UTILIZING ‘THE LISTENING GUIDE’ WITHIN INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY: A REFLEXIVE EFFORT TO AVOID ‘INSTITUTIONAL CAPTURE’ AND ‘PRIVILEGED IRRESPONSIBILITY’.

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Background to the topic

Institutional ethnography (Smith 2005) is a theory and method of inquiry that foregrounds individual standpoint to reveal the coordination of social relations, particularly through the mediating power of texts. However, there is little in the literature on IE that explores the process of researcher reflexivity and the avoidance of ‘institutional capture’ and ‘privileged irresponsibility’ that it recommends.

Focus of the enquiry

There are particular tensions for institutional ethnographers in seeking to avoid objectification of participants through both ‘institutional capture’ and ‘privileged irresponsibility’ that can result from the imposition of researcher subjectivities in listening for and asking about texts. In this study, the Listening Guide (Mauthner and Doucet 1998), a narrative method that develops a relational analysis of the social, is used to develop such reflexivity: not to learn about the researcher per se, but to learn about the researcher's location in the ‘relations of ruling’ (Smith 2005).

Research methods and theoretical framework

This presentation explores this process within an institutional ethnography of a primary school. It illustrates the use of the Listening Guide, in particular the researcher's production of an 'I' poem after being interviewed by research participants. This promotes an ethical approach to researcher reflexivity, enabling an explicit analysis of the researcher's subjectivities in the use of ethnographic methods and a deeper understanding of privilege and power on the part of the researcher. A significant concern in this research context is the researcher's place in the education hierarchy. The approach works to mitigate researcher authority over the textual representations of the research participants, and minimise the danger of objectifying them.

Research findings/contribution to knowledge

The Listening Guide can be effectively used as a reflexive, analytic tool by institutional ethnographers. There is a common interest in the social production of experience and the researcher's relationship with text. This example of an ethical approach to researcher reflexivity explicitly addresses a deficit in the current literature on IE.
