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Exploring 'voices': a methodological reflection on how to enrich the AT approach to the study of inter-professional collaboration

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Background

In this contribution, I intend to discuss the main methodological issues involved in an ethnographic study (Hammersley 1990; Hymes 1981; 1983) of inter-professional practice, within a newly created children's centre in an urban metropolitan authority in central England. In particular, the refinement of methodological tools to describe the recontextualisation of policy around multi-professional work will be addressed.

Drawing from the theoretical reflection offered by Daniels (2006) on the under-theorised problem of social-positioning in Activity Theory (AT), an analytic account will be presented on the ways in which the concept of 'voices' can be expanded to analyse the interplay between institutional discourse and specific genres. Provisional data gathered during the initial phase of my study corroborates the idea that an institutional discourse can exclude or silence certain voices from the policy process, while simultaneously promoting those voices which are considered more consistent with a consensus strategy (Jephcote and Davies 2004). This requires the identification and interpretation of the ambivalences and congruencies between competing discourses as well as the recognition of power as 'exercised and as constitutive of the social, of norms, and of subject...' (Watson 2000, 75).

The AT approach is regarded as a powerful analytical framework that offers a particular interpretation of the ways in which organisational and professional learning can evolve in a system that comprises roles, tasks and goals distributed between professionals, local authorities and clients (Edwards et al. 2009). Particular emphasis is placed on the historicity of the system as the dominant aspect of social and cultural organisation that has been established and transformed over time.

However, it will be argued that the conceptualisation of inter-professional work as a changing system does not fully support the investigation of the policy recontextualisation and meaning-making processes involved. In this sense, the need for a methodological focus on the tension between different discourses and voices within a joint activity will be discussed.

In my view, this sense of historicity needs to be re-conceptualised when the policy mandates and the normative practices are restructured in a new system. This is particularly significant in researching new practices that involve different professionals working together. As a result of this, more developed methodological tools to interpret the shifting relationship between activity, subject-positioning and discourse are needed.

Research Questions

The focus of the intended proposal is to develop a framework that allows me to research the relationship between the institutional structure, the discursive practices and the social position of the subjects involved in inter-professional activities. In this sense, the recognition of physical and semiotic resources, as conceptualised in the AT perspective, needs to be expanded as an analytical category in which an attempt to interpret the relationship between resources (e.g. the use of a Common Assessment Framework check-list), and some specific discourses can be made. This will be articulated by referring to a particular ethnographic encounter from my fieldwork. Three relevant questions at this point are:

How can Linguistic Ethnography (LE) expand the AT methodological tools in order to articulate the role of discourse in shaping the link between genres and institutional order?

What are the resources that legitimate specific discourses and, simultaneously, which particular discourses foster the emergence of specific resources?

In what ways are the professionals' voices recontextualised in the use of symbolic and material artifacts for sharing information and assessment?

Methods

In my methodological orientation the idea of voice is regarded as the formal expression of more implicit forms of cultural agency. In a linguistic anthropological perspective (Blommaert 2005; Hymes 1996), the concept of voice is defined as being constrained by particular cultural codes that will determine the kind of genres in which that voice will attempt to be heard or impose itself. Translating the metaphor into multi-professional contexts, the genres can be seen as the deployment of professionally organised narrative patterns that can represent, or misrepresent, particular voices, dependent on whether they fit into specific codes of behaviour and language.

In this sense, the LE approach can offer a powerful tool in the exploration of the interplay between the voices of the professionals involved in the children's centre, the situated practice that they create in shared activities, and the institutions to which they relate.

Frame

It will be argued that a way of further enriching the methodological tools offered by the AT framework is to focus on a deeper exploration of the relationship between micro-contexts in which the policy is entextualised (Blommaert 2005) and the wider institutional context. This will entail not only a vivid description of the implementation of collaborative practices, but also an interpretation of the ways in which meanings, actions, and discourse combine to define the particular roles and rules in which that situated inter-professional culture is inscribed.

In this sense, the identification of divergent cultural models and social positioning cannot be separated from a closer investigation of the type of discourse that underlie them, since different professionals will use a different professional talk (and text), which will have identifiable linguistic features (Sarangi and Roberts 1995).

Such an investigation will, therefore, involve an ethnographic move between interactional and institutional features in order to depict the construction, negotiation and contestation of professional categories and attributes.

As I shall highlight, Linguistic Ethnography (Blommaert 2005; Rampton et al. 2007) can powerfully elaborate on the concept of 'entextualisation' by developing an understanding of how an external mandate is transformed through an interpretative activity. This is made possible with a fine-grained analysis of discursive patterns by articulating specific genres that reflect the negotiation between local practices and institutional orders (Cook-Gumperz and Messerman 1999).

Research findings

My aim is to contribute to the progress of the methodological reflection on two levels. Firstly, in terms of the enhancement of knowledge of the ways in which different professionals involved in the policy implementation process create and negotiate their practice, with a particular focus on the issue of voice. Secondly, exploring the possibility to enrich the perspective offered by the Activity Theory framework in the study of inter-professional collaboration with the methodological tools offered by the Linguistic Ethnography approach.