

Institutional Ethnography and Actor-Network-Theory – In Dialogue

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Abstract

Institutional Ethnography (IE) is a sociology that focuses on the everyday world as problematic. As a theory/method of discovery, it focuses on how the work people do is organized and coordinated by text-mediated and text-regulated social organization. Actor-network Theory (ANT) is a theory/method that is concerned with how realities get enacted. ANT focuses on a multiplicity of human and non-human actors (e.g., computers, documents, laboratory equipment) how and the relations between them are constituted to show how actors are made to hang together to create certain realities. In this chapter, we discuss some of the similarities and differences between IE and ANT. We begin with an overview of IE and ANT and focus on their ontological and epistemological “shifts.” We then discuss some of the similarities and differences between IE and ANT, particularly from an IE stance. In doing so, we put these approaches into dialogue and allude to some of the potential benefits and pitfalls of combining these approaches.

Key Words: Institutional Ethnography, Actor-network Theory, Ontology, Epistemology.

Introduction

Institutional Ethnography (IE) is a sociology that focuses on how the work (generously conceived) people do is coordinated by text-mediated and text-regulated social organization. The analytical and empirical goal of IE is to explore how people's everyday doings are organized, coordinated, and made knowable translocally/institutionally. Actor-network Theory (ANT) is a theory/method that is concerned with how realities are assembled, enacted, and persist through translations and alignments of human and non-human actors (e.g., computers, documents, laboratory equipment, natural phenomena) across time and space. The empirical focus is to explore how these assemblages hang together in lasting or ephemeral associations, or "actor-networks." An analytical goal of ANT is to demonstrate how practices, artifacts, and realities are the product of much work that is made opaque once they have become a part of taken for granted and everyday life, or "black boxed" (Callon & Latour, 1981; Latour, 2007). Both IE and ANT are concerned with coordinated action and how the divide between local and present experiences or conditions are bridged (ANT) and organized (IE) by forces that are not obvious and immediately observable. For ANT, the *social* emerges and persists through the interaction of humans and nonhumans, while for IE the *social* becomes visible through explicating how people's lives are concerted on and organized by local and extra-local relations; the local and extra-local are not a binary per se but co-occur in an ongoing, reiterative, and recursive way.

In this chapter, we put IE and ANT in conversation with each other. In doing so, our goal in this chapter is threefold: 1) to shed light on the major tenets and insights of

each approach, 2) to draw attention to some of the similarities and differences between each approach to inquiry, and 3) in providing readers with a delineated discussion of the similarities and differences between these two critical approaches to social scientific inquiry we hope readers will be better informed about the potential benefits and limitations of combining insights from these two approaches, or in their choice of one over the other. While there have been others who have discussed IE and ANT and their potential convergences and divergences (see for example Thompson & Pinsent-Johnson, 2011; Tummons, 2010), we discuss IE and ANT with a more direct focus on the theoretical groundings of each approach within the context of this specific volume. Because this edited volume aims to further work in IE, we focus more on that tradition and making a contribution to its advancement. Lastly, we note that this is not an exhaustive discussion of IE and ANT, but a selective reading of these two approaches in order to further discussions of both frameworks.

Institutional Ethnography

Institutional Ethnography (IE) makes an epistemological and ontological “shift” so as to move away from, while also talking back to, positivist epistemology and objectivist ontology, which are characteristic of mainstream sociology and tend to bury the presence of people and their actual doings in favour of objectifying accounts of those happenings. IE claims that such universalizing, objectifying, and theoretically driven accounts result in a “blob ontology” and the “14th floor effect” (Smith, 2008), whereby the theory used to explain people’s lives stands in place of what people are actually doing. In addition, Smith (2005) explains that “mainstream sociology clamps a conceptual framework over

any project of inquiry; such a framework determines how the actual will be attended to, dominating and constraining selection and interpretation” (p. 50). In doing so, mainstream sociology creates a disjuncture between people’s local happenings and how local happenings are reported institutionally (Smith, 2005). Smith argues that mainstream sociology creates a bifurcation of consciousness between local happenings and institutionally relevant objectified features of those happenings. Smith discusses the need “to find a sociological practice that could begin in the actualities of people’s lives so that I could explore the social from there on, as it is brought into being in that same actuality” (p. 22).

Smith draws on Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology to critique “sociological description” (Smith, 1990a, p. 87) dependent upon “objective” ways of knowing – numerical, categorical, and theoretical ways of knowing. Garfinkel offers a strong critique of traditional notions of objectivity, suggesting that “objectivity” is subjectively made objective. He writes, “in short, *recognizable* sense, or fact . . . or objectivity of accounts are not independent of the socially organized occasions of their use” (Garfinkel, 1967, pp. 3-4, original emphasis). This is a central theme throughout Smith’s sociology, in that IE is geared towards exploring how people’s everyday lives are concerted and how knowledge is put together.

Language is another central feature of IE. Mead (1962) has suggested that the meaning of speech is never pre-given, but it is inter-individual; meaning “is both within and ‘between’ people” (Smith, 1999, p. 110) and is thus a two-sided social act between speaker and hearer (Smith, 2005). Mead (1962) explains, “We want to approach language not from the standpoint of inner meaning to be expressed, but in its larger context of co-

operation in the group taking place by means of signals and gestures” (p. 6). However, Smith points out that Mead lacks a theory of language and discourse necessary to move beyond individual explanations and understandings. As such, Smith argues that a complementary theory of language is needed so that there are means “of making forays into social organization and relations beyond the matrix of the social act in which the self arises” (Smith, 1999, p. 111).

To move beyond this theory of language offered by Mead, Smith draws upon Bakhtin and Volosinov’s conception of how language and utterances are dialogically situated and historically indexical – “any utterance is a link in a very complex organized chain of other utterances” (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 69, 92) – and organized discursively. In other words, language carries social organization. In his discussion of the difference between primary (simple) and secondary (complex) speech genres, Bakhtin (1986) explains that secondary speech genres are ideological¹ “These primary genres are altered and assume a special character when they enter into complex ones. They lose their immediate relation to the actual reality and to the real utterances of others” (p. 62). This concern with how language carries social organization allows IE to remain focused on the local site where people are actually doing things. It also orients the ethnographer’s analytical interests to explore, in part, how language used in everyday life carries traces of institutional relations. Exploring how talk is socially organized is central to IE’s project of explicating how people’s doings are coordinated extra-locally.

To elucidate translocal social organization IE examines how people are organized by text-mediated and text-regulated relations. IE conceptualizes texts as anything materially replicable and reproducible across time and space (e.g. audio, paper based or

1 Ideology being viewed here as a system of ideas (p. 101).

electronic documents) (Smith, 1990; 2005). Texts are central to IE because they allow analysis to move beyond people's everyday lives to examine how lives are hooked up into and are organized or concerted by relations of ruling. Texts, once activated by people, occur at the juncture between local happenings and translocal relations of coordination and control (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 32)². As Campbell and Gregor (2002) explain with reference to Smith (1990a), texts in contemporary society are used in ways to "process people and manage aspects of their lives" (p. 22). The capacity for texts to translocally coordinate people's doings is accomplished by the text's active materiality and ability to surface in identical forms across time and space (Smith, 1990a; 2006). Text reproducibility gives them the capacity for mediation and coordination of social relations.

In order to see how texts are constituents of social relations, in prior work Corman asked readers to imagine an interactional process between a health professional tasked with diagnosing autism and a mother who had concerns about her child's health (Frank et al., 2010). In this encounter, certain standardized diagnostic tools (texts) enter into the interaction between the mother and doctor when, for example, the doctor picks up the Autism Diagnostic Interview-Revised (ADI-R) and begins to ask questions based on this standardized tool. The text-mediated event that follows mediates which questions are asked, what counts as answers, and the assignment of diagnostic scores, all of which are factored into whether a diagnosis of autism was assigned or ruled out (p. 39). The purpose of this example is to illustrate how texts not only enter into people's everyday lives and actively organize and coordinate people's work processes but also how specific

2 It is important to note that individuals read texts in different ways than the maker of the text originally intended (Smith, 2005, p. 105). As Smith notes, texts are often designed to be read differently depending on the institutional context in which they are activated (Smith, 2005, p. 108). Nevertheless, texts (though not all texts) have a unique ability to coordinate extended sequences of actions because they are standardized and exteriorized across time and space.

institutional ways of knowing are constructed from abstracted and now discursive accounts of actual knowings and doings vis-à-vis this social relational sequence of text-mediated events and work.

While texts are active constituents in people's everyday lives, it is not assumed that texts work in a specific way or ways. Rather, how texts work and how they organize and coordinate people's work are empirical questions to be explored. Furthermore, it is important to note that texts are also understood as being intertextual – texts do not stand-alone from other texts; higher-level texts interact with, frame, shape, and control lower level texts (see Smith, 2005). Referring back to the previous example, the ADI-R is framed by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a governing text, which defines what autism “is” in contemporary society.

In another example, Rankin and Campbell (2006) provide a look into health reform practices in Canada. They explored how the work of nurses has come under the purview of what they call technologies of management and governance that attempted to make healthcare more efficient, effective, accountable, and transparent. They discussed a multiplicity of different institutional technologies, which have various texts embedded within them, including tracking systems that record admissions, discharges, and transfers of patients, standardized clinical pathways aimed at mediating clinical practice, and technologies used to determine “appropriate” levels of care for patients that, on the surface, seem to be rational solutions to perceived crises in health care. Rankin and Campbell illustrate how these technologies enter into the work practices of nurses and other health practitioners, mediating their interactions with their patients and displacing and subsuming the expert knowledge that nurses have gained over their years of practice.

In addition to coordinating local activities, texts have embedded within them specific discourses; once the text is activated, the discourses embedded within the text have the potential to be activated and thereby become constituents in people's everyday lives. It is with this in mind that we see IE's project of discovery geared toward exploring how lives are "put together" across a multiplicity of different sites (DeVault, 2008, p. 6) by explicating "distinct social forms of coordination" (McCoy, 2008, p. 703). Institutional ethnographic analysis, therefore, attempts to make visible "interinstitutional" (Griffith & Andre-Bechely, 2008) relations of ruling accomplished by and through the textualization of everyday life; texts are viewed as being central to governance in contemporary society (see Griffith & Smith, 2014). As McCoy (2008) explains, "modern governance and large-scale coordination occur through generalized, and generalizing, text-based forms of knowledge" (p. 703). Furthermore, DeVault (2008) argues, "the dominant mode of contemporary governance (in most arenas, and increasingly) is now discursive" (pp. 4, 6; see also Clarke & Newman, 1997). Discursive modes of governance, accordingly, are realized through text-mediated modes of social organization, whereby active texts – texts activated by people in local settings (Campbell, 2008, p. 280) – enact the discourses embedded within them across multiple sites, organizing and coordinating people's doings.

Texts organize and coordinate what people do locally vis-à-vis regimes of management and governance, qualitatively transforming relations between people and by people (Smith, 2005, 2014; Turner, 2002). In other words, texts have "actual presences in people's activities and in how activities are coordinated both as local sequences of action [between people] and institutionally" (Smith, 2005, p. 104). IE views texts as major

organizers and coordinators of people's everyday lives; they are "constituents of social relations" (Campbell 2001, p. 323) central to IE's project of explication and discovery.

Actor-network-theory

Like IE, ANT has grown out of a critique of mainstream sociologies, in particular the strong program or Edinburgh School of studies in science and technology (Bloor, 1976), the social construction of technological systems (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 2012), and ethnomethodology (Latour & Callon, 1981). For example, the strong program was concerned with sociologist's lack of confidence engaging in analysis of scientific activity beyond activities of people in labs. In an early articulation of what would become known as ANT, Latour and Callon (1981) critiqued ethnomethodology in order to further its insights regarding how meaning and society are performed in small-scale interactions and how these can grow onto a larger scale—conceptualized as micro and macro levels in traditional sociology. Interactions produce materials that last beyond the initial interaction, these persist and can be aligned with other artifacts to produce macro-level effects, organizing the world as new interactions and alignments occur. Ethnomethodologists had omitted from their analysis the tools, objects, and regulations that partially remove ambiguity in human contexts (Latour & Callon, 1981). They explain:

We must now gather up what their [ethnomethodological] analysis leaves out and examine with the same method the strategies which enlist bodies, materials, discourses, techniques, feelings, laws, organizations. Instead of dividing the subject with the social/technical, or with the human/animal, or with the

micro/macro dichotomies, we will only retain for the analysis *gradients of resistivity* and consider only the *variations in relative solidity and durability of different sorts of materials* (p. 284, original emphasis).

Gradients of resistance and variations of durability do away with traditional sociological explanatory categories and direct the analyst toward how assemblages of things are made, endure, or do not.

Similar to IE, ANT aims to make a radical move away from allowing abstracted and objectified accounts to stand-in for actual happenings. In particular, it draws attention to natural phenomena, nonhumans, and artifacts which organize, assemble, coordinate, facilitate, or otherwise constitute what sociologists presume to be the “social” world (Law, 1991; Latour, 2007). This move away from a “sociology of the social” (Latour, 2005) as primary to analysis and as a causal force in the explanation of phenomena was signaled by Latour and Woolgar (1986) removing the word “social” from the second edition of their book *Laboratory Life: the social construction of scientific facts*.

Removing “social” focuses on the construction of facts without reifying the “social” as a category or entity that is outside or prior to such constructions. ANT does not presuppose the ontological independence or importance of the social—it is a product that must be described in its articulation in associations of people and things. That is, what sociologists typically consider to be social—categories such as gender or race, negotiations/interactions between people—cannot be given any special status over the what sociologists would typically consider to be nonsocial—natural phenomena, animals, objects—in analysis and explanation. This leads to a point which causes much chaffing for sociologists, and IE in particular (see discussion below)—ANT treats humans and

nonhumans symmetrically—neither is privileged and all explanations must be given equal treatment (Bloor, 1976). For ANT agency is much more than intentions that originate with human cognition, it is a matter of acts, resistances, and effects. In making this observation ANT de-centers humans and their cognition as solely responsible for agency. Rather, entities can have agency without intentionality. As Law (2012) has stated, “the same type of explanation should be used for all the elements that go to make up a heterogeneous network, whether these elements are devices, natural forces, or social groups” (p. 124). Such an approach would not be possible if the analyst presumed that humans instigate interactions and are the only source for causal forces. In other words, the analyst does not presume that humans have greater agency than nonhumans, which is why *the social* can no longer be marshaled as an explanation. The analytic point of ANT being that to ignore nonhumans and what they do is to ignore an important part of society (Latour, 1992). As such, ANT explores how knowledge and realities are assembled through negotiations between people, institutions, organizations, *and* nonhumans (Latour, 1992).

Where IE and ANT differ in their sensibilities is that ANT allows for the possibility that nonhumans have agency. Sayes (2013) has provided a particularly well-articulated summary of ANT’s conceptualization of agency and nonhumans. Nonhumans as an analytic category do not include: humans, and entities which are entirely symbolic in nature, supernatural, or exist at such a large scale that they are composed of humans and nonhumans (Sayes, 2013, p. 3). Similarly, nonhuman agency is limited, but also broader than human agency. In ANT, the notion that nonhumans have agency is not intended to articulate that they necessarily have a sense of purpose, justice, or potential

existential suffering in the face of threats to their associations. Sayes (2013) points out that within ANT, responsibility, autonomy, and purposeful action cannot be attributed to any specific actor, it is outside the realm and purpose of the analysis. The degree to which nonhumans or humans act in any given network is an empirical question. Often the concern with attributing agency to nonhumans is related to giving nonhumans intentionality. Sayes (2013) notes that intentional action is merely one type of action and quotes Latour on agency's multiplicity, "there might exist many metaphysical shades between full causality and sheer in-existence: things might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on" (Latour, 2004, p. 226). Moreover, ANT stresses that, "nonhumans do not have agency by themselves, if only because they are never by themselves" (Sayes, 2013, p. 11). The terms "nonhuman" and "agency" are terms used to support analysis and description—they are methodological—not theoretical concepts intended to stand in place of accounts of actual happenings.

ANT leaves "open *who* or *what* the actor is," which Mol argues is an advantage (Mol, 2002: 143, original emphasis). Such a deployment of both human and non-human actors allows for the tracing of how uncertainties are stabilized and realities enacted (Latour, 2005: 23). For ANT, an actor—reconceptualized as "actant"—is any entity that exerts a detectible influence on other entities in the network (Law, 2012), or "*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference" (Latour, 2005, p. 71). Actors are thus treated as mediators and make visible the movement of the social (p. 128). If actors are not doing things, they are dropped from analysis (p. 154). The analyst does not presume that humans have greater agency than nonhumans, rather agency is multiple, can

vary, and is characteristic of relational networks and not necessarily individual humans or nonhumans. For example, in a study of Portuguese naval history, Law (2012) demonstrated how winds, currents, masts, length to breadth ratios of ships, guns, Muslims, and Hindus all formed a network that contributed to the Portuguese domination of the Indian ocean for a period of time. In this analysis, the winds and currents acted on the masts and the ships; if the length to breadth ratios were not such that they were willing and able to work with these nonhumans, the Portuguese would have failed to navigate effectively. Humans and nonhumans work together, and in this analysis, neither were given special treatment in explaining effective navigation.

Sensitivity to nonhuman actors is what the “theory” in “actor network-theory” refers to, it is not theory in the sense of a conceptual explanation, but a methodological attentiveness (Sayes, 2013). Whereas ANT is sensitive to how humans and nonhumans are configured into local actualities, made to persist, or fail through the work of both, IE is directed toward exploring how local human actuality is shaped by text-mediated-extralocally coordinated practices. The local-extralocal nexus is described in the articulation of alignments and translations of actor-networks. A crucial point for ANT is that subjective and collective interests, biases, judgments, concerns are displaced from their originators and into artifacts, which allows norms and interests to persist across time and space. This is one form of what ANT researchers refer to as “translation” (Callon, 1986). The effects of translation are somewhat similar to IE’s notion of ruling relations, ideology, and theory of language in that social organization is carried by texts—which we discuss further in the next section. John Law’s (2002) analysis of a simple computer spreadsheet is illustrative. The spreadsheet and its user work together to perform a reality

and create effects. The spreadsheet is “an agent of homogenization” and to enter into the spreadsheet items from outside of it must take a symbolic—statistical or arithmetical form—it is therefore also an agent of simplification, reducing actuality into numbers to be manipulated according to it and its user’s reality. The spreadsheet draws diverse things into its cells in the form it requires, it aligns them in particular ways—to which there are many possible alternatives that it discloses. In doing so, the spreadsheet “embodies and enacts a series of relations which tend to reflect and reproduce specific social and technical agendas” (Law, 2002, p. 27). In this case, the spreadsheet was used by a project manager aiming to estimate a delay in achieving a desired outcome—loss of predicted man-years [sic]. Loss of predicated man-years was not a reality that existed outside of the spreadsheet, but also did not pre-exist within it. The project manager works *with* the spreadsheet. Loss of predicted man-years was beyond each of the individual capacities of the spreadsheet and the project manager. It is only once the project manager worked with the spreadsheet that the two of them together perform that reality into being. The spreadsheet may have been programmed by others in a different time or place, and hold their agendas and interests within it, but they may be long dead and in this local interaction the spreadsheet limits, but also furthers the project manager’s capacities. A different artifact or alternatively programmed spreadsheet would have different effects and shape the project manager’s work differently. Law also points out that the spreadsheet’s agency in these relations would become all the more obvious if it were to crash while the project manager was attempting his work. The point of Law’s spreadsheet analysis is to illustrate that economic realities are not independent of their articulation

through particular means, they are material and symbolic enactments and how these are practiced has consequences for what can be known.

In his study of academic assessment, performance metrics, and rankings in higher education, Barron (forthcoming) used insights from each perspective to direct his research, posing following research questions: How are the work and practices of people transformed into numbers and how do those numbers then transform work and practices? Who decides these processes and for what purposes? How and through what work is this particular knowledge produced? What do the numbers conceal or make visible through such transformations? He began with IE's notion of standpoint to consider his own position as a graduate student and would-be scholar to trace how the institution in which he sought future employment was shaped by metrics and rankings. He further used IEs insights into how humans work within and across organizations is conducted through mediated-action. This use of IE allowed him to trace information flows across organizational units within universities, out into other organizations and back again attending to how people made such flows happen and made meaning in such work. However, a potential limitation of IE is that its focus on text-mediated social organization can lead one to ignore the possibilities of how nonhumans might be involved in shaping institutions and coordinating the actions of its people (Walby, 2007). By drawing on ANT's methodological sensitivity toward nonhumans and their agency Barron was able to identify how university administrators, professors, performance reporting templates, databases, citations, social media, strategic plans, conferences, promotional events, publishing corporations, universities, and higher education systems are all enrolled, translated, and aligned to make rankings a salient reality with no specific single

ideological agenda realized, but many such agendas that are dependent on varying enactments of these relations.

For example, rankings do not merely coordinate human work, but impose their judgment on it as well. As professors make use of journal rankings to assess one another, they have to resist the temptation to allow the rankings to stand-in for their traditional debates and negotiations. The professors could easily submit a report listing their colleagues publications and the rank of each journal in which they appear, they would not have to read one another's work, meet to discuss it, and conclude its quality—the rankings would have already done all of this for them. There are at least three enactments here that imply varying degrees of agency and which are illustrative of ANT: Rankings can totally replace academic judgment fully determining hiring, tenuring, promoting, or firing of professors; rankings can be a point of reference that shape academic judgment as professors debate quality in relation to the numbers; the rankings might fail to become aligned with professors and their work, peer review might happen without any reference to them. In the first instance the judgment is complete, the ranking has done the work, and the work that was put into the ranking's production is opaque, black-boxed, taken for granted; in the second, rankings concert academic work, limiting or enhancing the professorial perspectives on quality; in the third, the ranking-network fails. Each of these configurations and enactments have different political implications and consequences, but the analysis does not pass judgment as to which is preferable. So to be clear, Barron's combination of ANT and IE was in his methodological assemblage for following traces and gathering data. The analysis lays more on the side of ANT, but also leaves open for discussion and debate what enactments of these human-nonhuman configurations may be

more or less desirable. Other analyses have used neoliberalism to explain rankings (Amsler & Bolsman, 2012; Nedeva, Boden, & Nugroho, 2012), and proponents of rankings—particularly their reputation surveys—have argued that rankings are a form of peer review (Baty, 2014), but by adopting ANT’s sensibility Barron is able to show that marshaling neoliberalism directs attention away from the fact that rankings are of and enmeshed with long-standing university practices and that rankings can often strip scholars of the contexts that give them the ability to draw on their expertise to make individual and collective judgments.

Similar analytical projects: Emphasizing actual interactions

Institutional ethnography proffers an ontological view of the world as “being produced and brought into being through the social practices of people” (Smith, 2006, p. 34) and a reflexive epistemology that moves away from traditionally objectivist accounts of knowledge towards viewing knowledge as “being mutually produced through interaction between researchers and the people they learn from” (Smith, 2006, p. 31). Similarly, Latour provides a related critique when he discusses the limits of what he calls “sociology of the social.” In doing so, both approaches argue that social theory, and specifically how it is used in the *mainstream*, generally provides a reified conception of the “social” and all of the dichotomous concepts that go with it, as a thing or entity in and of itself that impose a certain order to things. This mainstream use of the “social” is then used as an explanatory device that makes invisible associations of humans and nonhumans (ANT) and how everyday life is organized and coordinated (IE) that these approaches empirically describe. Latour’s concern with ANT is to achieve an understanding of the social as a “type of connection between things that are not

themselves social” (2007, p. 5). As such, traditional dualisms, such as micro and macro, human and non-human, are relationally constituted—the outcomes or effects of networks—and are not used as explanatory resources (Law, 2007, p. 8; 2004). His project is thus to trace associations between different actors and explore how the social is enacted and held together by people and the nonhumans that work with them. Similarly, IE moves away from using mainstream concepts (e.g. racism, ageism, etc) and aims to “ground” such concepts like “racism” in “social relations” (Smith, 2005, p. 57); rather than having such nominalizations stand in for or eclipse actual doings of people, IE aims to explore “the ground of a concept in the actual ordering of what living people do” (Smith, 1990, p. 41, see Corman, 2017).

As such, IE and ANT can be regarded as anti-positivist approaches to social scientific inquiry that reject the use of universalizing and subsuming concepts³. Rather, both approaches use orienting concepts that direct the researcher to explore enactments (ANT) and the work people do and how work is organized (IE). In doing so, they flip the analytical gaze of mainstream sociology’s “major ontological categories” (Law, 2004, p. 157), so that such concepts no longer exist in and of themselves but are seen relationally constituted expressions of social relations (IE) and accomplishments (ANT) (Campbell, 2003; Latour, 2005).

In their critique of positivist social scientific inquiry both approaches draw on insights offered by Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology is concerned with how people’s practices are central to commonsensical ways of knowing and how group members’ methods of interaction accomplish reality. That is, knowledge and reality are “attainments of members’ concerted activities” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 10).

3 Law (2007) for instance describes ANT as “an empirical version of post-structuralism” (p. 6).

Hence, a key feature of ethnomethodology is a focus on what people are actually doing and how “facts” are put together. The project of both ANT and IE is to make visible what is generally left invisible by traditional or mainstream sociology.

Both IE and ANT emphasize actualities and interactions (for examples, see Diamond (1992), Rankin and Campbell (2006), Callon (1986), Law (2012) and Mol (2002)). Both approaches “privilege practices over principles and study them ethnographically” (Mol, 2002, p. 33) and may make use of many methodological tools to do so (e.g interviews, observations, textual analysis), but primarily those which facilitate a focus on “what counts,” and how what counts is “framed” (Latour, 2005, p. 187) or socially organized (Smith, 2005). This focus inevitably relates to how things work – how realities are held together by tracing relations and actions that are made possible – how realities are made salient through them (ANT) – and how people’s everyday doings, their actualities, are put together and made institutionally actionable and recognizable (IE). As such, neither perspective forecloses possibilities on how data ought to be gathered for analysis, but alerts the researcher to how method and analysis shape knowledge production. Furthermore, both put forward an “ontological shift” that seeks to direct the researcher to explore how people’s everyday doings are shaped extra-locally (IE) and how differences and divergences – “heterogeneous elements” (Latour, 2005, p. 5) – between human and non-human actors are translated to hang together in creating realities (ANT).

IE uses the metaphor of a map to represent what is often the end product of this type of inquiry. Mapping shows how knowledge is socially organized through institutional processes that textually mediate the work of individuals’ doings. According

to Smith (2005), “A map assembles different work knowledges, positioned differently, and should include, where relevant, an account of the texts coordinating work processes in institutional settings” (p. 226). As such, the purpose of creating a map is twofold. First, mapping allows individuals to locate themselves within the terrain of the ruling apparatus, illustrating how their lives are ruled (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Secondly, mapping assists individuals in gaining more knowledge about the processes in which they are embedded, helping them to ultimately become subjects instead of objects of social relations. As such, map-work makes explicit how people’s lives are made into objectified actionable accounts essential for governance in society today. Ultimately, and like using a map in a mall or while driving in an unfamiliar area, the goal of IE is to discover knowledge so that individuals can use it as an extension of their own knowledge (Smith, 2005).

Latour uses a similar metaphor of “cartography” (Latour, 2005, p.16) to describe aspects of ANT. He suggests that while the social world is full of uncertainties, social connections can be described by following the traces that are left in the wake of stabilized uncertainties (Latour, 2005, p. 16). Latour suggests that ANT attempts to render the world flat in order to make it traceable; by “feeding off uncertainties instead of cutting through them,” as the sociology of the social does, it becomes possible to “learn something about the real topography of the social” (p. 170); that is, how realities are enacted and maintained (Latour, 2005: 172) or, as Law (2007) writes, “how the social is done or holds together” (p. 9). Mapping in this sense is the tracing of pathways—work and relations—that lead to the closure of controversy, the establishment of facts. It is with

these metaphors in mind that both IE and ANT are not concerned with the substantive *whats* per se but *how* the *whats* are assembled, enacted, organized, and held together.

Different “So Whats”

One significant difference between ANT and IE that we focus on is the former’s sole focus on description – “Just describe the state of affairs at hand...I myself have always found this incredibly demanding” (Latour, 2005, p. 144). Sticking to descriptions, according to Latour, is important because it “protects against the transmission of explanations” (2005, p. 137). As a radical material semiotics, ANT does not aim toward explanation, as relations between concepts and material that constitute the analysis would also therefore create the “explanation,” concepts and social forces are effects of particular networks and therefore cannot be marshaled as an explanation for phenomena. This focus on description is significantly different from IE’s focus on moving beyond descriptions to explication. Explication is the mapping of “how things work” and relies on description to build explanations of how people are situated and coordinated in specific circumstances. Explication is connected to IE’s overall project of producing a sociology geared towards “changing the world” (Frampton et al. 2006). IE’s political project to make meaningful change for people is embedded within the notion of explication and is based on IEs roots in Marx and feminism.

Another major difference between the approaches is where a project from each perspective might begin. Institutional ethnographers begin by identifying a “problematic” located in people’s everyday lives or experiences (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). The term problematic “sets out a project of research and discovery that organizes the direction of

investigation from the standpoint of those whose experience is its starting point” (Smith, 2005, p. 227). It is used in institutional ethnography to direct attention to “a possible set of questions,” puzzles or tensions that are “latent” in, yet arise from, people’s everyday actualities (Smith, 1987, p. 91). The problematic is described by Smith (2005) as, “A territory to be discovered, not a question that is concluded in its answer . . . it explores with people their experiences of what is happening to them and their doings and how those are hooked up with what is beyond their experiences” (p. 41). For example, Corman’s (2017) research on paramedics was activated by an experience he had while driving his partner to work:

In the act of turning into a parking lot, our car collided with an individual riding a bicycle. I remember glass everywhere, levels of adrenaline never experienced, and a loud scream. I called 911 to report the accident and request an ambulance to assist the cyclist, who sat in pain on the curb, bleeding, sweating, and in tears. The dispatcher asked certain questions, along the lines of “Are you in need of police, fire, or ambulance?” and “is the individual conscious?” time passed and the paramedics eventually arrived. One paramedic immediately approached the cyclist, asked her some questions, and then appeared to examine different body parts. Another paramedic approached my partner and me. A brief encounter followed, no body checks, only questions asked. Moments later, the paramedic turned away and assisted the other paramedic in loading the injured cyclist onto a stretcher and eventually into the ambulance. Soon, the ambulance left, off to what I could only presume was a hospital, lights glaring, sirens blaring. (p. 3)

The accident and Corman's reflections that followed constituted his initial problematic. He became intrigued and puzzled by the interactions between the paramedics, himself, his partner, the bicyclist, and what happened once the paramedics left. He began to wonder about the relations that organized the work processes of the paramedics at the accident site and beyond and wanted to learn more about how things work in EMS from the standpoint of paramedics.

This brief discussion of Corman's problematic exemplifies the importance of how IE researches begin where people are actually working, which inevitably connects to IE's political orientation of making meaningful change to such work settings. ANT has no necessary starting point, but controversies—public, political, or scientific problems—are a common point of departure as networks are often assembled in order to resolve them (Latour, 1987; 2005). The closure of controversy results in the establishment of facts, the solidification of a particular assemblage, it becomes “black boxed.” When a configuration is black boxed it is largely taken for granted and the assumptions, controversies, and work that have gone into its assembly have all been made invisible (Callon and Latour, 1981; Latour, 1987). Being aware of the end-products of network building might also allow the ANT-analyst to work backward from a fact, artifact, or state of affairs to examine how these relations were assembled, but this may be more difficult given specific assembly work has ended.

Ideology is another concept in Smith's project that is absent in ANT, and points to IEs explicit focus on the relations of ruling that organize people's everyday lives. In IE the notion of ideology is used to move beyond description to explication. Smith makes it explicit that ideology is not the ideas of the ruling class. Rather, Smith defines ideology

as a “definite practice of reasoning” (Smith, 2004, p. 452) – a conceptual practice of power (Smith, 1990b) or a “metadiscourse” (Smith, 2005, p. 217) – that regulates “more specialized and subordinated discourses” (Smith, 2005, p. 217)⁴ central to governance in society today (Frampton et al. 2006). Ideologies, in other words, are “social forms of knowledge” that arise from and are abstracted through “the social relations in which they are produced” (Frampton et al., 2006, p. 32), but do not reflect the actuality of those relations. Ideology operates from a standpoint as the imposition of objective, textually mediated, conceptual practices on a local setting (Smith, 1990, p. 50). Ideological practices (Smith, 1990) create a “virtual account of happenings,” making governing, administering, or ruling of life possible (Smith, 2006, p. 48). In other words, the actual is made institutionally actionable as a result of how knowledge is socially organized. Rather than producing speculative accounts that are ideologically captured, something endemic of mainstream sociology, Smith’s project attempts to explore and explicate this social organization in order to explore how people’s doings are organized outside of their local happenings (Smith, 2006)⁵.

ANT on the other hand is not concerned with ideology due to its symmetrical treatment of humans and nonhumans, the interest is with tracing actions and relations that make them possible. An ANT approach to ideology would require a study of the relations between materials and concepts that are assembled so as to make ideology possible. That is, from an ANT perspective, ideology is an effect of a network mobilized in specific ways. By flattening the topography of the social, there are no ruling relations, just

4 Smith (2005), for example, explains how neo-liberalism is an example of an ideology (or metadiscourse) and new public management is an example of a subordinate discourse that mediates neo-liberalism (see her concluding chapter). See also DeVault’s (2008) edited volume for additional examples of ideologies present in society.

5 IE departs from speculative or ideological accounts by “investigating the actual social relations in which the categories arise” (Smith, 2004, p. 456).

relations with consequences for how things manifest, fall apart, or are made to persist. ANT recognizes that morals, norms, biases, controls and so forth are incorporated into artifacts and their relations, but there is no clear means of attributing the actions and consequences of these to any single actor. Without a conception of ideology, the relations of ruling, in IE parlance, are left invisible.

The contrasts discussed in this section point to perhaps the biggest difference between IE and ANT; IE is geared towards providing knowledge to inform change whereas the policy and practice implications of ANT are more subtle and require reflection on particular configurations of humans and nonhumans after analysis has been completed. IEs focus on explication and change is exemplified in the metaphor of the map; by gaining a better understanding of how things work and are put together, avenues for change potentially open up. Smith (2005) explains: “A knowledge of just how these forms of domination are being put together can make resistance and progressive change more within our reach” (p. 220). As such, understanding, relevance, and change is central to the project of IE (see Pence, 2001 and Smith, 2006).

The political relevance of ANT can seem unclear. Law (2007) points out that while ANT has the potential to be politically relevant, it has been critiqued for failing to do so in practice. For example, Latour (2005) discusses “political epistemology” and the need to open what is to be assembled so as to be given a “chance to modify a given state of affairs” (p. 250). He goes on to explain, “Is it not obvious then that only a skein of weak ties, of constructed, artificial, assignable, accountable, and surprising connections is the only way to begin contemplating any kind of fight?” (p. 252). Perhaps this leads towards more “satisfactory” assemblages (p. 261) but the implications of an ANT

analysis remain vague. In addition, Mol (1999) discusses “ontological politics” when she writes, “The question this study provokes is how the body multiple and its diseases might be done *well*” (Mol, 2002, p. 7). She goes on to say, “This question will not be answered here. Instead, I’ll map out the space in which it may be posed” (Mol, 2002, p. 7, original emphasis)⁶. While Mol’s study offers the possibility to make enactments more generous (Frank, 2004) – medical interventions do not follow from nature, there are many ways of shaping such choosing in that we might organize such choices according to markets or through universal state provided services – ANT does not provide any direction for doing so. This is because ANT leaves any political project separate from its analyses. ANT cannot presuppose a specific politics due to its emphasis on symmetry—choosing the side of people over other actants in a network would violate this rule—however by pointing to the configuration of humans and nonhumans many possible political programs might be considered (Bijker, Hughes, & Pinch, 2012). The praxis-oriented potential of ANT is pointed to by Law (2007) when he writes, “how might this patchwork of realities be enacted in better ways?” (p. 13).

Conclusions: ANT, IE, or Both?

Institutional ethnography and actor-network theory each regard the world as constructed through symbolic and material components. Each is also concerned with the ways in which actions are mediated, aligned, or coordinated and the analyses of both are focused on thick description of actual happenings. They share a sensibility concerned with avoiding abstracted or objectified concepts serving as explanations for phenomena. However, this is where the similarities seem to end. ANT displaces agency from its anthropocentric seat and thereby regards agency as more than intentional action, for

6 See also Law’s (2004) discussion of allegory.

example, it can also be any resistance against the agency of other's—human or nonhuman. The IE project is also political through and through, beginning with a problematic that situates the analyst in the everyday world of people with the aim of improving it, whereas ANT examines politics, but does not incorporate any specific political aim.

Barron's use of IE and ANT contrasts with Corman's study; whereas Barron used a combination of IE and ANT to explore the production of performance quality in the higher education sector, Corman (2017; 2016, see also Corman and Melon, 2014) used IE to explore the work of paramedics and their socially organized work setting. Based on his initial experience discussed above, he posed four inter-related exploratory questions or "puzzles" that are relevant to his problematic:

1. What do urban paramedics actually do on the front lines of prehospital emergency medical services?
2. How does the work of paramedics interface with other workers in EMS?
3. How do different institutional technologies shape the work of paramedics?
4. How is the work of paramedics made visible and how does this connect to the social organization of knowledge in EMS?

Corman was interested, first and foremost, in the work of paramedics – what paramedics actually did on the front lines of emergency medical services – and how their work was organized and coordinated by text-mediated social organization. While ANT is insightful, Corman was cautious of adding an additional project/scope to his study; while IE and ANT might be cut from similar cloths so to speak, they are different analytical and empirical projects and Corman was concerned that using ANT would do "ontological

violence” to the shift proffered by Smith by moving analysis away from *people at work* (DeVault, 2008). In addition, Corman did not see the need to use ANT to answer his puzzles; while an ANT lens would invariably lead to additional insights, studies are never complete, including in IE, and Corman found that IE offered empirical tools to provide a thorough explication of urban EMS from the standpoint of paramedics. In addition, as his analysis unfolded, non-humans (e.g. the ambulance design, the design of homes/apartments, locations of calls, the electronic patient care record, technologies at the Dispatch Centre) played an integral role in his analysis. However different from how ANT gives agency to these “actants,” Corman did not give agency to these non-humans; rather, he was interested in how paramedics, and other key players in the emergency medical services system, worked with and on these technologies, oriented (or did not) to these technologies, and how these technologies were used (by people at work) to make certain things visible and other things invisible.

We wrote this chapter because we are interested in ways of furthering IE, and we thought an explicit focus on IE and ANT would be one way of contributing to this discussion. It should be explicit to readers that the authors do not necessarily agree on the combining IE and ANT; while Corman views Barron’s use of IE and ANT as innovative and insightful, he is not convinced that a combination of these theories/methods is necessary. In contrast, Barron explicitly combined the two approaches as he felt one (ANT) added to some blindspots of the other (IE). Nevertheless, such combination is not necessary nor always advisable. The perspectives have many ontological and epistemological characteristics in common, but their blind combination may lead to analytic and political confusion.

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