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# *IE Newsletter*

## *A Special Tribute to Dorothy E. Smith*

Institutional Ethnography Division of the Society for the Study  
of Social Problems

### **From the Division Chair: Colin Hastings**

Dear SSSP IE Division Members:

I'd like to introduce this newsletter by saying a big thank you to Gina Petonito who coordinates and publishes all of our newsletters and brought forward the idea of dedicating an issue to the memory of Dorothy Smith. Gina has worked to collect memories of Dorothy from members of our Division and beyond to share with us here.

The reflections Gina has compiled clearly illustrate the profound influence Dorothy has had on so many. What I find striking, is that these memorials show that Dorothy was not only an intellectual giant, but also a tremendously thoughtful, attentive, and supportive mentor to generations of IE scholars.

I know that many of us first had opportunities to talk with and learn from Dorothy at the SSSP Annual Meetings. As momentum builds towards [this year's conference](#), I look forward to working together to honour Dorothy's legacy by continuing to collectively foster a space for innovative, engaged, and transformative institutional ethnographic research.

All the best,  
Colin



Photo from Liza McCoy posted on Dorothy E. Smith 1926-2022 Kudoboard:  
<https://www.kudoboard.com/boards/92REPim8>

## **Dorothy E. Smith: A Life of Scholarship and Generosity**

### **Gina Petonito**

It is no exaggeration to say, we, the Institutional Ethnography Division, would not be here were it not for Dorothy. A brilliant scholar, Dorothy shook sociology away from its male-centric and supposedly “objective” theories towards a sociology for people. However, Dorothy is also remembered as a person who generously gave of her knowledge, wisdom, and teaching to all of us. The thread that weaves through these tributes is how Dorothy personally touched each writer, whether student or established scholar. Yes, some tributes discuss the intricacies of her work, and how it impacted their own, but everyone mentions her ubiquitous presence in their lives, and indeed in this Division. As Marj and Paul note, Dorothy lives on in her writings and legacy. Indeed, IE’s international and inter-disciplinary reach will continue to influence everyone who sojourns down the IE path.

## **Tributes**

### **Dorothy Brought Us Together**

#### **Paul Luken**

When Colin contacted me to speak, he asked me if I would be “comfortable” sharing a few words. I told him that I might not be comfortable because I’m often not comfortable in talking with others. But I’m also simply still trying to come to terms with Dorothy’s passing. I appreciate this opportunity

because this is the kind of gentle prodding that might help me to come to terms as I have been searching for words, the proper words to say. I want to share a few experiences, different episodes if you will.

For some reason, starting with experience seems like a good idea, and I'm going to begin with my last interaction with Dorothy. It was in February when I sent her an e-mail. I had some questions about her writing. She responded within a day or two. A few days after that I was talking on the phone with Tim Diamond. (He is someone you might know personally or from reading *Making Gray Gold*. He is someone I've known since grad school). I mentioned this exchange with Dorothy to him, and he commented, "It's like getting an e-mail from Einstein." I added, "Or any other revolutionary scientific thinker." He responded with, "Who would have thought it would be revolutionary to say, 'let's start with actual people and what they're doing....'" He continued talking, but by then we were already laughing at how absurd that sounded. Yet, that is how I view Dorothy: as a great revolutionary scientist. She's been that to me for many years, and now I want to go back to my first encounter with Dorothy.

My first encounter was a lot like my last encounter in the sense that it was textual. It was in the mid-1980s and I was living in Kansas City, MO, where I was a postdoctoral fellow. I had a number of serious problems with sociology (which I need not go into) and just about ready to give up on sociology. Here Tim Diamond comes into my story once again. I called Tim and told him my problems. He responded, "What do you think of Dorothy Smith?" I told him that I had never heard of her. At which point he sent me something in the mail. It was a copy of a presentation that she had given in 1981 called "The Experienced World as Problematic: A Feminist Method." When I read that I saw that Dorothy too had some problems with sociology, some serious problems with sociology, and over the years she'd been working on developing an alternative sociology. When I finish reading that paper, I called Tim again and asked if he could send more, which he did. I was also copying things that he sent me and was forwarding those along to Suzanne Vaughn who was living in Columbus, OH, at the time. That's how word got around about Dorothy back then. But when I read Dorothy, I knew I wanted to stay in sociology because I wanted to be a part of this project she had been working on. I didn't know how I would be able to contribute to it, but it was pivotal in my life. Dorothy provided me with direction when I needed it.

Do you know how she described women in that first paper that I read? She wrote that they are "oppressed." That is the word she used. This sociology for women was a sociology for women's liberation. I'm not sure that everyone who takes up IE sees that, but Dorothy was involved in the struggle and this sociology is part of it. The sociology that I had learned in grad school was not a sociology for liberation. This was vastly different. And Dorothy, while never leaving sociology, attacked it. She tore into its ideology, its practices. Part of the "job qualifications" for a working sociologist at the time was to be able to write sentences connecting concepts to other concepts. It is through our precious concepts that we objectified the world. But now, one concept after another was shattered. I don't know if Dorothy ever referred to herself as an iconoclast, and I wouldn't be surprised if she would object if anyone called her that, but it seems fitting to me.

It wasn't until the summer of 1996 that Suzanne and I met Dorothy for the first time. There were conferences in NYC and, yes, Tim Diamond arranged for us to have dinner with Dorothy, and Marie

Campbell. Afterward we went to our room in the Travelodge and talked into the a.m. The evening was momentous in itself, but it was also a beginning as we would continue to see Dorothy at conferences and at various gatherings of the network of IE scholars and activists.

Presenting what we now call IE at conferences was troublesome and unsatisfactory. People didn't know what it was and most of the time we had for our presentations had to be devoted to describing this new sociology and we had little opportunity to actually talk about our research. Something had to change. In 2003, with the encouragement of SSSP President Nancy Jurik, and the nod from Dorothy, I wrote a petition to create the IE Division. Dorothy's one caveat: Tim Diamond should be the first chair. Signatures were gathered, the SSSP Board approved, and here we are. Next year, in Philadelphia, we can celebrate 20 years. I will do my best to see to it that Tim Diamond is there, and we will all be mindful that Dorothy brought us together.

I began this talk with the experience of last time that I communicated with Dorothy. That is not true. It's not the last time. Since I wrote those words, I have had quite a few text-reader conversations with her. Her books and articles surround me now. And I know that there will be a next meeting and a next meeting and so on. Dorothy has seen to that.

(Revised version of Paul's tribute delivered during the IE Division meeting on 7/25/2022).

## Her Presence Lives With Us Still Marjorie DeVault



Dorothy Smith! I can still taste the excitement I felt when I first read about “a sociology for women.” And she has been a very significant presence in my ever since, for about 40 years. I know that she's been an important presence for many others as well. She offered me a vision of how to do a sociology that offers real discoveries—and as important, a vision of how to be a woman and a scholar.

Dorothy was a serious and original thinker; when she chafed at the peculiar practices of conventional

sociology, she set out to make it better—and discovered that she needed to build a different sociology. So, she did that. She was part of a group of women in the social sciences who refused to be excluded from the conversation (as we were in those early days). Thinking from a marginalized position was key to her theorizing, and key to the way her ideas have evolved to speak to other groups who continue to be outside the “main business” of ruling. She and other women honed a critique of the academy and the disciplinary frameworks that excluded so much. And then Dorothy went beyond

critique, working till the very end of her life to develop a sociology that works for people, rather than confining and controlling them.

Dorothy was also a magnificent teacher. She was quite demanding with her early students, I think-- because they were engaged in an enterprise that mattered-- but she was also a friend, open to people & generous with those who wanted to learn. I was also struck by the way she worked with some people who became partners in her thinking and research. Alison Griffith, of course, but I'm also thinking of George Smith, Ellen Pence, Susan Turner. Her interest in their concerns and ideas—her ability to work collaboratively with them—opened up new avenues in her thinking. Those were striking examples, but I think that Dorothy treated all of us as people who might teach her things even as we learned so much from her.

Dorothy's writing is dense, packed with ideas, complicated. And then there are the images that we cling to and use as aids to understanding, jewels to examine closely. I'm thinking of the brewer's dray, and all the conversations I had about it with Paul, Tim Diamond, and others . . . more recently, for me, there is the "you are there" map . . . you can fill in your own examples. Yes, Dorothy's writing required some close examination, and it rewarded that effort. Dorothy's speaking was calm, clear, and powerful. Hearing her speak brought the ideas to life. And when she answered questions (especially the critical ones), she didn't mince words—which was fun to watch, and an excellent example.

Dorothy was a presence in our lives and in the world-- and it's hard to believe she's gone. Saying that, I realize that of course she's still a presence for us; we have not only memories of Dorothy, but ideas, convictions, images, questions to explore, inspiration-- and we have each other, in the networks she helped us build. I miss a teacher and a friend. I'm sad, I'm grateful, and I'm still a bit awestruck.

(Based on remarks at the IE Division Zoom Business Meeting, July 25, 2022

Photo contributed by Jayne Malenfant)

**You Must Get It Clear, Don't Worry About Actually Getting it Right"**  
**Rashmee Karnad-Jani**

As I write this short tribute to Dorothy Smith, Professor Eric Mykhalovskiy's introductory remarks at the November 2018 Dalla Lana's School [Introduction to Institutional Ethnography](#) public lecture come to mind. For me, meeting Dorothy (through Alison Griffith who was my MEd supervisor since 2011) was one such experience that forever changed the course of my life.

I know I am not alone, and many will likely remember when and where we first met Dorothy Smith and how IE became the way we think since that time.



I've been especially contemplative about the April 2022 tribute where [the film](#) made by Elizabeth Cameron and Professor Liza McCoy was shared, on May 3rd, the book launch. Looking back to these gatherings and celebrations, so close and so well attended, I am glad we got together this way.

As I notice the ripples of IE into many fields by researchers in universities, I also rejoice that those of us who are in non-academic settings are also using IE to notice and share "what is actually going on and how people put things together" in our workplace. The 2 decades of Dorothy Smith's contributions to my life before my scholarly work as well as [how I apply IE](#) within my paid employment in Ontario's Kindergarten to Grade 12 and volunteer work with communities to influence social change for students and families as well as marginalized teachers, staff and administrators. Her words "you must get it clear (what people are actually doing) don't worry about getting it right" guide my steps daily.

(Photo Originally posted in Dorothy E Smith, 1926-2022 Kudoboard:  
<https://www.kudoboard.com/boards/92REPim8>)

## **You Were So Kind, Supportive and Approachable Katie Koralesky**

Dear Dorothy,  
 I think about institutional ethnography every day and in so many aspects of my life. What I learned from your books and from you has changed how I think about the social world. I feel so lucky that I had the opportunity to meet you, your sweet dog Bilbo and of course your family. During our discussions, you were so kind, supportive and approachable, and I know this is how many people felt when they met and talked with you. Thank you for everything.

## **Many Thanks and Much Love Susan**



(Originally posted in Dorothy E Smith, 1926-2022 Kudoboard:  
<https://www.kudoboard.com/boards/92REPim8>)

## **IE Completely Transformed My Work** **Courtney R. Petruik**

I learned about Institutional Ethnography at the beginning of my doctoral studies a few years ago in one of Liza McCoy's graduate courses and it changed the way I think about research and people forever. Not only did it completely transform how I approached my thesis (leading me to transfer into sociology in the second year of my doctoral studies - yikes!) but also changed how I look at the world. Thank you does not even begin to cover the gratitude that I feel for you and what you have gifted to this world; not only for what you have produced but for your humility and openness to offer your support, guidance, and wisdom to everyone including those of us just starting in our careers. We can all only hope to do you proud with our work and how we live our lives moving forward. Cheers to you. <3

(Originally published in A Tribute to Dorothy Kudoboard: [s://www.kudoboard.com/boards/orD7LGyp](https://www.kudoboard.com/boards/orD7LGyp))

## **I Am Running Out of Superlatives!** **Patricia Wood**

I 'met' Dorothy Smith over Zoom in the summer of 2020 as she kindly agreed to be my instructor for a directed studies on Institutional Ethnography that I was taking as part of my PhD Nursing at the University of Victoria, BC. I was surprised that she answered my email to inquire about the possibility of her being the instructor for the course, as I knew that she was in her 90's and not actively teaching anymore, let alone that she would agree to give up her time every week during the summer to do so.

One other student was taking the course as part of an interdisciplinary PhD at another institution. Both of us, as students, were quite intimidated as first but Dorothy was so

approachable and down to earth that we were soon able to develop and articulate our thoughts in our weekly Zoom sessions about how we might use an IE approach in our respective doctoral work.

I appreciated the experience so much, she challenged and broadened my thinking every week and I had the opportunity to learn about 'all things IE' in such a deep and meaningful way, 'from the ground up'. It was so valuable, incredible, unforgettable ...I am running out of superlatives!

However, one thing that I remember with clarity is when, in one of our first Zoom sessions, she was having some difficulty getting the video and audio settings to work for her and she said, "oh, I'm really fxxking this up, sorry about that." My jaw dropped open, then I thought, "well, why shouldn't she swear if she feels like it" and my already considerable admiration for her grew even more!

I think of her often as I think, write, and ponder questions about IE that come up in completing my dissertation, and I sometimes listen to our recorded Zoom sessions for inspiration, but I do so wish that she still walked among us.

Dorothy absolutely rocked, in every sense of the word, and the IE community, as well as pretty much everyone on the planet, has lost an amazing person with her passing.

## **We Never Do Academic Work Alone** **Nancy Naples**

I have benefitted from Dorothy's insights in everything I do in the field of sociology, women's and gender studies, and beyond. Every research project, every course I teach, and a great deal of my mentoring strategies are informed by lessons I learned from her writing or our many conversations over the years. I just love to see students like me who are searching for a way to make sociology as meaningful as they thought it would be when they entered graduate school find her work and take off to create amazing studies that contribute to the broader collective project of developing an activist sociology for people. One of the many lessons I have learned from her is that we never do academic work alone. Her students Ellen Pence and Alison Griffith understood that well and they both gave selflessly in sharing their own insights with those of us who had the good fortune to know and work with them over the years. Along with her many fabulous students, Dorothy created a vibrant international and interdisciplinary community. From seeking to find a meaningful name for her approach to publishing at a break-neck speed and institutionalizing IE in SSSP and ISA, I continue to be amazed at how IE as its own field of inquiry has developed over the years. This would have been hard for many of us to imagine in the 1980s when we organized the first IE workshops at SSSP. But she had the vision and planted so many seeds that it was inevitable.

(Adapted from A Tribute for Dorothy E. Smith Kudoboard: [s://www.kudoboard.com/boards/orD7LGyp](https://www.kudoboard.com/boards/orD7LGyp))

## **I Am Forever Grateful**



## Elizabeth Brule



To Dorothy E. Smith, words do not describe my indebtedness to you. Thank you for your mentorship, collegial guidance, and continued encouragement—I am forever grateful for your knowledge and intellectual and emotional support, and the camaraderie that you have so generously shown me over the many years. Thank you for staying the course and seeing me through to the completion of this dissertation. You are dearly missed.

## Walking Down Memory Lane:

Here are some pieces that appeared in previous editions of the IE Newsletter over the past few years.

### From Spring/Summer 2020 Remembering Happy Times



Dorothy Smith and workshop attendees in Edmonton a couple of years ago. How many disciplines can say they have a founder who is so generous in giving of her time and expertise? Looking forward to meeting again.

Stay safe and healthy everyone

## From Fall 2019 Dorothy Smith Named to Order of Canada



Institutional Ethnography founder, Professor Emerita in the Department of Social Justice Education at OISE, Dorothy E. Smith, was named to the Order of Canada in June 2019. Announced by Governor-General Julie Payette, the award is one of Canada's highest civilian honors. Congratulations to Dorothy Smith on this well-deserved honor.

## From Summer 2018: Remember these Workshops? Two IE Workshops

Drs. Dorothy Smith and Susan Marie Turner are offering June IE workshops in Toronto (OISE/UT). Please register early as these workshops fill quickly. There are only a couple of spots left in the week.

And here is who attended!



Elena, Sophie, Daniella, Adriana, Alexa, Susan...

(Posted by Adriana Suarez in A Tribute for Dorothy E. Smith Kudoboard)

## From Fall 2015

Members of the Institutional Ethnography Division took a few moments to pose for photos:



Back Row (l to r): Janet Rankin, Lauren Eastwood, Daniel Grace  
 Front Row (l to r): Frank Ridzi, LaNysha Adams, Dorothy Smith, Maureen Sanders Brunner

### **Dorothy in Her Own Words**

**“I’m Really Happy That My Work Works for People”**

[Dorothy Smith: Discovering a Sociology for People](#) reviews Dorothy Smith’s life and how she developed institutional ethnography. The film features her granddaughter, Calla Rowen Smith, and IE Member Katie Koraslesky.

### **Obituary in ASA Member News and Notes**

Dorothy E. Smith died on June 3, 2022, in Vancouver, British Columbia, at age 95. She had recently written *Simply Institutional Ethnography: Creating a Sociology for People* (University of Toronto Press 2022) with Alison I. Griffith. Her groundbreaking feminist critique of sociology helped change the discipline in the 1970s, and her institutional ethnography approach inspired an international network of researchers in sociology and related fields.

Smith grew up in Yorkshire, England. After working as a secretary and social worker, she earned a BS degree in sociology from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a PhD from the University of California-Berkeley in 1962. She taught briefly at UC Berkeley and at the University of Sussex, then took up a position at the University of British Columbia, where she embraced feminist activism. In 1977, Smith joined the Department of Sociology in Education (now Social Justice Studies) at the University of Toronto’s Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE). After retirement, she continued to teach at the University of Victoria and lecture and offer workshops at OISE and elsewhere. During her career, Smith supervised more than 40 doctoral dissertations.

Smith's feminist critique made her a canonical theorist in sociology; she advanced a distinctive version of the "standpoint theory" that animated the era. Her "sociology for women" (rather than *about* them) began with everyday experience as a point of entry for wide-ranging investigation of the "ruling relations." Her first major book, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Northeastern University Press 1987), outlined this approach, which was built upon the ontology and methodology of Marx, and was grounded in people's activities and concerned with how those activities are coordinated. As people working from different marginalized positions took it up, institutional ethnography became a "sociology for people." With Alison Griffith, Smith researched mothering and schooling, and the restructuring of human-services work.

Smith's work emphasized the power of text in social relations. Fascinated by language and "conceptual practices of power," she wrote about the social organization of knowledge, drawing on and extending the work of George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz, and ethnomethodological perspectives. While her thinking reflected the linguistic turn in social science, she insisted on the primacy of embodiment, a position she outlined in the 1996 paper "Telling the Truth after Postmodernism" in *Symbolic Interaction*. Smith developed methods for analyses of how people take up, use, and are coordinated by textual materials of many kinds.

Smith worked to make her ideas useful in activist contexts, collaborating with George Smith on HIV/AIDS treatments, Ellen Pence on the processing of domestic-violence cases, and Susan Turner on justice issues in First Nation communities in Canada. The research partnerships she forged only begin to hint at her influence on scholars worldwide. She traveled widely, and her writings were translated into German, French, and Spanish; Japanese and Chinese translations are in progress. She was a much-beloved teacher and a remarkably generous mentor, both for students and the many scholars who gathered to learn from her. The institutional ethnography network she founded has made institutional homes in the U.S.-based Society for the Study of Social Problems and a working group in the International Sociological Association. Regional institutional ethnography networks have formed in the Nordic region, Taiwan, Australia, Europe, and elsewhere.

Smith received numerous honors and awards, including the American Sociological Association's Jessie Bernard Award in 1993, ASA's W.E.B. Du Bois Career of Distinguished Scholarship Award in 1999, and the ASA Marxist Sociology Section's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013. In 2019, Smith received the Order of Canada for her contributions to society.

Dorothy is survived by her son, David; three grandchildren, Sam, Calla, and Max; and her daughter-in-law Anna. Another son, Steven, died in 2019.

*Marjorie DeVault, Professor Emerita, Syracuse University; Liza McCoy, Associate Professor Emerita, University of Calgary*

(The [obituary](#) appeared in the November 2022 issue of *Member News & Notes*, the American Sociological Association's member newsletter. Used with permission).