

# Using Institutional Ethnography to improve policy.

## An example from STRESS-Mums Project

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### Summary

- Institutional Ethnography (IE)<sup>1</sup> is a research approach that allows understanding how *texts* (e.g., laws, regulations, guidelines) shape the everyday life of people<sup>2</sup>.
- IE can be utilized to improve policy, help policy-makers in decisions, promote social change.
- STRESS-Mums Project provides an example of the application of IE in the social research field with the aim to improve policies and laws.

### Introduction

Institutional Ethnography (IE) is a feminist theoretical and methodological research approach founded by the Canadian scholar Dorothy E. Smith.

IE explores how *institutional discourses*<sup>3</sup> frame the way in which individuals think and act within their everyday practices, connecting the local social experience of the individual to the *ruling texts* of institutions level and to the discourses of the society as a whole (macro-level).

For this reason IE is also known as a “sociology for people”.



Prof. D.E. Smith

### Objectives

- To illustrate how IE:
  - Identifies a research problematic, collects data and peruses *disjunctures*<sup>4</sup>.
  - Interprets these *disjunctures*
  - Works on explaining these disjunctures to participants, policymakers, and stakeholders to improve policies and practices.
- To provide a concrete example of application of IE

### Methods

The methodological approach of IE focuses on **three aspects**<sup>5</sup>:

- The **text**: texts (e.g., laws, policy, codes, guidelines, etc.) are analyzed considering the context, the pre-text, the text itself and its intertexts, the post-text, and the new context that derives from the text interpretation.
- The **process**: the active translation of those texts by people (e.g., professionals, and clients, who are called “readers”) is analysed to understand how it organizes the practices that concern that particular segment of the everyday experience of people (e.g., how “readers” explain the text to “non-readers”).

- The **discourse**: the textually mediated discourse circulating for instance among “readers” and mothers “non-readers” and that rules the everyday life of people is analyzed.

**Steps** for conducting an IE are:

- ✓ To identify of a *research problematic*
- ✓ To define a *conceptual framework*
- ✓ To write an *account of the methodology*
- ✓ To collect data (through observation, interviews, archival research, PAR, visual methods)
- ✓ To *map social relations* through data analysis
- ✓ To write a research report and to *make it available to participants, policymakers, and citizens*.

### Example from STRESS-Mums Project

The project is a two-year Institutional Ethnography in four European countries that focuses on the *legal transition* from double to single parenthood.

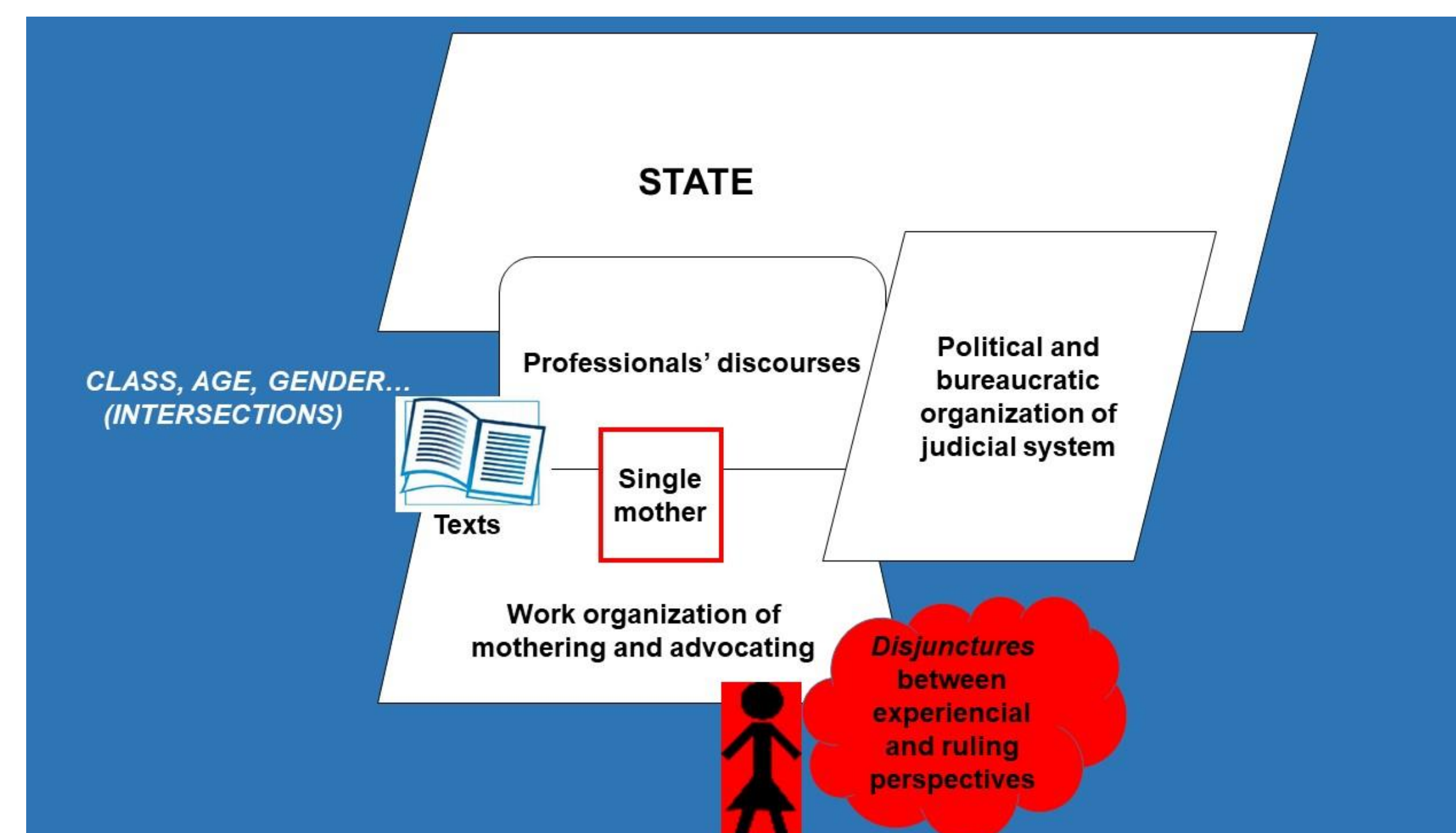
**Aims:**

- To investigate how judicial institutions and legal professionals shape this phase of transition.
- To identify disjunctures in the everyday life of lone mothers during that transition due to laws and practices.
- To discuss these disjunctures with participants.
- To improve policy, practices and laws making results available to *participants, policymakers, stakeholders and citizens*.

**Participants:** lone mothers, legal professionals, gender activists, and other professionals.

**Methods:** discursive interviews, interviews to the double, participant observation, documents analysis, focus groups, photovoice; discussion of maps concerning social relations

**Dissemination and outreach activities (social value):** research reports to stakeholders, policymakers; public seminars/webinars.



A woman standpoint: mothering and judicial institutions (adapted from: Smith 2006)

### Examples

Examples of *disjunctures*:

- 1) When policy rules mother’s everyday life in a way different from her needs (e.g., eligibility criteria for statutory paid leaves);
- 2) When a questionnaire doesn’t include questions able to collect correctly people characteristics or experience (e.g., gender, work, family relations);
- 3) When law/policy fails to ensure properly child support payments (e.g., no availability of effective procedures to claim such payments).

### Conclusions

- IE approach can be utilised in other areas of research and social life that need to detect gaps between the people’s everyday experience and institutions’ ruling functions by texts.
- A classic output of IE – the maps of social relations - allows to reach out and involve policymakers, stakeholders and citizens in discussion and suggests how to improve policies.

### References

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