

**REPLICATING THE UN
MULTI-COUNTRY STUDY
ON MEN AND VIOLENCE:
UNDERSTANDING WHY
SOME MEN USE VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN AND HOW
WE CAN PREVENT IT**

**Q&A WITH THE EXPERTS:
CONDUCTING
INSTITUTIONAL
ETHNOGRAPHIES
THROUGH A GENDER LENS**

**PARTNERS FOR PREVENTION: A UNDP, UNFPA, UN WOMEN AND UNV REGIONAL JOINT PROGRAMME FOR GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE
PREVENTION IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
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Raewyn Connell, University of Sydney, and Kate Bedford, University of Kent, Kent Law School spoke to Parters for Prevention (P4P) about their experiences and recommendations on institutional ethnographic research on gender-related issues.

1. What are some steps to conduct an institutional ethnography on gender-related issues? (such as selecting methodologies, defining the focus, identifying spaces for gender analysis) What do you think makes a good institutional ethnography?

Raewyn Connell (RC): I think a good institutional ethnography has to be careful and systematic, so it needs a plan for the issues to be observed and the way the data will be gathered. It's helpful if this is based on a coherent theory of gender, one that's relevant to the local situation. At the same time, the research needs to be open to discovering new and unexpected things. Being systematic does not mean being rigid!

Kate Bedford (KB): My work was on the World Bank, and the consequences for gender policy entrepreneurship of the Bank's move to a Post-Washington Consensus under Wolfensohn. I defined institutional ethnography as Dorothy Smith did. I was interested in the organizational culture and meaning-making, the bureaucratic norms and the "common-sense," of why policy was framed in a certain way and why some stakeholder voices were privileged while others were marginalized, and what the consequences of various policy frames were for different actors.

The advantage, for me, in looking to institutional ethnography to help answer some of those questions is that they don't always get answered well by other approaches. For example, you can assume that policy is framed in certain ways because it is functional for the powerful to do so. Yet, this doesn't really explain the variation in policy approaches across different development organizations, or variation across levels within the same institution. It also treats policy frames as mere outputs (rather than complexly-constituted outputs AND sometimes drivers) of social life.

Institutional ethnography, for me, is a way to recognize the structural elements of social life while also being open to how people and movements can seize space within constrained organizational contexts to forge change. It is also useful to explore how policies in one realm can have unanticipated effects in another, and how the process of building a stakeholder consensus around policy approaches may both give voice to gender equality advocates, and simultaneously limit their own visions and approaches. Another advantage is that it values the knowledge of gender equality advocates: they are sometimes (though not always) the best

analysts of the limits of a particular policy frame for their work, because they see its effects.

A good institutional ethnography will reflect deep knowledge of the institution. If it focuses on documents, it will know the codes of writing and reading that predominate in that organization – whether people just read the summaries; how text boxes are used; if graphs carry more weight than photos or poor people’s narratives as rhetoric of factuality (to use Theo Porter’s lovely phrase). If it uses interviews, it will have a sense of what is hard to speak, or what does not need to be spoken, in that organization [one of my interviewees simply rolled her eyes when I asked about macroeconomists in the Bank. She didn’t need to say a word]. It will also try to ‘know’ the institution at multiple levels: not just head office documents, but also training manuals produced by field offices; not just how the policy framers see the issue at hand but how staff on the ground running workshops or lending money to people see the issue (and how that does, or does not, relate to what head office tells them they should do).

2. What do you consider to be the key challenges faced by researchers who conduct institutional ethnographic research on gender issues? Can you speak about your experiences? How did you overcome these issues?

RC: There are many challenges! Such research may be unwelcome to powerful interests, so there has to be political support. If a research team is involved, there has to be steady cooperation among the different members of the team, and some common outlook. Gender issues can be emotionally demanding, so mutual support, and some way of ‘debriefing’, is needed. It’s necessary to write up the results in language that makes sense to the people in the institution, while remaining true to the data; that takes time and effort. Meeting deadlines while keeping the research high-quality can be a problem; plan realistically!

KB: Access to multiple levels of the institution is a challenge. I found this hard, especially to get access to national level Bank actors (in Ecuador and Argentina). Without the support of the Bank’s headquarters, they would not have spoken with me. On the other hand, researchers from the global north get immense privilege when trying to access dominant development actors. It is much harder for scholars from the south.

Also issues around ethics remain a challenge. Institutional ethnography relies on a dual insider/outsider location, where you try to get immersed enough that you understand the common-sense, but where you try to keep enough distance that you keep asking WHY that common-sense/how that common-sense impacts the world, for various actors. This meant, in my case, that I was critical of the common sense about gender equality being generated by the post-Washington Consensus Bank, for what it meant for radicalized masculinity, for women’s sexual autonomy, for the ability of feminists to demand state resources for childcare, and so on. I was given access to the institution’s

day to day workings by self-identified feminists working within constrained contexts, some of whom were themselves critical of the Bank, and the analysis that resulted was very critical of the limits of the policy frame under which those people were working. I tried to always emphasize the institutional and structural reasons WHY gender policy took these routes (the ones I then tried to show the limits of!), so that the analytic lens was taken off individuals and on to the institutional context within which they operate: and some of them appreciated that because I could say things [in print] that those individuals could not say. But 10 years after some of the research I sometimes continue to worry that the analysis could be read as more critical of the individuals than the Bank (and hence of the structural political-economic conditions that drive the Bank), and I remain vexed by the question of how to generate effective, trenchant policy critique that doesn't slam on feminists who are struggling for space within very constrained contexts.

3. What are two or three pieces of advice that you would give to researchers who are interested in conducting institutional ethnographic research on gender and gender violence issues in their countries?

RC: Talk to other researchers, who have done anything like this. Talk to all stakeholders in the situation, as early as possible. Use multiple methods to gather information – interviews, documentary analysis, participant observation, etc. And give feedback, after the research and analysis is done.

KB: I am not a violence specialist, but I did find it helpful to question the common senses I kept hearing in my research about who was most violent (and the unspoken comparison with the men who were most safe). I learned a lot about how development actors see class, race, indigeneity and gender by doing that.