work is organized in ways they are unable to see or understand from where they are working. Because I remained committed to the split between the researcher and his/her research, I believed I could simply apply what I learned to subvert the coordinative relations the research revealed.

### **The social organization of youth homelessness**

Findings from my first institutional ethnography acquired a practical significance when I began my doctoral work: a community-based institutional ethnographic research project on youth homelessness that I conducted in collaboration with a youth shelter (Nichols, 2014, 2013, 2009, 2008a). I sought to activate my knowledge about non-profit funding regimes and the ideological coding of certain types of work and identities in the non-profit sector as part of a strategic effort to repair some of the gaps my research revealed. I set out to map the social organization of the youth sector where the research was situated and then strategically work in- and with relations of ruling to create socially just change. I assumed that once I figured out how knowledge and practice within the sector were organized, I could strategically adopt institutional discourses and practices to advance an agenda for change.

Like I had done in my research on activism and non-profit organizing, I began this project by talking to people about their work (e.g. young people's work to obtain housing or adult practitioner's work to manage a youth shelter). I paid attention to people's struggles to accomplish what they set out to accomplish in any given institutional context. For example, when I talked with shelter workers, they expressed a concern that the same young people continued to cycle through the city's programmes and resources for youth throughout their adolescence, rather than using the services to accomplish a concrete and time-limited developmental task. They called this phenomenon a 'revolving door syndrome' (field note). Shelter workers saw this revolving door phenomenon resulting from their inability to provide young people with

any other support beyond a bed and a meal. I decided my first task as a researcher would be to figure out how this 'revolving door' explanation came to exist and be used by shelter workers to help explain repeated periods of homelessness among youth. I began to see that shelter workers' conception of the problem and their ideas about how to solve it reflect an understanding of homelessness as the outcome of a knowledge/skills gap on the part of youth. That is, with proper skills-based programming, young people could acquire the skills they need to maintain their housing. The problem, as shelter workers saw it, was that without sustainable funding to deliver skills-based programmes, they did little more with homeless youth than simply 'rack and stack' (field note) them outside of the public eye.

A programme-based response to the complex problem of youth homelessness in a community arises in the context of complex and overlapping discursive practices and methods of work. But because of my previous research, I zeroed in on the non-profit sectors' dependence on programme-based funding. Like most other emergency shelters in Ontario at the time of my research, the youth shelter did not receive any operating funds from the province. The provincial funds it did receive only covered two-thirds of the cost of an occupied bed. The funding of shelters reflects a per diem funding model. Variable rates of shelter use over the course of a year, coupled with the per diem funding model, meant that there were not sufficient economic resources available to support programming on an ongoing basis. In order to offer programmes, the executive director needed to secure significant additional funds, and the dominant funding model in the youth sector is a programme-based funding. Among non-profit and community-based youth organizations, executive directors pay staff and operating costs almost entirely through programme-based funds. The shelter workers' suggestion that more programmes would lead to better and smoother transitions for youth is shaped by the dominance of this psycho-educational model across the youth sector, related to how these organizations are funded.

While the shelter had a charitable status number that made the organization eligible for non-profit and charitable funds, fundraising takes considerable time and effort. Grants

are time-bound, which means new programmes continually need to be developed and new funds sought. Instead of creating and implementing programmes that reflect the needs, experiences and strengths of staff and youth, programme development reflects the funding priorities, conceptual orientations and funding processes of government, foundation and corporate funders. Furthermore, competition for non-profit funding is steep. Bigger organizations have people on staff to engage in fund-seeking work on an ongoing basis. The shelter only had the staff it needed to provide what the executive director described as a 'head in a bed' service (field note, 2007). The expectation was that all fund-seeking would be done by the executive director. But because he occupied the only leadership role at the shelter, much of his time and energy ended up being directed towards frontline managerial and human resource issues, rather than fund-seeking efforts.

I started this project with a desire to ensure that the research I did was useful to the shelter and youth who use it. I suggested to the executive director that I could use what I know about how non-profit granting processes are organized to obtain some funds to support young people to stay out of the shelter once they left. None of the young people I interviewed wanted to be dependent on a youth shelter for their housing. In this context and in the thick of data collection, I began to design and seek funding for a programme to help young people transition smoothly out of the shelter. My hope was that this programme would allow me to apply what I was learning from youth about what went wrong during their encounters with institutions, as well as answering practitioners' calls for more programmes. I worked with a shelter staff to envision the programme, and then sought Ontario Trillium Foundation funding to fund it. We requested funds to enable the shelter to support young people's sustained transitions out of the shelter, to increase leadership in the organization and to contribute to a sustainable funding stream. We designed the programme to honour the knowledge and experience young people have, to speak to their desires for trusting relationships with adults and to support their pursuit of self-determined goals. We also designed the programme to be funded, which meant situating what we wanted to do within the relevancies of the funding programme itself.

Familiar with the Ontario Trillium Foundation funding programme because it was one of the funding programmes I studied during my research on activism and the non-profit sector, we articulated both clear outputs (the number of clients served each year) and outcomes (changes we sought to make) against which the programme's future performance could be measured. I knew that we would need to hide operational costs within the programme budget, and propose a funding model that reflected our potential for economic independence in the long-term. As such, we requested a decreasing amount of funds over three years with the goal of running a self-sustained programme by year three. The funds to pay for youth mentors and a programme coordinator were to be generated by fee-for-service contracts with the various youth serving agencies that were already placing the agency's 'hardest to house' clients at the shelter. The grant application was successful.

Through strategic programme development and fund-seeking activities, I used my earlier research on the politics—or social organization—of non-profit and community service provision to contribute to what I hoped would be positive changes at the shelter and in the youth sector in this small city more broadly. At the same time, I continued to pursue what I saw as my central research agenda: figuring out how young people's work to be housed is socially organized. As I invited young people to tell me how they came to stay at the youth shelter, a complex institutional landscape began to materialize in their stories. Their work to be housed was never simply about securing a safe place to sleep. Instead, this one institutional task (i.e. requesting a shelter bed or renting an apartment with Ontario Works or Child Welfare funds) hooked them into, and was hooked into, multiple other institutional work processes, many of which they did not participate in directly.

Ultimately, this focus on the inter-institutional coordination of service provision for homeless youth allowed me to see how the programme we created to address a perceived service gap in the sector was shaped by- and contributed to institutional knowledge about homeless youth as deficient or lacking in normative skills/attitudes.

This individualizing/individualized conception of the problem of youth homelessness drew our attention away from the larger political-economic forces shaping their experiences of housing instability. By framing the project as enabling the cultivation of economically-independent youth and an economically-independent organization, the burden for change was placed squarely on the shoulders of individual youth and the staff in the organization. My strategic efforts to play the funding game meant that I aligned the project with the political economic concerns of the funder and the state, rather than the experiential concerns of the young people and adult practitioners I was working with. The programme hooked us into the relations of capital and exchange, and management and accountability that influence frontline work across the human service sector more broadly. These are also the relations through which class difference become produced (Ng, 1988).

By creating the Transitioning Life Skills Programme as a revenue generating/recidivism reducing intervention at the shelter, I added another layer to the already complex institutional backdrop against which young people's work to acquire shelter and practitioners' work to negotiate service access for youth are organized. Young people's institutional work (e.g. their engagement with school, their work to seek shelter, their efforts to keep and attend appointments) became the thing we tracked and measured in order to indicate they were making progress, and that the shelter was being held accountable to the organizations that were purchasing its services. As a demonstration of institutional accountability, we monitored the degree to which young people met the goals they had articulated for themselves in their individualized transitioning plans. Because the sustainability of the programme depended on our ability to secure a consistent funding base using a fee-for-service model, we saw this surveillance and tracking work as an inevitable aspect of our service delivery approach.

Since the fee-for-service relationship and the associated monitoring and reporting mechanisms altered inter-organizational relations in the sector, day-to-day interactions between the youth and their adult mentors also changed. At case-management meetings, other service providers activated these new accountability relations as a way

to hold individual youth and their mentors accountable to a programme of change laid out in their plans. Youth and their mentors left these meetings with clear instructions to demonstrate progress towards their transitioning goals. A failure to do so would mean the shelter would not continue to receive the fee-for-service funding it required to sustain the mentorship programme. For different reasons, both the youth and the mentors were initially quite invested in the project. Youth wanted support and companionship as they transitioned out of the shelter, while the mentors (typically shelter workers) enjoyed the opportunity to connect individually with youth. Over time, however, the mentoring relationships changed, reflective of the push from institutions such as child protection and probation, to meet transitioning targets in timely ways. Had I left the field after having created and implemented the Transitioning Life-Skills Programme, I would have failed to see how it became enveloped into the larger project of administration and management that is pervasive in the human services. As it happened, I was there to see the limits of my subversive and strategic use of institutional knowledge, and appreciate the implications of the ontological shift Smith articulates. One is never above the institutional relations he/she describes or out of reach of their coordinating effects. Our research is a product of the social world it describes. The social processes through which knowledge is produced and used across both time and space link the social relations of youth homelessness to the social relations of community-based research in ways that I would have missed had I not eventually re-focused my analytic energies on the broader social arena within which the research was taking place.

### **Using research to improve the coordination of services for youth 'at risk'**

Right now, I am the principal investigator for a five-year community-based institutional ethnography on community safety that begins from the standpoint of youth who have been institutionally categorized as *unsafe* through dove-tailing youth justice and safe schools' processes. I am at the mid-point of the project, which means I lack the analytic distance that I have to the other two projects I have written about in this article. Nevertheless, there are important differences between my current project and the other two projects I have described that help to illuminate how institutional ethnography can

be used reflexively throughout the collaborative process to create conditions for critical consciousness-raising among participants, in addition to inspiring reflection and action on the part of human service professionals, informing collective efforts to create systemic change and guiding the research process itself.

This project builds on three other projects I was involved in: a project on the social organization of school expulsion processes, a community-based evaluation I conducted with a youth-sector organization and my research on the social organization of human services for youth who are homeless. The development of the research design and proposal began as a series of conversations with young people and practitioners who interacted in a community agency in a designated vulnerable neighbourhood or 'Neighbourhood Improvement Area' in Toronto, Canada. As a group, we suspected that exclusionary institutional practices and a disorganized inter-organizational response to school and community safety were contributing to some young people's dislocation from their communities, as well as their disengagement from/in schools and other mainstream organizations. We identified that institutional transitions were difficult for youth and for the adult professionals they work with. These tended to be the times when a young person would 'fall through the cracks', so to speak. And yet, schools (and other institutions, including the courts, jails, group homes, child protection and mental health institutions) continued to initiate the movement of youth across a vast geographic and institutional system. We were concerned that these moves were disruptive to youth and – importantly to their long-term health and wellness – their connections to-, and success in, their communities and their schools. Unlike the other two projects that preceded it, this project originated out of a collective concern. It has always involved researchers and collaborators who share a desire to see young people included in their communities and successfully engaged in school. It has also always involved the people from whose standpoints this analysis proceeds – in this case, young people who have been institutionally categorized as 'at risk', either because of where they live or because of their institutional involvement (e.g. in safe schools programmes or youth justice facilities).

The first year of the project was spent in the field doing what institutional ethnographers call, 'talking with people' (DeVault & McCoy, 2006). At all stages in the project, the fieldwork was conducted by youth and adult co-researchers. Through the 'talking with people' process we sought to improve our understanding of how institutional determinations of safety were made, and how practitioners coordinated young people's transitions within and between school boards, youth justice facilities and community programmes. We also sought to build relationships with people who can make policy- and organizational decisions. I spent time speaking with people who work for the school boards, youth justice facilities, youth-serving ministries and community organizations. This outreach work reflects my increasing awareness of how decisions get made, and research gets used, in both government and practice-based settings. That is, once again, I used research knowledge about the social organization of public and social service work, as well as my research on the impacts and social organization of community-academic collaborations, to help ensure that the knowledge this new project generates has a receptive audience and/or landscape for application (Nichols, Anucha, Hower, & Wood 2013; Nichols et al., 2016; Nichols, Phipps, Provencal, & Hewitt 2013; Nichols, Phipps, Gaetz, Fisher, & Tanguay, 2014; Nichols, Gaetz, & Phipps, 2015). The amount of time I dedicated to talking with people during the first year of the project reflects my commitment to ensuring that findings are taken up and used by adult professionals who are able to implement and support socially just reforms in policy and practice – i.e. legal practitioners, advocates, frontline practitioners and institutional leaders (e.g. school principals).

But my ongoing strategic efforts to engage with institutional decision-makers has meant that I am constantly reframing my analyses to diminish defensive resistance on the parts of those whose work I am suggesting needs to change. There is a limit to how activist one can be when working *with* institutions. For instance, there are some institutional processes and practices I did not push to get access to – for fear that all access and goodwill would be revoked. My work with institutions also means I must continually navigate what Smith (2005) calls, 'institutional capture'. This is where one begins to take the institutional discourses, relevancies and organization of a setting for



granted, rather than seeking to explicate the social relations through which they coordinate people's actions and thoughts. For example, I was recently asked to prepare a submission on racial profiling to the provincial policy dialogues organized by the Ontario Human Right Commission. My colleagues and I sweated over this paper because we had 1,500 words to convey a very complicated set of social processes through which the social relations of race unfold across institutional settings. Even so, we also discovered that the request for us to write about racial profiling meant we went looking for instances of racial profiling in our data. A desire to ensure that our research was useful and accessible to socially just legal advocates meant that we slid right back into mainstream sociological methods of description. To produce a submission that upheld our ontological and epistemological commitments, we had to actively resist treating institutionally-derived and institutionally-actionable concept such as race or racial profiling as naturally occurring and observable phenomena. Despite the ongoing attentiveness this requires of our research team, we remain committed to sharing what we have learned with people who are better positioned than we are to act on the findings – people who work in neighbourhood collectives, institutions and advocacy organizations.

Unlike other participatory or activist-oriented projects, the study does not presuppose a technical utility of the findings for the young people we have worked with. They have clearly benefited from opportunities to engage in critical social research and analysis, which facilitates important shifts in consciousness and understanding. Based on our ongoing reflective conversations and yearly evaluations, I am confident that learning how their experiences of oppression are socially organized has been transformative to the 12 youth who have participated in the study as co-researchers. But I have always anticipated that the adult professionals would be tasked with redressing the oppressive relations that young people's accounts bring into view. Admittedly, I now wonder about the degree to which this a reasonable assumption to have built the project on. When my own research history suggests the strength of institutional capture for someone who is keenly aware of the organizing force of institutional relations, there will certainly be limits on the extent to which active participants in institutional discourse and producers of

institutional policies and programmes will be able to act on research findings in ways that do not (re)produce the relations of exclusion the research reveals. The degree to which they will be able to actualize the anti-oppressive aims of the project will hinge on their ability to see particular institutional relations from standpoints outside of them.

This is easier for some people than others. Participation in institutional discourse is a key feature of professionalism across the human services. Some institutional discourses – for example, criminal-legal discourses ( intelligence-led policing and public safety) make it challenging for police officers to see how their non-crime related street checks and community outreach efforts influence young people's relations with their other institutional authorities, such as school principals. On the other hand, educators steeped in inclusion discourses and responsible for 'student success' tend to recognize that the work organization of public secondary schools and the metrics used to monitor success undermine their efforts to engender equality through education, but may nonetheless struggle to see how seemingly helpful institutional processes create exclusionary conditions for some youth. Critical dialogue sessions between research staff and educators have led to stimulating conversations and practical discussions about the changes necessary to see youth more smoothly transition between education programmes in community and youth justice facilities. In contrast, similar sessions with youth justice facilities staff were shaped by defensive and resistant commentary on the parts of the government managers, who participated in the event, not to mention a palpable disinterest or disbelief on the parts of many of the youth service officers. In these sessions, it was more likely for social workers within the group to come and speak privately with researchers at the end of the discussion, rather than contradict the dominant discourses of social control and punishment held by their colleagues and superiors. On the opposite side, grassroots community service workers and people who work in small youth organizations are less likely to participate in dominant institutional discourses, and can create quick programmatic changes in response to our ongoing dialogues. In this way, they become important collaborators in a project that seeks to effect local change. Since our data revealed places where small-scale solutions could be lodged, I worked alongside the executive director of our community partner

organization to ensure findings that inform fund-seeking, programme development and ongoing professional learning within the organization. I've also worked to build relationships and share findings with key change makers – for example, legal advocates interested in redressing institutional racism and other forms of institutional discrimination on a provincial scale. Unlike my work at the youth shelter, I did not attempt to develop and implement programme or policy changes myself. In each of these relationships, my role has been to produce the knowledge that others require to advocate for specific policy and legislative changes.

This project has also been influenced by key structural changes in my own life, which have shaped the degree to which the project's activist intentions could be realized. I conducted the first two years of the project as a post-doctoral fellow in Toronto. During this time, our research team, including youth researchers, community researchers, graduate students and myself collectively spent between 15-200 hours/week in the field, engaging in extensive participant observation, facilitating training for youth co-researchers, conducting interviews and focus group discussions and engaging in collaborative conversations with community and institutional leaders. In year three, I became an assistant professor and moved to Montreal – an urban centre in a different province and approximately 500 km from Toronto. Because the project is funded by a federal research grant, funds remain connected to the principal investigator and his or her university. This has meant that the involvement of the research team in the field has diminished. Beyond a series of critical analysis workshops for youth, which were conducted by one of the youth researchers and a senior graduate student this past fall, our collective efforts have more recently focused on writing and other research sharing activities. Currently, I am working with the project's community partner organization to design and co-lead a series of community forums. The goal is to ensure that the project supports community leaders' and youth organizers' use of the findings to facilitate just institutional outcomes for the youth in the community. Simultaneously, I am in the process of building a new and similar project with schools and youth organizations in Montreal.

While I begin the process of embarking on a new community-based and participatory institutional ethnography in Montreal, I have recently submitted a federal research funding proposal that begins from the standpoints of the engaged-and-activist-scholars working collaboratively with frontline practitioners, organizational and community leaders, policymakers, and activists, both strategically and deliberately, seeking to generate and use research to effect positive social change. The objective is to study the institutional, government and economic relations that promote the creation, accessibility, mobilization and use of social science knowledge to create socially just change. The research will be used to investigate and record the various ways engaged scholarship contributes to socially just change, as well as the broader political economic relations that implicate what takes place in individual research projects in social relations operating in universities, nation-states and transnationally.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Research organizes relations among people. How we relate to one another as researchers and participants, principal investigator and co-applicants, or researcher and grant manager, shapes the outcomes of these relations towards specific ends. Relations among individuals participating in a project are further shaped by the economic and governance relations shaping workplaces (e.g. universities, government offices and community-based organizations) where we, as participants, are active. The research and action cycle I describe in this article is unfolding within this broad field of activity. Given this complexity, the outcomes of any research-to-action process will have multiple effects. However, I believe that institutional ethnography offers a way to use sociology to support social change, *and* systematically assess the degree to which these changes are as socially just as we had hoped.

Critical researchers have produced a legacy of research that illuminates social problems, failing to participate in conversations about how a problem might be solved. This legacy continues to shape our interactions with service providers, policy decision-makers and institutional leaders. If we seriously want our research to make a difference, we need to 'ratchet up the sophistication' of our work (Russell & Tieken, 2011). Our

challenge is not to engage in further or more robust analysis, but to work with others (e.g. community organizers, policy analysts, institutional leaders) to strategically and collectively apply what we know to create change. For a sociological analysis of ruling to be practically and politically useful, it needs to show how ruling relations are (re)produced, resisted and reformed in the co-ordered activities of actual people. It must acknowledge that the capacity to organize is not located in discourse, institutions or policies, but in relations among people, as these are mediated by objectified forms of knowing and being.

The difficulty in this is that many institutional ethnographers, myself included, are working in- and with institutions, outside of an activist movement. And while research conducted both in and with human service organizations can be used to reveal how things work from standpoints outside the ruling relations, the knowledge translation process often requires a researcher to 'package' the findings in ways that are institutionally actionable or salient. As one endeavours to move research into practice and policy change, he/she becomes particularly vulnerable to what Smith (2005) and others describe as institutional capture. To ensure my own research is seen as relevant and valid in the institutional settings where I want it to have a transformative effect, I have a tendency to slip back into the practice of using the very processes of abstraction and objectification in my work that institutional ethnography seeks to disrupt. This is a problem for those of us who are committed to thinking about and employing a sociology that seeks to disrupt relations of ruling and subjugation.

Perhaps our practice – that is, our research and analytic methods – will never sit easily with our theorizing, in terms of our rejection of dominant social science research frames. More likely, the answer lies with the origins of institutional ethnography in the women's movement and Smith's (1999) call for us to re-connect scholarship and activism, such that we are no longer 'hampered by methods of writing into texts that seal in a knowledge divorced from the lively part it might play in coming with others to know together, our relations and society differently, from within yet not subjectively, knowing them as we participate in them and as they are brought into being' (p. 69). Institutional

ethnographers need to deliver on the promise of a sociology for people, adding to the visibility and navigability of a particular complex of social relations. To proceed as such would also require an open admission that the institutional ethnographic mapping process is necessarily ongoing, requiring a wiki-like orientation to co-construction, revision, debate and reformulation. And like any other cartographic enterprise, our sociological maps would be designed to be engaged and used to navigate and change the very world within which they get created. Of course, standard academic practices of writing and research create barriers to this aspect of the work. In order to enliven and deepen our institutional ethnographic practices, I suggest we return to its origins as an activist ethnography, used to discover foci, objectives and methods for change that are not immediately evident to people from where they are situated in the daily unfolding of their lives.

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