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## Stumbling around: Towards an approach to Institutional Ethnography as a frame of inquiry into library work.

**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the researcher's experience developing an approach to institutional ethnography to examine library work in a Midwestern USA middle school. Throughout the year-and-a-half process of developing an approach to the methodology, gaining access, collecting data, analyzing data, and writing the dissertation, I kept various journals and writings showing how I learned to see the library ethnographically.

**Résumé :** Cette communication porte sur l'expérience de la chercheuse lors du développement d'une approche d'ethnographie institutionnelle afin d'évaluer le travail bibliothéconomique dans une école intermédiaire du Midwest des États-Unis. Durant le processus d'un an et demi qu'a nécessité le développement de la méthodologie, l'accès à l'institution, la collecte et l'analyse de données et la rédaction de la thèse, j'ai consigné par écrit comment j'ai appris à concevoir la bibliothèque d'un point de vue ethnographique.

### 1. Introduction

I first “met” the ideas of Dorothy Smith when she was the keynote speaker at a seminar for library researchers in 2007. At the time, I knew I wanted to examine the daily work of school librarians, but I was dissatisfied with the options I had discovered so far for exploring this work. Immediately after the keynote speech, I began looking at my own daily experiences through the lens of institutional ethnography, asking how my experiences show the ruling relations around me. Institutional ethnography immediately showed itself as the way I wanted to approach my research, but it did present a steep learning curve for a researcher who is the only institutional ethnographer at her university and one of only two in her field of research. Diamond (2006, pp. 46-47) describes “stumbling around” while designing his research in a nursing home. Smith's response indicates that she believes “that's the way an ethnography should develop.” The process of stumbling around while trying to learn institutional ethnography, navigating several institutions, shaped my IE in a middle school library. I had to learn to articulate the value of this frame of inquiry to people whose beliefs about research had been shaped in an environment privileging objective, quantitative research.

Before I was even able to enter the library as a participant observer, navigating the Institutional Review Board of the university and gaining permission from the school district gave a glimpse of ruling relations at work. Unlike many researchers, institutional ethnographers do not have a predetermined outcome in mind as they begin research. This can make it more difficult to navigate Institutional Review processes and to gain funding from organizations that accept a specific way of doing research.

### 2. Problematizing School Library Work

A dominant way of looking at library work, particularly in school libraries, places problems as individual issues, with suggestions for improvement focusing on the leadership abilities of individual librarians or otherwise asserting the ability of an individual to navigate the sociopolitical realm of the school in order to get results. This way of looking at library work in schools lacks an examination of where the librarian and library are actually located in the sociopolitical realm of the school. Problematizing library work makes it available for examination by the researcher. While accepted methods of research tend to objectify the experiences of individuals for the purpose of generalization, proposed solutions are to be implemented on an individual basis. The school environment is portrayed as generic and generalizable. School library work is taken for granted in research on school library work. Problems in education continue to be presented as isolated and individual, and not influenced by the system within which schooling takes place.

### **3. Discovering and Analyzing Ruling Relations**

Examining contradictions between what the profession of librarianship says about itself and how the profession is practiced within the school is one way to discover ruling relations. While school library writers assert the place of the library as the center of the school (AASL), Neuman (2003 p. 505) asserts that more studies linking school libraries to educational achievement measured by test scores would improve how school librarianship is seen by “the educational establishment.” This idea places school librarianship outside “the educational establishment” and asserts that part of the work of school library researchers is to help make school librarianship more acceptable to “the educational establishment,” without defining that establishment.

Two other contradictions that reveal ruling relations include packaged discipline solutions and ideas about appropriate ways for students to use school libraries. The USA has a strong narrative proclaiming the intellectual, physical, and emotional freedom of its citizens. In practice, however, these claims are contradicted by policies restricting physical freedom of students and by school “mottos” valuing obedience and conformity-- mottos that are created off-site by an organization that provides a packaged discipline solution. The packaged discipline solution hooks into ruling relations of group schooling, along with the university where the discipline packaged is created and marketed.

The discourse of the field holds that library use is for everyone (ALA Bill of Rights). This belief about libraries is continually perpetuated in writings about school libraries, but when actions and words are examined through an IE lens, a different narrative emerges. Library use is presented to students and described by workers as a privilege. Library use is mediated through adults. The library “is not a place to hang out,” in the words of a library worker.

### **4. Writing the Ethnography**

Writing the ethnography is part of analyzing ruling relations. The voice of the

institutional ethnographer is not the distant voice of an authoritative academic. Unlike other research methodologies, an institutional ethnography keeps the voice of the researcher, a person who was there in body and who experienced the events and the results of ruling relations at work. At the same time, doing institutional ethnography requires the researcher to acknowledge that she is making the ruling relations material and contributing a text that will be activated and hooked into ruling relations. The structure of this project was prescribed by the ruling relations involved in higher education, in acceptable ways of writing dissertations, rules about who is qualified to teach and who is qualified to research.

The process of writing an ethnography begins before gaining access to the research site and continues through the research process. Each time the data is revisited, new insights can be gained through writing and rewriting. My process included multiple researcher journals, including a field notes journal kept in long-hand while I was at the site, along with a journal of personal insights and notes kept on the hard drive of my computer. I kept journals during the observation period and while writing the initial Institutional Ethnography, which was my dissertation. Each time I revisit the data, I journal new insights into the site, school librarianship, and institutional ethnography. This is a methodology that is learned by stumbling around.

## References

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