

Fall 2000

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Recommended Citation

Grahame, Peter R. and Grahame, Kamini Maraj (2000) "Official Knowledge and the Relations of Ruling," *Journal of Pedagogy, Pluralism, and Practice*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/jppp/vol2/iss1/3>

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Official Knowledge and the Relations of Ruling: Explorations in Institutional Ethnography

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Introduction

Since the 1970s, questions about the politics of knowledge have figured prominently in social studies of education. Whether one looks at Illich's call for deschooling society, Freire's critique of banking education, Bernstein's typology of restricted and elaborated codes, or Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the concern has been with how knowledge and power are linked (Bernstein, 1975; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Freire, 1973; Illich, 1971). These studies can be viewed as part of a larger project of investigating the dominant modes of knowledge in contemporary societies that is being carried out on a variety of fronts, including critical theory (Habermas, 1984), feminism (Smith, 1987), cultural studies (Hall and Jefferson, 1976), and poststructuralism (Foucault, 1977). In different ways, these studies address the effects of power associated with official forms of knowledge: bureaucratic, technological, scientific, managerial, legal, medical--in short, institutional modes of knowing. Many of these conceptions have been worked out at a very abstract, macro-analytical level: for example, Habermas writes of the colonization of the life world, and Foucault traces the emergence of a disciplinary apparatus of social control. The problem for the field researcher is to find where and how these forms of knowledge operate in everyday life, and to identify and study other ways of knowing that become marginalized through their operation.

In recent years, a growing body of qualitative research in education has focussed on the gap between official forms of knowledge and the unofficial realities which are the stuff of everyday life in contemporary societies. For example, in research on schooling and youth cultures, Paul Willis (1977) and Jay MacLeod (1995) have examined male peer groups' rejection of the official school curricula and its underlying ideology, while Donna Eder (1995) and Barrie Thorne (1993) have explored informal, peer-based constructions of gender and sexuality which shape school experience in pre-adolescence and early adolescence. Outside of educational research, the

problematic character of official categories has been investigated in relation to wife abuse (Loseke, 1987), homelessness (Snow and Anderson, 1993), anti-depressant drugs (Karp, 1993), physical disability (Cahill and Eggleston, 1994), and sexual identity (Mason-Schrock, 1996). All of these studies have relied on a traditional approach to field research that centers on providing richly detailed descriptions of cultural practices and forms of interaction encountered in more or less well-defined social worlds such as schools, homes, streets, restaurants, bars, etc. (Grahame, 1999). In confronting the oppressive character of official knowledge, such studies have offered a wide range of accounts of informal knowledge and the role of informal codes and subcultural practices in resisting official versions of reality. In doing so, they have emphasized cultural and social psychological explanations which examine how cultural codes and interpersonal meanings are used by individuals in the context of more or less clearly circumscribed local action settings. A good deal of this work includes attention to class, race, and gender-based forms of resistance to official definitions of reality. Indeed, a focus on resistance and marginalized forms of cultural practice has become for many scholars the hallmark of critical approach to schooling and other cultural institutions (Anderson, 1989; Giroux, 1983; Hall and Jefferson, 1976). However, relatively little direct attention has been given to how official forms of knowledge actually function. In contrast, in Dorothy E. Smith's work on the social organization of knowledge, the gap between official and unofficial forms of knowledge is conceptualized differently: the focus is on how official forms of knowledge operate in practice--namely, through the operation of institutional complexes. Smith's concern is to address forms of knowledge which are not confined to single locales or settings experienced as "worlds" but rather function as forms of ruling that operate across and beyond local settings, linking together and coordinating diverse forms of action.

Institutional ethnography and ruling relations

In her studies of the social organization of knowledge, Smith has used a variety of research strategies, including autobiography, historical studies, textual analysis, and phenomenological description. Of particular interest to field researchers, however, has been her pioneering efforts in the area of institutional ethnography (DeVault, 1999; P. Grahame, 1998a; Smith, 1987). In recent years, institutional ethnography has won increasing recognition as an alternative to traditional field studies of organizational practice, particularly in the areas of education, social work, and medicine. Following Smith, we view institutional ethnography as a strategy for investigating the everyday world which seeks to grasp connections between experience, situated activities, and the extended social relations which organize contemporary societies. Smith's conception of institutional ethnography grows out of her pioneering work in the sociology of knowledge. A key aspect of Smith's approach lies in seeking a point of departure outside of the dominant (or "ruling") academic discourses. This makes it an approach which is particularly useful for conducting studies which attend to excluded voices, marginalized topics, neglected issues, etc., since the difficulty in addressing these matters is directly connected with the ruling forms of social organization--i.e., opening up a marginal topic involves taking as one's problematic the very organization of knowledge which has made it difficult to address.

Whereas in standard sociology "ethnography" signifies the description of a particular local setting, in institutional ethnography the local setting serves as a starting point for explicating how the activities within that setting are coordinated in relation to multiple sites. In institutional

ethnography attention is directed to how activities in a local setting are structured and shaped by institutional relations which extend beyond the local. It involves an exploration of the social relations individuals bring into being through their practices as they go about their daily work and as that work is coordinated in relation to the work of others in extra-local or "trans-local" settings (McCoy, 1998).

A critical methodological stipulation in institutional ethnography is that the entry point of an investigation is always "the standpoint of actual individuals located in the everyday world" (Smith, 1987:159). Standpoint refers to the location of an "embodied subject" in a specific local, historical setting. However, inquiry cannot be confined to the direct experience of the everyday world for it is "organized by social relations not fully apparent in it nor contained in it" (1987:92). Here Smith makes a crucial move by proposing that the everyday world should be treated as a problematic for sociological investigation. The task of an inquiry beginning in the standpoint of individual or individuals located at a specific place in the everyday world is to explore and analyze the complex of relations structuring and coordinating the individuals' activities in the particular setting. Exploration and analysis are oriented to making visible the social relations, conceived as "temporally concerted sequences or courses of action" in and through which the activities of people in different sites, who may or may not be known to one another, are coordinated (Smith, 1987; 1990a; 1990b; 1999).

Smith conceives of "institution" as a "complex of relations" organized around a specific function such as law, health care, or education. This complex of relations forms part of the ruling apparatus in contemporary society. Rather than referring to a specific form of social organization, "institution" refers to the coordination and intersection of an array of activities into a "functional complex." For example, Smith points to the ways in which state agencies are typically linked to professional forms of organization and how both are "interpenetrated by relations of discourse of more than one order" (1987:160). The concept "institution" refers not to each of those as entities in themselves but rather to the way in which they are interwoven around a particular function. For example, in the case of employment training we examine in a later section of this paper, the institutional complex providing employment training involves many spheres of activity including multiple state agencies, community non-profit organizations, economists who develop labor market forecasts, industrial development, and the like (K. Grahame, 1999). And in the case of informal environmental education we examine in another section of this paper, the institutional nexus surrounding educational programs includes commercial tour operations, non-profit conservation organizations, state tourism and natural resource agencies, natural history writers, producers and retailers of nature-oriented products, academic researchers, and so on (P. Grahame, 1998b).

Smith argues that the coordination of institutional processes is dependent on the development and utilization of ideologies. Ideologies "provide categories and concepts expressing the relation of local courses of action to the institutional function" (Smith, 1987:160). Ideological categories can be viewed as a kind of conceptual currency which provides for exchange among different parts of the institutional complex and through which the different sites are coordinated. The categories and concepts of ideology are used by members of the setting to describe and analyze how their own practices fulfill the institutional function. Moreover, in their actual work practices, members to a local setting intend (rely on and direct themselves toward) the categories and

concepts of those ideologies (Smith, 1987:160). Kamini Grahame's study displays some of the central ideologies organizing job training as evidenced in the ways individuals talk about their work processes and what they are trying to accomplish. Thus, for example, she shows how "skill" and "skill transferability" come to be critical currency in the job training enterprise. Similarly, Peter Grahame's study examines the ways in which nature and the environment are made accountable in environmental education programs provided for tourists. For example, "natural history" and "ecotourism" supply a currency for writing and talking about nature in ways that promote specific images of the natural landscape, while suppressing others.

Undertaking an institutional ethnography thus involves three main tasks. One of these is an examination of the work activities (broadly defined) of people engaged in the production of their daily lives with a view to analyzing how that world is shaped by and maintains the institutional process. Second is an analysis of ideological procedures which are used to make the institutional work processes accountable, as described above. The third task involves analyzing how these work processes in a particular sphere are connected to those performed by others elsewhere and as such operate as part of an extended set of social relations (Smith, 1987:160-161).

Smith has argued that texts are pivotal in the organization of contemporary societies such as ours. Texts, in both their "material" and "symbolic aspect" form the "bridge between the everyday/everynight local actualities of our living and the ruling relations" (1999:7). She has described this as textually-mediated social organization (1990b). Smith's conception of texts is very broad, encompassing an array of documents, media reports, the discourses of sociology and other social sciences, accounting records, forms of various kinds, and the like. Texts such as these provide for accountability in the institutional context. Institutional ethnography as a distinctive research enterprise focuses on how the routine textually-mediated practices of people engaged in their daily work coordinate multiple sites into a single institutional complex.

In our own research, we have focused on areas of educational practice which lie outside the central concerns of mainstream educational researchers. Our concerns are with instructional practices that do not involve standard academic venues (schools), curricula (traditional subjects), staff (professionally trained teachers), or learners (matriculating students). What interests us is not just the form and content of these instructional activities, but also the complex institutional contexts in which these instructional activities are carried out. Concretely, we have been concerned with studying (a) employment training programs and (b) informal environmental education. Both involve learning activities carried on outside of traditional school settings. Below, we present a brief account of each research project, and we call attention to how institutional ethnography can be used to explicate these educational practices in relation to the complex institutional settings in which they occur.

Skill and employment training programs

The first example we consider involves employment training programs and their relation to the labor market. One of us (Kamini) studied job training, examining the work activities of a variety of individuals in a number of different sites as they put together employment training programs. A focus on work processes revealed that every aspect of training--from the community organizations' development of funding proposals, recruitment of clients, and job counseling, to

state and local government planning processes, and federal reviews of employment training processes--were all components of an extended set of relations organizing immigrant women into specific locations in the labor market. Various ideological categories--e.g. skills, efficiency, performance--were pulled into service as a way of accounting for the courses of action that were followed and that thus made sense of the practices people were engaged in, in terms of the institutional function. Peoples' activities in managing, planning, and delivering programs were coordinated through texts. Thus, texts as diverse as application forms, participant records, planning documents, labor market analyses, legislation, and the discourse on skills were taken up, interpreted, and used in the concerting of people's activities across multiple sites.

For this paper, we want to focus on one element of program organization--the notion of skill--which illustrates how official knowledge operates in practice within the institutional complex of job training. A fundamental assumption which undergirds contemporary job training policy is that training programs provide necessary skills to unskilled workers seeking jobs or who ought to seek jobs (e.g., those on welfare) in the labor market. This assumption is a relatively new feature of training policy. In the early stages of their development during the Works Progress Administration of the 1930s, programs were generated to fill a job shortage (Bassi and Ashenfelter, 1983). Between the 1960s, when public employment training programs reemerged after a hiatus in the post war period, and the 1970s, when the Comprehensive Employment Training Act was established, policy included the creation of public sector jobs through which participants could gain work experience (Barnow, 1986). Thus, for decades, federal job training policy included a recognition that joblessness, and the resulting poverty were linked to the lack of jobs. In the contemporary period, especially with the emergence of the Job Training Partnership Act, job training programs have been viewed as filling a skills gap between available jobs and the skills of "disadvantaged" individuals--the poor, among whom are disproportionate numbers of race/ethnic minorities, including immigrants (1). The roots of the links made between jobs, income and individuals' skills lie in human capital skills theory--a theory that has come to be hegemonic in the field of job training policy.

The notion of a gap between skills and jobs, especially among the poor and race/ethnic minorities, pervades employment training writing, talk, and programs. This idea wends its way through documents produced by the different layers of government and by the Hudson Institute, a private think tank contracted by the Department of Labor in the 1980s to produce a report, *Workforce 2000*, which has wielded influence over the articulation of job training policy. Usually, a connection is also made between the jobs/skills gap and the changing nature of the economy. The Institute's report expressed concern over the mismatch between new jobs created in the changing economy and workers:

The workers who will join the labor force between now and the year 2000 are not well matched to the jobs that the economy is creating. A gap is emerging between the relatively low education and skills of new workers (many of whom are disadvantaged) and the advancing skills requirements of the new economy. (Johnston and Packer, 1987:75)

To take such statements at face value would be to begin from the standpoint of ruling discourses which renders invisible not only the skills immigrants bring but also the mediating role the state plays in managing the relation between capital and labor through how skill comes to be

managed. An ethnography that begins from the standpoint of the Asian immigrant women clients, and looks at how the programs were put together in practice, challenges this notion of an unambiguous relation between skills and jobs. Proceeding in this way enabled the discovery that (1) participants to employment training programs came with a variety of skills, (2) there was a disjuncture between their perception of their skill needs and the ways in which the Employment training system viewed those needs, and (3) the courses of action that training agency personnel followed were designed to produce a sense that they were skilling individuals as the system required. This process of inquiry permitted discovery of how the notion of skill is socially constructed, including disclosing that how "skills" get constituted shifts with changes in the economy. Far from being "unskilled" as the discourses on "disadvantage" and job training would have us think, the women clients were people with varying levels of education (ranging from high school graduates to bachelor's degrees) and job experiences (including managerial work). The single missing capacity for them was English language capability. Many could speak English sufficiently to be interviewed in English. However, from the standpoint of the job training system, English was not a training skill--i.e. clients were not entitled to attend job training classes solely to learn English. Although community training agency workers recognized that English language proficiency was perhaps the most pressing need of their linguistic minority clients, they nevertheless would routinely turn away people who they determined wanted to enroll in the programs for English language skills, since this was not permissible within the parameters set by the job training complex. Yet the same agency workers realized that it is the single characteristic that kept their clients from getting "good jobs." This became even more noticeable with the contraction in the economy in the early 1990s. This development and the responses at all levels to it in itself revealed the socially constructed character of "skill."

Agency workers related the difficulties that their linguistic minority clients had finding jobs in the poor economy of the early 1990s. These troubles were attributed to job consolidation wherein jobs required a broader array of skills--instead of someone to do typing only, a job might require typing, reception, telephone answering and other office skills. Further, employers could find workers who were in essence "over-skilled" for the jobs. Thus, it was a labor market in which there was a job shortage, not necessarily a shortage of workers who were unskilled. Yet this was a feature of labor market organization that the job training complex never really acknowledged. Instead it continued to promote the view that if disadvantaged individuals would get the right skills, they would find work. Still, English was not treated as a training skill, but a pre-training skill.

The fluidity of the concept "skill" was revealed in how the department of labor itself, through its surveys of employers, came to broaden what could constitute job skills as the 1980s progressed. The Department of Labor found that employers said that the skills entry level workers were missing were "basic skills required to do any job well." These included " spelling, writing, mathematics, oral communication, flexibility and adaptability, problem solving, self-direction and initiative, and attitudes and work habits" (1989:2). The local government agency (service delivery area) which allocated contracts to community organizations to run training programs adopted a similar strategy of asking employers:

What we heard from them [employers] is that the most important thing were the basic skills--the math and English ability as well as workplace skills, work maturity, workplace knowledge. You

are supposed to be at work at nine o'clock, stay until five. If you are not there you call in, that kind of thing, etcetera, and all of that factored into the decision that we made about what we wanted our system to look like in terms of services we provide." (program manager)

They proceeded to develop programs to address work habits, but not English language proficiency. The view expressed was that the community organizations had to understand that some jobs simply weren't suitable for those with limited English skills. Thus, the strategy was to deny non-English speaking immigrants a chance at the kinds of jobs where English is more likely to be needed. Decisions such as these were part of the extended set of social relations ordering immigrant Asian women's labor market work.

Despite the dissatisfaction of community workers with the state's exclusion of English as a training skill, they nevertheless found themselves caught up in a system which made it difficult for their linguistic minority clients to move beyond low level white collar work. Indeed they were involved in sustaining, through their practices, the relation between skills and jobs developed in social science discourse and reproduced in job training policy. The mechanisms for accountability within the system provided for the realization of this relation. These are how the social relations of ruling operate in this case. Institutional ethnography as a research strategy enables these discoveries, but it also allows us to see how those subjected to these relations ingeniously find ways of accomplishing their goals. Thus for example, the women clients in the study found their way to classes that built in more language training as part of their job skills training and treated these as a step in their development to better jobs, not as an endpoint in itself.

Environmental education and interpretive programs

The second example we consider involves tourism and its relation to environmental education and community life. One of us (Peter) has been involved in studying the use of educational programs in nature tourism. A focus on the work performed by individuals who serve as guides on nature tours reveals how this work activity functions as part of an extended set of relations which tie educational programs, recreational activities, and environmental initiatives into regional and global tourism markets. In the tour context, guides engage in various activities that involve communicating with visitors about the attraction they have come to see. A variety of categories are used to account for these activities, including interpretation, natural history, environmental education, and ecotourism; the guide is frequently referred to as a "naturalist." These categories may be said to have an ideological character in that they make the local activities of guides accountable in institutional terms, and tie guides' work activities into official, textually based modes of knowledge and social organization. In this section, we provide a sketch of how the work of guides operates as one element of the broader institutional complex of nature tourism, and we consider how the concept of ecotourism is used to redefine that complex, raising issues about the work that guides do and the local and extended contexts of tourism activities.

One of the benefits claimed for nature tourism generally, and ecotourism in particular, is that such tourism has educational value because it increases awareness of the natural world, ecological principles, environmental issues, the need to manage resources wisely, and so on. The provision of educational programs has become a standard feature of many popular nature-

oriented settings such as national parks, zoos, wildlife refuges, theme parks, swamp tours, and whale watches. The official designation generally used for this kind of educational work is "interpretation" (2). Interpretation is conceived of as a kind of popular education which provides visitors with information about the attraction in the immediate setting in which they encounter it (Wilson, 1992:55-57). Interpretation differs from traditional education in that it is supposed to have immediate relevance to the attraction being witnessed, and involves a scope and format suited to the field experience. The use of interpretation in nature tourism rests on the assumption that the natural world is not self-explanatory and that visitors require some form of education in order to know what to look at and how to understand what they are seeing. In the tour setting, interpretation consists of a set of "markers" that mediate the relation between the visitors and the attraction, defining what it is and what it means (MacCannell, 1989:41). Two main forms of interpretation are used in nature tourism. The first involves a live commentary provided by a staff guide; this may occur at a single site or in the context of a walk, boat trip, bus tour, or the like. The second form involves signs, maps, printed guides, and other textual devices provided for visitors who are not accompanied by a guide; this is often referred to as "self guiding." In field settings interpretive staff typically divide their time between giving directions about what to look at and providing information and insight about what visitors are looking at (Grahame, 1998b). The work of interpreters plays a key role in nature tourism, since their narration is often the dominant form of communication in the tour setting. In many forms of nature tourism it is principally the narrative provided by interpretive staff that constitutes the official version of what the tour experience was all about.

The delivery of interpretive programs involves specific forms of knowledge associated with well-established discourses on nature and standard textual representations of the natural world. The interpretation provided in most nature tourism settings utilizes a natural history discourse, and involves conveying information about typical local species, their life cycles, their habitats, and their interactions with each other. Contemporary forms of nature interpretation may add information about environmental problems such as habitat loss and the impact of human activities, but this additional information is usually little more than a sidebar to the natural history focus. These forms of nature interpretation rely on an extensive body of natural history literature that provides detailed coverage of plant and animal life, geography, and climate for most parts of the United States and many other parts of the world. This literature appears in distinct textual forms, including commercially produced field guides, handbooks, and site directories, as well as detailed local biological manuals and surveys produced by universities, state agencies, and nonprofit organizations. These texts have become increasingly standardized in terms of terminology, organization, and methods for representing natural phenomena in ways that are suitable for use in field settings (Law & Lynch, 1988; Fine, 1998). Thus interpretive staff who take visitors into the field are not "on their own" since they can rely on a robust and increasingly professionalized literature that establishes a universe of official knowledge about nature. As a result, interpreters are in a position to not only impart information but also to enforce an official, standardized version of nature.

An institutional ethnography cannot be content with taking interpretation at face value. Natural history constitutes one of nature tourism's ruling discourses (others include economic development and conservation), and it is the one most likely to be encountered in field settings. The conventional natural history discourse presents nature in a certain way. The natural world is

represented as a place defined by the presence of wild species that are well adapted to their circumstances and live in a state of overall balance with each other and their surroundings. This world is typically presented as self-enclosed and self-sufficient. Human presence in this world, if it is mentioned at all, is usually treated as problematic, and described as interference, disturbance, exploitation, and the like. In effect, natural history talks about a world that we encounter when we leave places of human habitation behind. This discourse operates most unproblematically when it is matched with settings in which obvious signs of human presence are largely absent. These settings include nature sanctuaries, state and national parks, wildlife refuges, and other settings maintained as natural areas. What is less evident is the fact that all such settings are actively managed as "natural" areas, both in terms of general policies about what types of species and habitats should be encouraged, and specific practices used to manage populations of key species (Dizard, 1994). In this regard, natural history as a strategy for representing nature works hand in hand with a set of institutional arrangements that provide for setting aside land as a natural area, managing it according to specific objectives (e.g., for game species such as ducks vs. non-game species such as shorebirds), and creating certain forms of public access (e.g., walking trails vs. roads). While natural history can convey a wealth of information about plants, animals, and their habitats, it is also often used in a way that tacitly represents the landscape as a place defined by human absence. Thus natural history, in its plainest form, tends to perpetuate the myth of human absence from the landscape, ignoring the history of native inhabitation and European colonization as well as the existence of contemporary human settlements in or near the natural area (Cronon, 1995). In settings managed as natural areas, visitors typically encounter a landscape in which older form of human presence has been actively eliminated in favor of a single alternative role: the tourist (Wilson, 1992; Urry, 1990).

The conceptual and institutional organization of nature tourism described above sets the stage for experiencing the landscape as problematic. For example, in conducting field research on nature tourism in Trinidad (West Indies), Grahame frequently had the sense of being in two places at the same time. On the one hand, the places he visited were described to visitors in terms of their natural history, using accounts that combined facts, classifications, general scientific knowledge, and information about local conditions. Thus a setting would be described as a "coastal area" and good place to see "target species" such as royal terns, brown pelicans, and other sea birds because it provided "good habitat" for them. On the other hand, the character of those settings as ordinary places with a history of human uses was usually glossed over, and connections between these sites and local communities were generally ignored. For example, the existence of a small fishing village adjacent to the spot where sea birds were being watched would receive little or no official comment, even when visitors expressed a casual interest about the life of local people. What struck Grahame about visits to such settings was the way that the organization of the tour had the effect of screening out the presence of human inhabitants in favor of a focus on natural attractions. The activities and talk of the tourists and tour leaders focused on bird life and its natural settings, while disregarding the sometimes subtle and occasionally obvious contexts of human life surrounding these attractions. Meanwhile, along roadways and in fields and villages, the everyday life of these places unfolded unnoticed and unremarked (3). Local Trinidadians were of course aware of the tourists' presence, but accepted it without comment, in effect permitting the visitors to devote all of their attention to natural attractions. (In this regard, tourists were allowed to practice a peculiar form of disregard for others (4) that permitted them

to suspend the ordinary interactional character of places in order to focus on these places as nature.) The tour focus on nature thus masked two orders--the overall structuring of the nature tourism industry, and the local community life that played a real but unacknowledged role in fitting together elements of the visit. In effect, this extended, multi-layered organization transformed the working landscape of everyday life into a place experienced as "nature" by the visitors (cf. Wilson, 1992).

During the last decade, the concept of ecotourism has been used to challenge some of the assumptions upon which traditional nature tourism rests. In its most developed form, ecotourism represents a philosophy or ethic that goes beyond promoting interest in natural attractions. The most widely cited statement on ecotourism defines it as tourism which minimizes ecological damage, is culturally appropriate, and provides economic benefits to local people (Boo, 1990). In contrast, conventional tourism is viewed as a social problem that creates environmental destruction (e.g., by siting large-scale tourism amenities in environmental sensitive areas), creates economic problems (e.g., by siphoning off profits to absentee owners and investors), and constitutes a kind of "cultural invasion" (Freire, 1973) that undermines and eventually destroys local patterns of living. Advocates of ecotourism see it as an alternative, "sustainable" form of tourism that is developed in harmony with the natural environment while providing benefits to people living closest to the places visited. During the 1990s, the term ecotourism was incorporated into travel journalism and travel guidebooks, policy statements of government tourism agencies and international development agencies, publications of nonprofit conservation organizations, and academic research literature.

Ecotourism represents a shift in the discourse of nature tourism, but what does ecotourism look like in practice? While the places Grahame studied are frequently referred to in policy and promotional contexts as ecotourism destinations, (5) in field settings the focus was on practices of wildlife viewing that form the core of more conventional types of nature tourism. For the most part, interpretive programs continued to emphasize the observation of key attractions, species identification, and brief explanations based on the standard natural history discourse. Institutional ethnography points to the possibility that the reality of ecotourism is not to be found on the ground within the confines of the tour experience, but rather in how the conditions of this experience are linked to and shaped by other sites and more extended forms of social organization. In this respect, the term ecotourism functions as part of the conceptual machinery that coordinates different elements of the tourism industry. There is a kind of slippage between the ecological and social themes of the ecotourism philosophy and the institutional realities of nature watching: ecotourism makes nature accountable as environmentally and socially appropriate, but the practices of tourism in field settings still tend to enforce a separation between nature and the surrounding community, reproducing an ideological view of nature as an uninhabited landscape. In this sense, the growing volume of references to ecotourism does not signify the arrival of a practical solution to a well-known problem. Rather, the ecotourism discourse constitutes a shift in the kinds of claims that are being made about travel and the environment, pointing to intersections between nature, education, and tourism as a problematic for further investigation.

Conclusion

The two cases we report on exhibit a number of basic features of institutional ethnography as a mode of investigation. Both studies involved a focus on work activities, ideological accounts, and ruling relations. In different ways, the two studies used the standpoint of subjects to address disjunctures between everyday experience and official forms of knowledge. This involved moving beyond the focus on a more or less self-contained social world that characterizes many traditional ethnographic studies. Treating the everyday world as problematic involved considering how the particular practices and settings selected for study were connected with other sites and activities, and broader forms of social organization. Finally, in both studies a focus on texts played an important role in the effort to understand how these forms of organization work and to grasp their connections with the ruling relations of the society.

In addition to these general features, these studies both addressed areas of educational practice that are often neglected in mainstream educational research. In both cases we examined types of education that operated outside of the formal educational system. Employment training and on-site environmental education constitute forms of educational practice that are meant to be used in the immediate pursuit of practical objectives (getting a job and understanding nature). On the surface, the educational goals involved appear to be narrowly defined and rather innocuous. However, in both cases we tried to show how the specific instructional activity was tied into a much larger, institutional mode of knowledge that defined, organized, and controlled practice in a broad area of social life. With both training and interpretation, there is a politics of knowledge regarding the relation of informal educational activities to a larger set of social relations. What makes these forms of education problematic was not especially conspicuous at the level of instruction in the local settings we studied. After all, one might ask, what is so bad about acquiring office skills or learning about the natural history of neotropical birds? The issues we examined arose in connection with a larger set of relations, and with regard to what had been excluded from view through these ways of organizing knowledge. It is this larger problematic which institutional ethnography aims to investigate.

The reader will observe that there are some specific methodological differences between how Kamini Grahame and Peter Grahame proceeded in their investigations. It is important to note that there is no one method or set of methods that defines institutional ethnography. Kamini conducted a study of labor market organization that drew heavily on interviews with staff and clients in employment training agencies. She also conducted nonparticipant observations of employment training sessions. In this case, she approached the field essentially as an outsider, since she occupied a social location that was clearly distinct from that of either staff or clients. In contrast, Peter used participant observation as his primary mode of entry into the field, taking part as an ordinary tourist in a variety of nature tourism settings. He also interviewed interpretive staff at several sites. Both Kamini and Peter examined a range of texts related to the activities they studied. It must be emphasized that participant observation, interviewing, and text analysis do not represent superior, intermediate, and inferior methods of study (as if the face-to-face witnessing of activities were the ideal). Rather, these approaches permit opening up different aspects of the institutional complexes studied. Similarly, the participant and interviewer roles constitute different points of entry into the institutional complex. It is important to note that other points of entry are possible. For example, a researcher with a different social location might have an opportunity to study employment training as a trainee or to study interpretation as a staff interpreter. Institutional ethnography recognizes that multiple points of entry into an institutional

complex are possible, and that research can take the form of an ongoing, collaborative enterprise in which successive research efforts by different investigators continue the process of exploring how ruling relations operate within the institutional complex.

We see several advantages in pursuing institutional ethnography as a strategy for doing educational research. First, institutional ethnography moves beyond the "social worlds" emphasis of traditional ethnographies of education by addressing the specifically institutional character of educational practice: attention is directed to how particular educational activities are tied into broader forms of social organization that coordinate action within extended functional complexes involving families, schools, neighborhoods, labor markets, mass media, tourism, and so on. Here the focus is on grasping how local educational practices operate as constituents of extended social relations. Second, the ethnographic focus on the institutional dimension offers a new way of addressing the problem of official knowledge: while the classic studies in critical ethnography treat official, curricular forms of knowledge as a kind of cultural invasion used to suppress vernacular ways of knowing (Anderson, 1989; Willis, 1977), institutional ethnography goes on to examine how knowledge is organized and how the actual operations of official modes of knowing locate individuals within the ruling relations of the society. In this respect, the emphasis shifts from culture per se to social organization as the locus of explication. Third, by opening up the general question of how knowledge locates individuals within relations of ruling, institutional ethnography offers the prospect of reaching beyond the standard concerns of educational research with schools, curriculum design, instructional techniques, and the like, to address regimes of official knowledge wherever they occur. In this regard, we consider it important to examine training, interpretation, and other forms of educational practice that operate alongside and outside of traditional educational forms, and we suggest that institutional ethnography offers a strategy for examining how these diverse forms contribute to sustaining larger configurations of knowledge and power.

Endnotes

- (1) "Disadvantage" is another conceptual category that does ideological work within the employment training discourse.
- (2) The use of interpretation has a long history in nature tourism, and is closely associated with the U. S. National Parks system.
- (3) Thoreau's writing on nature provides an interesting contrast. As Foster (1999) points out, Thoreau's journals are full of observations about human uses of the land; the human presence is very much a part of Thoreau's account of the natural world. Contemporary nature tourism embodies a very different orientation, bracketing off the human presence.
- (4) Cf. Goffman's concept of civil inattention, which calls attention to how strangers provide for each other's privacy in urban public settings (Goffman, 1971).

(5) The policy contexts included various government planning documents as well as interviews with local environmental leaders about how these attractions should be developed; the promotional contexts included commercial and government advertisements, brochures, and directories.

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