The Activation of Texts in Institutional Ethnography

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The use of texts in Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography[4] seeks to develop a rich image of the day/night life of a specific set of participants, from their **'standpoint',** and understand how the standpoint experience is shaped by institutional settings.

'Texts' are important to this as they are understood as carrying meaning through institutional settings which can be used to map **'extralocal'** power relations through institutions, power and decision making which may not be present in the immediate location of the standpoint experience.

To do this Institutional ethnographers utilise a broad definition of **'texts'**. Focusing on how **'texts'** are **'activated'** within the experience of **'standpoint'** participants and discarding 'texts' that are not activated within the standpoint experience, which pure textual analysis might over-represent.
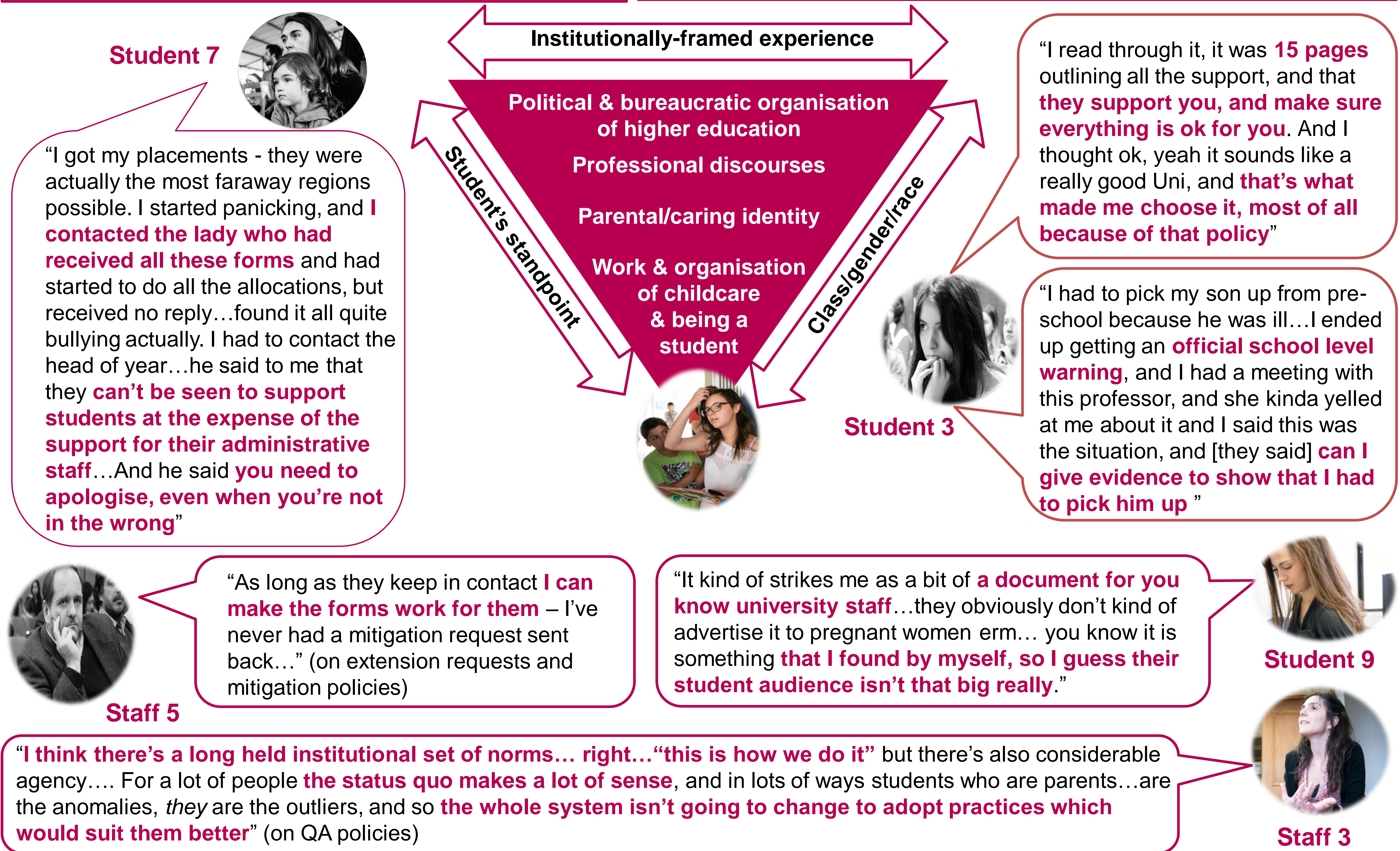
The role of texts

Texts shape the way our institutions work, critics such as Ball argue **"policies are representations which are encoded in complex ways"[1]** and therefore claims the policies as texts, and the discourses around them cannot be separated.

While Lightfoot argues **"policy is subject to compromise and contest and must take account of the changing power relationships within and outside of the institution"[2]**

My research into the experience of students who care for children in Higher Education argues that Institutional ethnography can take our understanding of these policy discourses further by exploring how they texts are **'activated'** within the experience of **'standpoint'** participants.

Institutional ethnography has limited application in UK higher education to date, but has been utilised in other education research in North America[3], but it can offer insight into the 'ad-hocery'[2] of policy practice and points of mis/recognition that can occur in these environments.

Institutionally-framed experience

Student's standpoint

Class/gender/race

Political & bureaucratic organisation of higher education

Professional discourses

Parental/caring identity

Work & organisation of childcare & being a student

Student 7

"I got my placements - they were actually the most faraway regions possible. I started panicking, and **I contacted the lady who had received all these forms** and had started to do all the allocations, but received no reply…found it all quite bullying actually. I had to contact the head of year…he said to me that they **can't be seen to support students at the expense of the support for their administrative staff**…And he said **you need to apologise, even when you're not in the wrong**"

"I read through it, it was **15 pages** outlining all the support, and that **they support you, and make sure everything is ok for you**. And I thought ok, yeah it sounds like a really good Uni, and **that's what made me choose it, most of all because of that policy**"

Student 3

"I had to pick my son up from pre-school because he was ill…I ended up getting an **official school level warning**, and I had a meeting with this professor, and she kinda yelled at me about it and I said this was the situation, and [they said] **can I give evidence to show that I had to pick him up**"

Staff 5

"As long as they keep in contact **I can make the forms work for them** – I've never had a mitigation request sent back…" (on extension requests and mitigation policies)

"It kind of strikes me as a bit of **a document for you know university staff**…they obviously don't kind of advertise it to pregnant women erm… you know it is something **that I found by myself, so I guess their student audience isn't that big really**."

Student 9

Staff 3

"**I think there's a long held institutional set of norms… right…"this is how we do it"** but there's also considerable agency…. For a lot of people **the status quo makes a lot of sense**, and in lots of ways students who are parents…are the anomalies, *they* are the outliers, and so **the whole system isn't going to change to adopt practices which would suit them better**" (on QA policies)

The power of activation

- Looking at the **activation** of texts, rather than content analysis alone, gives otherwise unseen insights into their use, impact, and the reality of lived experience within institutions in the areas which these texts try to influence, or govern.

- This approach avoids over representing certain texts which may draw the researchers attention from a purely textual analysis (ie a research keyword filled unread policy). For example this University had an appearance of regulation with vast numbers of texts both centrally and locally, across over **45 schools**. But for here only **1 policy document**, and **4 types of 'form'** are activated in the participants experiences.

- The **location of power** and **extralocal decision making**. By looking at how activation takes place we gain a greater understanding of the true location of decision making. Even this small sample shows the diversity of experience, and policy interpretation within this institution, which at times could generate inequalities, and misrecognitions within students' lived experience.

References
[1]BALL, S.J. (1993) What is policy? Texts, trajectories and toolboxes. Discourse13(2) 10–17
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[3]MCCOY, L. (2014). Producing "What the Deans Know". In: SMITH, D. E. and TURNER, S. M. (eds.). *Incorporating Texts into Institutional Ethnographies.* Toronto, University of Toronto Press, .
[4]SMITH, D. E. 2006. Institutional ethnography as practice, Rowman & Littlefield.
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