Shopping is Work: An Institutional Ethnography of Grocery Shopping

Abstract
Economic sociologists tend to focus on corporations and production, ignoring female-dominated economic activities such as housework and consumption. Using Institutional Ethnography I explore the work of grocery shopping by interviewing the primary household shopper and then situating her work in the institutional social order. The work of shopping involves many tasks both inside and outside the store, and this work is shaped by discourses that are created and disseminated by various institutional actors, including food marketers and retailers, government agencies, dietitians and nutritionists, mass media, and consumer economists. These discourses, which I identify as the efficiency discourse, the nutrition discourse, and the food industry discourse, increase the demands of the work of shopping and are often in contradiction with one another. This research suggests that a narrow conception of the economic makes significant individual and institutional work invisible and I argue that a gendered revisioning of the economy is necessary.

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