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Title

Doing Institutional Ethnography in International Contexts: reflections on a research study in four EU countries.

Abstract

This paper is based on a two-year Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 1987, 1990, 2005, 2006) in four European countries: Belgium, Italy, Spain, and the UK. The STRESS-Mums research study (Tartari, 2019) concerns the legal transition from double to single parenting. Through in-depth interviews, the research investigates from the standpoint of lone mothers how legal institutions and professionals shape the mothers' phase of transition from double to single parenting. Then, through interviews to the double, the research involves legal professionals and gender activists and asks them for explaining how they read and interpret the legal texts translating them into a language that fits the needs of the mothers. This IE allows illustrating how texts' interpretations, translations, and discourses (Campbell and Manicom 1995) shape the everyday life of lone mothers during and after that legal transition.

Conducting an IE in different countries presents many challenges and opportunities to develop new reflections on how IE as a theory and as a method can be utilized in international comparative research studies focusing, at the same time, on the local and translocal dimensions. How to select countries, how to select, contact and interview participants, how to manage and consider the culture and language differences, how to interpret and compare mothers' experiences analyzing texts, processes, and discourses in different countries are some of the challenges that this paper discusses.

The STRESS-Mums research project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions grant agreement no 843976.

Introduction

This paper aims to contribute to the academic discussion on how Institutional Ethnography (Smith 2005) can be utilized in transnational and comparative research studies.

I will draw on my two-year Institutional Ethnography that explores the judicial transition from double to single mothering in four European countries (Tartari, 2019).

Conducting an IE in different countries presents many challenges and opportunities to develop new reflections on how IE, as a theory and as a method, can be utilized in transnational and comparative research studies focusing, at the same time, on the local and translocal dimensions.

This paper is organized into four parts:

- 1) a presentation of the literature that focuses on the methodological and theoretical issues of doing transnational and comparative research through IE,

- 2) an introduction to my research study,
- 3) a discussion on the aspects that emerged from my study about the process of conducting transnational and comparative IE;
- 4) a conclusion with some reflections which link my study with the existing literature and suggestions for future studies.

The literature review

When I wrote the proposal of my project, I chose Institutional Ethnography for its ability to valorize the participants' standpoint in the research process, to problematize the social relations and organization that lie under the experience of participants' everyday life and to connect the local and translocal dimensions. I was aware of the fact that the EU appreciates transnational and/or comparative projects, but the matter of transnational and comparative projects was almost unexplored in IE. Furthermore, transnational and comparative analysis are often controversial also for other theoretical and methodological approaches in the sociological field.

Therefore, last winter I asked Prof. Liza McCoy, the president of the ISA WG06 on IE, to discuss these aspects in a webinar that I organized at the University of Antwerp. She offered us useful reflections on the literature and her experience. She started her presentation by describing the existing bases and possibilities for comparative and transnational research in the ontology, analytic project, and research strategies of IE and she brought examples of comparative and transnational IE research.

Liza McCoy (2021) underlined the differences between IE and qualitative research by explaining that "Qualitative comparative research often examines two or more cases concerning a theory or concept, or to create a theory". She explained how Institutional ethnographies often investigate

work processes *in different sites* that are key points along with a set of extended institutional relations. Therefore, she argued that IE analysis sometimes includes these comparative elements.

She mentioned some “explicitly comparative studies and analyses”, like the work conducted by Alison Griffith & Dorothy Smith, (2014), Margaret Quance (2007), and other studies.

After her analysis, McCoy (2021) concluded that IE is well-suited to comparative and transnational research.

She explained that this conclusion is grounded in the nature itself of IE, its ontology, and its analytic project. About the IE ontology, she reminded us that IE conceives “the social as the ongoing coordination of people’s activities; and this occurs locally and trans-locally through extended chains of action mediated by text-based modes of knowledge”.

Furthermore, she reminded us that the analytic project of IE starts in the actual people’s experience, it “investigates trans-local forms of coordination/rule as people’s activities”, it describes how these trans-local forms of coordination work and how they shape the experiences of people in their everyday lives”.

Then, she added that trans-local forms of coordination in contemporary society are often globally distributed.” This means that “we can observe similar experiences and courses of action in diverse sites, as well as characteristic differences and forms of inequality”.

She suggested that “the examination of these similarities and differences can usefully inform projects of advocacy and reform, as well as leading to a more subtle analysis of the ways these ruling relations operate in different sites and contexts” (McCoy 2021).

The transnational examination of these similarities and differences characterizes a part of my research study.

The STRESS-Mums research study

My research study analyses **texts, processes, and discourses** (Murray 2020) that concern the judiciary system and that affect lone mothers' everyday life during and after the courts' evaluations for children's custody.

In other words, the main goal of my project is to investigate, starting from the standpoint of single mothers, the disjunctures between mothers' actual needs and ruling texts that characterize the legal transition from double to single parenthood due to separation or divorce.

The project is funded by the EU (through the Marie Curie Actions), and it aims to generate social change by providing data, which could orient public policies and legislation in the EU member states.

The project also aims to support the participation and inclusion of women as mothers and as citizens in the process of social change in the EU context.

My research involved four European countries (Italy, Spain, Belgium, and the UK). The complexity of my study raised questions about *how to collect and compare reflexively data from different countries* with women who belong to different cultures, live in different social contexts, and with organizations, which have different social and cultural premises.

Research design and methods

First, these four countries were selected because of criteria concerning the legislation on children's custody and population socio-cultural characteristics. In other words, all countries have a similar law on children's custody, but they have different social policies (for example, they have different policies for supporting single parents) and different socio-cultural characteristics (for example, the hypothesis was that these countries have different ideological codes which rule the women's role inside the family and society). These different characteristics can affect the discourse on how the children's custody law is enforced.

Second, the selection of participants and organizations was based on the principle of the local dimension. In other words, I selected mothers and professionals who lived in the same town and were involved in the same organizations where the trial happened. I selected mothers from different cultural backgrounds (natives and immigrants) but who were resident in the same town or involved in a trial at the same court.

The research started by considering the standpoint of the lone mothers through two rounds of in-depth interviews, which investigate the disjunctures between the women's actual life, their needs, and the institutions' practices and discourses focusing in particular on the texts which rule those practices and discourses.

Then, I conducted a documents analysis of the specific law for children custody and of documents that I collected from the mothers, like attorneys' petitions and court decisions.

Then, the study involves these mothers in a photo-voice activity asking them for collecting pictures that they consider significant about that phase of transition and for drawing a map of the journey that they did through institutions and professionals during their separation and after that.

Then, the research involves professionals from the judiciary field and from the social services through a particular kind of interview, the interview to the double, by investigating how they read and interpret the legal texts translating them into a language that fits the needs of the mothers who are their clients.

Data collection

In this section, I will discuss specific aspects of the methodology that is the strategies, which I used to conduct this transnational and comparative IE, in particular strategies of data collection and data analysis.

About the data collection, many efforts were directed towards the preparation of the recruitment and interview guides for different countries, by considering the differences concerning cultural and social aspects.

I chose to start the fieldwork in Italy before investigating countries with different languages and cultures because, in my context of origin, in my home country, speaking my language, it would have been easier for me to notice how to modify recruitment procedures, interactions with participants, the interview guide, and how to observe social dynamics, participants' forms of resistance.

Then, for the fieldwork in Belgium and Spain, I hired some research assistants who belonged to the same cultures or who shared similar positions with the interviewees, intending to reduce the power imbalance between the researcher and participants, to facilitate the process of recruitment and the interactions during the interview, and to stimulate reflexive accounts. Even if I have a basic knowledge of the Spanish language, I do not speak Dutch, the language of the Belgian region where I conducted the fieldwork. I trained the research assistants by providing a basic knowledge of IE and elements of the interactive and ethical practices in qualitative research to prevent the more common mistakes that concern, for example, the power imbalance during the interviews.

Assistants' work was about recruitment and translation of texts and interviews. For example, in Belgium, I chose two assistants who belong to different ethnical groups and I trained them to reduce the power imbalance between the interviewees and us.

Interviewees were prepared in advance about the presence of a third person during the interview and this was mentioned in the information sheet and the consent form.

The interviews were conducted in the language of the interviewees with simultaneous translation in Belgium and Spain. When participants felt comfortable speaking English, I conducted the interviews without the help of these assistants.

Overall, these efforts, this attention towards linguistic and cultural aspects were very welcomed by the interviewees who cooperated to reach the aim of sharing knowledge about their experiences.

The interviews conducted in other languages than my own mother-tongue language were usually longer due to the need of collecting explanations about some specific aspects of the language and terminology that characterized texts, practices, and discourses.

During the fieldwork in Belgium Spain and the UK, I become aware of the risks of institutional captures, which were emerged while I was conducting the research in my home country. Dorothy Smith (2005, 225) defines institutional captures as those situations in which “both informants and researcher are familiar with institutional discourse, know how to speak it, and hence can lose touch with the informant’s experientially based knowledge.”

The amount of knowledge taken for granted in the context in which we are used to living is significant and can affect how we collect and interpret data. Therefore, I felt the need to come back to the first fieldwork in my home country, I tried to analyze more in-depth aspects with some additional interviews and conversations, with the aim to deconstruct my pre-existing assumptions because in the past I worked for many years as a court-appointed expert and the risk of institutional captures was very high.

The most difficult fieldwork has been in the UK where I faced many difficulties in recruiting participants and I met mothers with many misconceptions about research and the role of researchers. In the UK, single mothers often are researched as a deviant category, therefore they try to avoid researchers or use some forms of social camouflage. It was the only situation in which I felt to be a cultural *outsider*: non-native, non-mother-tongue, and immigrant. The access to the fieldwork was very slow and I gained trust only through some contacts with the local primary school that my son was attending there.

Finally, I should add that keeping the focus on the materiality of texts that is a characteristic of IE, helps in the process of data collection and data analysis when we come to compare texts, processes, and discourses.

Therefore, the next section will focus more on the process of data analysis.

Data analysis

For the data analysis, I followed the suggestions from Murray (2020), I analyzed and compared texts, processes, and discourses and I conducted a specific analysis for each country, with the aim to understand local and translocal dimensions of the participants' experience, and to compare them.

I started from the texts, and the analysis of the texts concerned the texts of the law that rules the children custody, the procedure of evaluation and decision, in different countries, and the texts concerning petitions and court decisions.

I applied and then modified the short reading frame developed by Murray (2020) that focuses on the

- (1) Spatio-temporal position of the text and researcher's reading
- (2) Positioning of people and objects in the text
- (3) Structuring of the text
- (4) Intertextualities
- (5) Text-act-text sequences

In comparison to the reading frame developed by Murray, my analysis focused more on how the text frames gender and women issues, how the text considers – or not – other subtexts (for instance the criminal law on domestic violence), and the actual policies for single parents of each specific country.

A great amount of time was dedicated to analyzing and understanding these texts (the law and the decisions), which rule the mothers' everyday life in different countries.

The analysis of these texts was not merely a translation but implies an understanding of social and historical contexts that determined the use of specific procedures and practices for the application of the law.

Then, the analysis of the processes concerns the outlining of an institutional sequence of texts and associated activity (Murray 2020). This means that a pre-existing textually mediated process can be

examined through the analysis of the interviews that I collected with the aim “to develop an understanding of how people read/write texts at each part of the process” (Murray 2020).

During this very time-consuming analysis, the use of the typical maps used by IE facilitated the reconstruction and the understanding of the journeys that the interviewees had through different judicial systems.

The third and final step concerns the analysis of discourses. This is what Murray (2020) defines as a comparison between *texts and talks*, the complicated back and forth from the text to the talk and back. About this aspect of the analysis, going back and forth between the texts of the interviews and the texts of the law and other written subtexts was very helpful in highlighting specific issues, which are often *the same in all the countries*. In other words, the imbalance of the economic and symbolic capitals between mothers and fathers, the ideological code of “two-parenting” as a function of the rights of parents and not of children, the absence of appropriate policies, laws, and procedures to support mothers before, during and after the separation process, in particular for situations of domestic violence.

Conclusions

Even if I am still working on the analysis of the materials I collected, I can argue that in the conduction of my research I’ve found very useful the intertwining between the pragmatic suggestions of Orla Murray (2020) about how to analyze texts, processes, and discourses, and the suggestions of Liza McCoy (2021) about how to analyze similarities and differences in IE transnational studies.

Then, I would conclude by offering some reflections on what I would do in the same way and what I would not do if I could start my research all over again.

First, I would start with an interview more focused on the texts and then I would conduct a second interview on the experience; then I would conduct a small focus group with professionals about

how to read and interpret together that specific law that rules children's custody and parents' arrangements.

Then, I would involve another IE researcher as a co-investigator rather than hiring and training research assistants with no experience with IE.

For example, I would dedicate more time in the starting phase of the project to the direct observation of interactions between parents and professionals inside and outside the court.

Finally, I would share some reflections about how to develop and “sell” comparative/trans-national IE research. I think that we should explain very well the great potential of IE in comparative and transnational studies following the suggestions of Prof. Liza McCoy (2021).

We should highlight the potential of IE in bringing to light what is hidden in the local and translocal settings and in understanding the impact of global discourses on the local dimensions.

We should look for new techniques of data collection and analysis for IE, which can help in conducting transnational and comparative IE studies. We should underline the transformative potential of IE at the level of social policy by mentioning reviews of specific transnational studies.

Finally, we should promote and solicit a specific awareness and knowledge of the IE peculiarities in reviewers and evaluators, for example by specific actions of promotion and sensitization through the IE networks.

Acknowledgments

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