# INCORPORATING TEXTS INTO INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIES

# Introduction

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*Incorporating Texts into Institutional Ethnographies* collects examples of how institutional ethnographers have introduced observations of texts in action into their ethnographic practice. Working from the writings of Dorothy Smith and others who have used the approach known as institutional ethnography for over thirty years, we've selected examples that illustrate diverse fieldwork-based investigations into how texts coordinate and concert people's activities across time and place. The book presents research models, each with distinctive ethnographic strategies appropriate to the researcher's project and the institutional sphere being explored. The selection emphasizes the variety and difference among possible ethnographic practices that bring texts into view, including interviews about work and practices, observations of naturally occurring activity, a strategy for experiential ethnography, and strategies for investigating text–reader conversations. Each chapter illustrates an ethnographic strategy and its analytic payoff, discovering and extending ethnography into the organization of institutions beyond the immediately observable. Together, they provide a "toolkit" of strategies, inviting the reader to borrow and improvise in new projects.

Moving beyond the immediately observable is a major research innovation and significant change in ethnographic studies. For the most part, when reaching beyond what lies within people's direct experience, social science is stuck with a transition into theory or into an abstract language of categories and concepts that cannot be anchored back into the world of actual people. Terms such as "power," "large-scale organization," "transnational relations," "governance" and so on make regions beyond the local and that dominate it nameable and speakable,

but not observable. Institutional ethnography repairs, or perhaps better, simply bypasses, this break in social scientific inquiry. It does so with an ethnographic method of inquiry that has discovered how to explore, learn about the workings of, and explicate the relations that organize our lives beyond the immediacies of local settings.

Institutional ethnography's discovery is of how replicable texts are integral to the relations constituting the objectified modes of consciousness and organization that are deeply and yet undramatically embedded in how our societies are put together. Marx (1973) argued that money had come to organize a distinctive order of social relations overriding and, indeed, overpowering direct relationships among individuals. Now we confront *objectifying* relations mediated by texts that stand over and against our local everyday worlds and lives and yet permeate, penetrate, and organize them. Indeed, money is no longer the material entity that it was when Marx theorized in the mid-nineteenth century. It, too, has largely been resolved into the textual modes that organize our contemporary world. A transnational financial order, for example, exists primarily in an electronic mode; there are complexes of international *agreements* (see Lauren Eastwood's chapter on the United Nations Forum on Forests negotiations) and *regulations* implementing them at various levels of government. In agriculture, for example, there is *certification* of types of product (see Katherine Wagner's chapter on the certification of organic production), also involving texts; producers must be able to produce the texts of their *accounts* as part of demonstrations of having conformed to regulations – and so on and so on. At every point in such an institutional complex there are people who devise and negotiate the wording of governing texts; who check out with forms whether regulations are being followed; who produce reports; whose record-keeping is accountable (i.e., read by someone who supervises and who is supervised). The introduction of new forms of public administration that conform to a managerial rather than a bureaucratic model involves changing textual organization and the introduction of new textual technologies of information and communication that enable, for example, people's front-line work to be translated into the technical language of accountancy (see Liza McCoy's chapter).

**What Is a Text?**

The notion of texts that institutional ethnography works with has two aspects that differentiate it from how texts are taken up elsewhere in discourse analysis (see, for example, Norman Fairclough 1995, 2003), or

in social research more generally (see Lindsay Prior's 2011 four-volume *Using Documents and Records in Social Research*).

First, texts are material objects that carry messages – stone carvings, sand sculptures, writing or pictures on walls, paintings on canvas, writings on cloth, parchment, paper or on computer screens, music recorded on records, CDs, or on tape, images on film, television, and so on. The texts that are of particular relevance to institutional ethnography are those that are or can be reproduced many times, so that different people can read the same text in different places or at different times; it is their *replicability* that is central. Of course not every text is replicable. The message on a birthday card wishing the recipient "best wishes and happy returns with love from" is not what is meant by a replicable text. We are talking about texts that can appear again and again in different places and at different times and for different people to read, watch, or listen to. The replicability of the texts does not mean that every copy or occurrence of a text is read in exactly the same way; the making of or reading (watching, listening to) a text is something being done in an actual sequence of action at a particular time and in a particular place. But the recognizable identity of a text from one site of activation to another is integral to the text's distinctive form of coordinating ruling relations, and hence is also significant for the development of ethnographic practices exploring the social relations extending across, coordinating, and regulating multiple sites and settings of people's work.
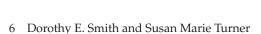
Second, texts are never to be treated as objects of research in and of themselves nor as separate from how they coordinate people's doings. They must be conceived as occurring in definite actual settings of people's everyday/everynight living. They are incorporated into ethnography as they enter into and play their part in ongoing sequences of action coordinating them with action going on at other places or at other times. Institutional ethnographies exploring the complex and varied social relations are discovering and making observable just how texts enter into, organize, shape, and coordinate people's doings as they/we participate in the objectifying relations of ruling.

## Some Historical Background

We could start with the invention of writing, but perhaps more dramatic in the extraordinary reconstruction of social relationships is the invention of print. Texts, defined as material forms mediating human communication, have been around perhaps ever since anything we could call human has existed. Think of handprints on the walls of caves

and on rocks, of markings which have not survived on tree trunks, of arrangements of stones, and, as skills and tools developed, of paintings, carvings, notations, and eventually script. All have this extraordinary and powerful magic: they create expressive bridges across time and space.

But with the invention of printing, something else happened. It was not fully realized in the early forms of printing created in China, in part because the replication of a given text was etched on stone, laborious, slow, and hence, radically limited in its distribution. In Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, with the advantage of alphabetic script, technologies of printing were developed which could reproduce a given form of words and even of images with an ever-increasing facility, so that many copies of a given text could be produced. Different readers in different places and at different times were finally able to see and read the same words. No need to imagine that they read them in the same way, but for each the form of words would be identical. If the translation of the Bible into the vernacular was a major historical event, no less significant was how print made possible its circulation beyond the traditional hierarchies of the priesthood. The very existence of the standardized texts created the ground for questioning and resisting the authority of the church and at the same time generated radical differences in, and arguments about, interpretation.

As texts, replicated and replicable, became ubiquitous, new forms of consciousness and organization emerged, progressively independent of particular speakers or hearers connecting face to face. The transition is from utterances, in M.M. Bakhtin's (1981) inclusive sense and use of this concept, relying on the authority of speakers, to utterances that appear in a material form, in-text, without a present and embodied speaker. Even though an author or source may be identified, she or he is not there, face to face with the hearer. The utterance in-text stands alone. It has no specific personal destiny, no specific other it is addressing – though it may be written or imaged as if indeed it were addressing itself just to you. Here is the practical reality of objectification as something people do; taking up, activating, and making such texts enters and is integral to the creation of a world of messages that are materially grounded and must be created and/or activated by actual people in actual settings. But at the same time, those texts are not, and cannot be, simply located there, tied there. Such objectified and objectifying utterances always hook and engage makers and readers in a complex of relations, coordinating a given moment of utterance or reading or

watching or listening with what others are or will be doing elsewhere. Institutional ethnography's ontology is distinctive among approaches to texts and to the ethnography of texts in its reliance and focus upon the coordination of subjectivities, consciousnesses, activities, and relations among people rather than a reliance on an ontology of the social as organization produced by motivated individuated subjects.
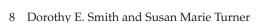
### The Collection

Institutional ethnography as a social scientific approach develops and evolves through its practitioners' ongoing research. This book collects and brings into focus how in their research institutional ethnographers have been discovering the way the texts on which they focus coordinate what people do – create, put together, and build – in different sites of our contemporary world. We have designed the collection to make available just how integral texts are to the organization of the trans- or extra-local relations that we participate in but cannot observe from our local sites of being. We also wanted to provide an opportunity for others to learn, as we have been learning, about what can become observable when texts are incorporated into ethnographies of regions of organization and ruling in contemporary society.

What we have brought together here are institutional ethnographies illustrating different ways texts are incorporated as integral to the ethnography. Putting together this collection has been a pleasure for us. We have enjoyed the task and the work of the contributors, learning how they have gone about putting together their ethnographies. Though we had read most of the studies included here before imagining this book, they were read separately and over a period of several years (the span is 1988 [George Smith's] to 2008 [Katherine Wagner's]) and many are not easily accessible. Reading them again, this time as models of different strategies for how to incorporate texts into ethnographies, and bringing them into dialogue with one another as chapters in a book, has meant learning more and differently about how institutional ethnography proceeds as a discourse, how it has developed based on empirical explorations of ruling relations, and is developing new ethnographic techniques as the different terrains and forms of organization demand new approaches.

The chapters of this book explicate in various ways how texts coordinate the settings and sequences of action that are the focus of the ethnographies. They are grouped into five "parts" to bring out some of the

distinctive ways in which institutional ethnographers have worked with texts in varying institutional settings and using varying approaches. We have assembled them as we have to bring into view some of the distinctive discoveries that have been made about text-mediated organization as well as how to incorporate texts into ethnographies thereof: (1) the discovery of "institutional circuits," originating in George Smith's investigation of an ideological circle; (2) how to develop institutional ethnographies involving technologically specialized texts; (3) ethnographies drawing on the ethnographer's own experience of institutional workings; (4) how activating texts as readers can be examined close-up and in detail; and, finally, (5) a rather special ethnographic venture into regions ordinarily assigned to political economy, a historical exploration starting from people's experience that explicates the coming of the suburb and its relation to child-rearing practices in North America. Notice, throughout all and across the different parts, that each ethnography always recognizes that texts only become alive, active, or "occur" as people bring them into place in institutional sequences of action. Of course, some ethnographies would fit into more than one grouping under a particular heading. We have assembled them as we have so that those collected in each group are brought into something like a dialogue in which they reflect on one another. Bringing institutional ethnographies together in this way gives emphasis to some of the distinctive ways in which texts can be brought into ethnographies that reach into regions formerly beyond ethnographic grasp.

**Exploring and Explicating Texts-in-Action**

In institutional ethnographic practice, nominalizations such as "organization," "institution," or "discourse" are not left standing or endowed with agency in the ethnographic text. The focus is always on uncovering what people are actually doing, and the activity and coordination that are implicit in such terms. This exploration also involves working ethnographically to discover just how the characteristic objectifications of organizational and institutional discourses are locally accomplished. Terms such as "UN policy," "the city's decision," "organic certification," and so on, when substructed ethnographically, are shown to locate forms of the social that rely on texts. Making visible what people are actually doing in sequences of action substructs the objectifications of organizational and institutional discourses; it returns the abstract nominalizations that attempt to capture these dimensions of the social to the observable and experienceable of everyday life and of people's

doings. The institutional ethnographies collected here show exactly how this is achieved in investigations of how texts organize the discursive transcendence of the local and ephemeral. The tricky matter for practice is to locate texts in time as participating in actual courses of action. The social act unfolds in time as well as in actual local settings. Note the plural form we are using here. The texts articulate what is getting done in local settings and at particular times within social relations that extend beyond any one setting and any particular time. The texts thus must be recognized as "occurrences" at the moment of reading that enter into the reader's next doings or "responses." And so long as the ethnographer avoids attributing agency to them (they can only come into play as they are activated by someone), they are seen as they are involved in some course of action, in talk or in writing/reading/watching/listening as organizers of local settings, aimed at, and governing, the ongoing development and concerting of activities.

## Themes and Threads

There is not just one line of discovery to be found in these chapters. As we, the editors, read and reread, we became aware that there were themes and threads of ethnographic practice working with texts that recur and are developed over the collection as a whole. This led to the parts into which we have assembled the various ethnographies. Collecting and differentiating the ethnographies emphasizes some of the distinctive aspects of how ruling relations are coordinated that become visible when the textual organization is brought into focus, as well as some of the distinctive ways in which institutional ethnographies are developed. However, though we have broken the collection up into parts, juxtaposing each study with others that tie into a common theme, we know that there are other connections to be made that bridge our thematic divisions. Assembling ethnographies that have distinctive features in common with one another is intended to bring those features into focus. It is not intended to blot out other aspects of how texts are brought into play in any particular ethnography.

### Part 1: Institutional Circuits

Part 1 brings together three ethnographies that show texts in action in organizing institutional circuits. We have stressed earlier that discovering how to incorporate texts into institutional ethnography has been an essential innovation and that it has made possible the extension of

ethnography beyond the local that ordinarily confines it and so to open up the investigation of how ruling is organized textually in contemporary society. One such discovery recognizes how the objectified modes of coordinating people's action are organized as institutional circuits. "Institutional circuits" is a term that locates sequences of text-coordinated action making people's actualities representable and hence actionable within the institutional frames that authorize institutional action. In institutional circuits, institutional work comprises mining actualities selectively to identify aspects, features, measures, and so on that fit the governing frame (sometimes called a "boss text"). The textual representation then produced can be interpreted in terms of that frame and become, in this way, articulated to an institutionally mandated course of action. The three ethnographies in this first section make visible different aspects of such circuits: George Smith developed his investigation of the circuit involved in "policing the gay community" from the notion of ideological circles originating in Dorothy Smith's 1973 paper "The Ideological Practice of Sociology." He takes a step, which he celebrates, of moving out of theory into a scientific investigation of, in this paper, just how gay men enjoying their sexuality in a steam bath could be charged under Ontario "bawdy house" laws. Texts are central to his ethnographic account, first of a report prepared by detectives on the basis of an investigation of the steam bath when gay men were present and active and of the textual fitting of their actions with sections of Ontario's "bawdy house" law – and then how that textual fit unleashed the "mandated course of action" leading to the arrest and charging of the steam bath owner, its manager, and those "found in" it at the time of the police raid.

The second paper in this group, Katherine Wagner's ethnography of how organic farm production is certified, brings into view the actual work involved for small organic farmers in governing both their production and their record keeping as well as how the inspector goes about the interchange with farmers to meet his accountability to government. Third is Lauren Eastwood's ethnography that shows the work processes involved in the writing of a governing text as she describes her experience of participating in the attempts of a non-governmental organization (NGO) to control the wording of the United Nations Forestry Forum's forestry policy. Noteworthy in this part is the way in which each inquiry shows an aspect of how texts in action are put together to construct an institutional circuit. George Smith's ethnography is built directly from the texts of an institutional circuit and shows both

the relevant categories of the governing or boss text and how the textual reality is constructed to fit them. Katherine Wagner's study focuses on the work of creating texts integral to a circuit which includes organic farming as a performance designed to conform to the certification procedures. Then Lauren Eastwood breaks open the work concealed behind those governing or boss texts known as "policy," making visible the skills and contentions of negotiating the language that will come into play in the representations of actualities they will govern.

*Part 2: Diverse Textual Technologies*

The second section emphasizes the variety of textual technologies that ethnographers can encounter. We have emphasized here the importance of the invention of print in the historical development of the ruling relations, but this section recognizes specialized technologies that, in one case, at least – that of the musical score on which Leanne Warren's study focuses – has only an uncertain relation to the history of print as explicated here. Liza McCoy's ethnography can be read as an institutional circuit which she shows as having reorganized relations among managers, deans, and departments and instructors in Ontario community colleges. But we include it in this section because the reorganization that brings the educational objectives and practices of the colleges under the control of financial government involves fitting the work of instructors into the framework and discourse of accountancy. McCoy teaches the reader how to read a key type of specialized text that brings departmental instructional practices into a commensurable relation with others and with other costs and benefits in the college. Warren's ethnography shows how the musical score of a Hayden cello concerto comes into play in coordinating the rehearsal performances of orchestra members, soloist, and conductor and how the score catches up the performance into the historical trajectory of musical tradition. And again, the reader is taught how to read the text, in this case, a musical score. In both of these cases, then, we have to learn how to read the text in order to trace in the ethnography just how these texts come into play. Marie Campbell and Janet Rankin's chapter shifts the focus to a technology with a hidden textual (electronic) system generating readable text that likely ties back into much the same language as that introduced to us in McCoy's paper. But here that which might be accounting language translates into instructions for nurses whose

responsibility it is to ensure hospital conformity to the managerial criteria of bed utilization.

*Part 3: Experiential Ethnography*

There is a distinctive use in some of the ethnographies of accounts based on the ethnographer's own experience. These are particularly valuable when texts are playing a focal role in an ethnography. One difficulty in discovering how texts coordinate social relations is that major aspects of textual work are not spoken and are not in any simple way visible to an observer. Hence the special value of what we have called "experiential ethnographies," that is, ethnographies written from within the ethnographer's experience. Gerald de Montigny provides a vivid account of how the categories and concepts of the social work discourse in which he had been trained organize his selective attention to a dirty and smelly domestic situation reported as being one of suspected child abuse. The observations he makes orient towards the production of a formal report eventually presented in court that justifies the removal of the child he had found there from that foul domestic setting.

Though Montigny's chapter is distinctive in his use of experiential ethnography, the uses of experience are also to be found in other chapters: Janet Rankin and Marie Campbell's ethnography of the workings of new computer software in managing hospitals draws on Janet's own work experience (see part 3); Susan Turner's drawing on her experience of participating in the municipal government decision setting; and Dorothy Smith's investigation of her own experience of a sociological text–reader conversation in sociological discourse (both in part 4). Each shows the researcher's own experience as an important resource for the institutional ethnographer.

*Part 4: Text–Reader Conversations*

To locate the moment of reading as an active interchange between text and reader, institutional ethnography has introduced the notion of a text–reader conversation. The idea here is to be able to see the moment of reading as one in which the reader activates the text as well as responds to it. In a sense, the reader becomes the text's proxy, taking on what is written or otherwise represented. Hence, the text organizes the reader's subjectivity in how she or he responds. Two ethnographies are included in this section: Susan Turner's explication of how a particular

text can be read very differently, and what that looks like, takes up text–reader conversations as these became observable in a public meeting where elected municipal officials were considering plans for a development proposed for a ravine and were reading and speaking about a diagram representing the site. She shows how different ways of activating the text enter into the talk producing "the city's" decision making; Dorothy Smith's study of her intertextual engagement with sociological theory is explicit in how becoming the text's proxy enters into her experience; she shows how she herself in her reading of a passage from the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens becomes its agent in excluding other text-grounded voices with which she was engaged.

Here again, there are instances of text–reader conversations explored in other chapters: Lauren Eastwood explores text–reader conversations in policy negotiations (chapter 3); Leanne Warren's account of how a cellist works with the cello concerto score in a rehearsal clearly involves a text–reader conversation (chapter 5).

Text–reader conversations are troublesome to investigate because they are generally done in silence: Eastwood draws both on her own experience and on observations of talk; Warren did interviews in which both she and her respondent knew the text; Turner makes use of her observations and recordings of a public meeting; Smith draws directly on her experience. Another research strategy was developed in Liza McCoy's (1995) study of how wedding photographs can be read. She brought together a group of three people, including herself, to talk about one of the participants' wedding photographs; how the three talk about the texts produces an observable text–reader conversation that McCoy uses to unfold how such texts may be read.

*Part 5: Extended Institutional Ethnography*

Paul Luken's and Suzanne Vaughan's study opens up new institutional ethnographic possibilities. They begin with women's experience of resettling in Phoenix, Arizona before the Second World War and delve deep into how models and ideals of suburban housing were developed in complex initiatives of the federal government, health and psychology professionals, and the construction industry. Their historical ethnography incorporates both written and pictorial texts – in the latter respect the only instance in this collection. It is an innovative study, one that extends the reach of institutional ethnography into relations being designed and put in place in the past that have laid the groundwork

shaping the ongoing (and changing) of our present, an investigative strategy that we hope to see taken up by others.

### The Possibilities for Institutional Ethnographic Practice

In identifying some of the themes that emerge from the studies collected here, our intention is to open up the range of possibilities for designing and doing ethnographies that explore what may otherwise be ethnographically impenetrable aspects of institutions and organization. Each chapter opens a door into relations present in but extending beyond our everyday by showing concretely how various texts are brought into action in coordinating with the extra-local what is being done in local settings. Each chapter shows the distinctive aspects of organization the ethnographer has discovered and the innovative ethnographic strategies she or he has used to move into the institutions and relations whose workings were to be understood. And each shows how to write creatively of what they have discovered. What they bring into view for readers is the operation of texts in distinct institutional forms such as child protection, hospitals, and nursing homes, in financial accounting in education restructuring, in land development processes and international governing negotiations, in sociological discourse and discourses reorganizing family practices in a critical historical period, and so on. The chapters also bring into view the potentialities for discovery beyond the particular instance on which each focuses. We invite you into the worlds and settings of work and method of inquiry that these chapters present, and we invite you also to explore texts-in-action wherever there are organizational and social issues that concern you.