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# *IE Newsletter*

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

Hello Institutional Ethnographers:

As half of 2020 is underway and much of the United States, and many parts of the world, are ablaze with social disruption, I have been left wondering how widespread and known our alternative sociology is for scholars and activists fighting for change now and on the other side of these demonstrations. Around the world, millions have taken to the streets to protest the murder of George Floyd and a system that perpetuates injustice and devalues the lives of people of color. IE presents a unique approach to current movements such as defunding police departments, which requires an in-depth examination of where funds are invested and a clear pathway for how to shift those resources to other areas of social need within local communities. With IE, the standpoint of those who have been most disaffected and disempowered is put at the forefront of any inquiry. One of my personal challenges is to encourage those outside the academy to use IE as part of the process advocating for social change.

Even though the 2020 SSSP Annual Meeting in San Francisco was canceled due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, there will be a complimentary half-day meeting on Friday, August 7 from 12:00-5:00pm (EDT). I would like to encourage IEers to attend as I think it will provide a way for us to engage digitally with our broader SSSP community and for us to drill down as a Division, afterwards. I am in the process of soliciting feedback on when it would be best for us to meet collectively as a group to touch base generally and to discuss matters specific to our Division.

As I close out this intro, I will say that my heart is heavy given the daily news about yet another black or brown person being murdered by the police. I am confronted with the anxiety-provoking reality of having to explain the very real threat of black embodiment to my sons as they grow older. Yet, I remain hopeful the more social disruption I see. As more communities become more organized, using tools like IE, to fight for change, I know we are inching towards a better tomorrow.

Onward and upwards,  
LaNysha

## George W. Smith Graduate Student Paper Competition



Congratulations to June Jeon on winning the 2020 George W. Smith Student Paper Competition for his paper titled “Invisibilizing Politics.” June Jeon received his PhD in sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is currently a postdoctoral fellow at Tufts University's Tisch College of Civic Life. His research area includes sociology of science, technology, and environment. His works have been appeared in academic journals, including *Social Studies of Science* and *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society*. We are fortunate to be able to publish his abstract below and we look forward to hearing him in person at a later meeting.

### Abstract:

Although sociologists have explored how political and economic factors influence the formation of ignorance in science and technology, we know little about how scientists comply with external controls by abandoning their prior research and leaving scientific innovations incomplete. Most research in science and technology studies (STS) on ignorance has relied on structural and historical analyses, lacking *in situ* studies in scientific laboratories. Drawing on institutional ethnographic research, this article examines the habitus of ignorance as a mechanism of the social production of ignorance. Scientists have a set of dispositions that establish practical contexts enabling them to ignore particular scientific content. Leaders of the organization repeatedly legitimate the abandonment of unfinished projects, while ordinary laboratory scientists internalize the normalized view that the scientific field is inherently opportunistic and that unfunded research should be left undone. A cycle of legitimation and acceptance of ignorance by actors at distinctive positions within the organization provides a mechanism of social control of scientific knowledge. As the mechanism is habitually self-governed by the rules of the game of current scientific institutions, the result is an indirect, although deeply subjugating, invisible and consolidating form of political and economic domination of the scientific field.

## IE in the Time of COVID-19

**Jayne Malenfant's** conversation with **Aron Rosenberg** resulted in this paragraph about Aron's doctoral work. Both Jayne and Aron are graduate students at McGill University.

### *Experience, activism, and new ways of connecting during Covid19*

One of the things that drew me to institutional ethnography is that people's everyday experiences are trusted as a valuable source of evidence. In this pandemic many of us are so isolated that the everyday experiences that we rely on are filtered through the internet. As someone who is spending the year offline as part of an I.E. project, I can see that the abstractions that people end up living in are more potent right now. We can build imagined versions of what's happening, or get caught up in conspiracy theories; it's harder for many people to have a clear and complicated version of reality that includes all kinds experiences when it's solely from your place of knowing. For those who go out and work with people, maybe you get to be in that world where you have other people's experiences informing your understanding of the pandemic. But the way many of us are impacted by the pandemic right now, I don't think these different narratives are being accessed in ways that might complicate policy, grand theories and top-down narratives. Being offline, I'm missing both these dominant narratives but also the alternatives, that are aimed at organizing and action. IE isn't against theory, but it is against taking theory and using it willy-nilly, and right now with Covid, people are adopting theory about what is happening from afar, based on epidemiology, climate

change, politics, etc. All of these theories circulating online, are those types of theories that IE is particularly weary of; the kind that, when you try to reapply them to people's everyday contexts, are completely unrelated. I think for many, having more access to say, online calls by activists (and particularly led by disability activists who have been advocating for these spaces for a long time) where you might explicitly get to hear people's varied experiences, there may be a greater desire to be doing organizing right now from home. I think IE also needs to have this activist push.

Note: Jayne and Aron had this conversation before the mass mobilizations against police violence/racism and George Floyd protests, and want to recognize the amazing activism that is happening right now (and was previously) that is firmly grounded in the everyday experiences of people.

*An IE analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic from the standpoint of a transnational researcher in Europe*, **Morena Tartari**, Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research Fellow, University of Antwerp, Belgium

This analysis of the COVID-19 pandemic reflects my standpoint as a transnational researcher. This analysis is based on entries from my diary, texts from the mass media and social media, and regulations from universities and research agencies. My current research has different consecutive fieldwork in Italy, the UK, Spain, and Belgium. During the early months of the Covid-19 outbreak (January-May 2020) I stayed in the UK. The onset of the Covid-19 crisis was followed by different restrictive measures and reaction times from the first announced case in these countries, which simultaneously ruled my personal and family life and the ongoing and future activities and expectations of myself and my research participants (single mothers and professionals). My analysis concerns how, continuously, institutions tried to transform the Covid-19 virus into a text, generating competition between different texts in interpreting the virus existence. These competing interpretations tried to gain power over the virus and people by ruling the life of different social groups. Some examples of these competitions come from my research fieldwork and in first-person experience, as follows. 1) The lockdown measures were not applied to parents with children's shared custody causing a lack of protection for people in the "at-risk" category and showing that family rights come before health rights (stated by the "stay-at-home" discourse). 2) In the same town, organizations like universities, government, council and schools ruled differently parents' at-home work and children's schools closing (offering competing interpretations of the virus' dangerousness). 3) The "stay-at-home" measures appeared as gender-insensitive in absence of ad-hoc policies for women. Health discourses seemed to prevail on the rights to work, affecting particularly single mothers' incomes. Several other examples are present in my fieldwork experience and could be analyzed deeply. In conclusion, the Covid-19 crisis has made many pre-existing problematics more visible.

*IE in these Times: Reflections on COVID-19 and the "everyday disaster" of neoliberalism*  
**Lauren E. Eastwood**, Associate Professor of Sociology, SUNY College at Plattsburgh

Rebecca Solnit, in her 2009 book "A Paradise Built in Hell: The extraordinary communities that arise in disaster," reflects on the fact that the erosion of social welfare systems has created a context where some people's lives are "everyday disasters." Clearly, this is the sort of analysis in which those of us who are influenced by the ontology of institutional ethnography have been engaging as we conduct our research. We are often investigating the impacts of the imperatives of neoliberal economies on individuals who are living and working in such economies. As I reflect on the current times, one thing that has been front and center for me since the pandemic entered into my consciousness, is the fact that it has severed the gossamer threads by which so many of our

institutions were hanging—those institutions having been eviscerated by recent historical economic trends. Institutional ethnographers have long studied these institutions, and their evisceration. From health care systems, to education systems, and a range of other institutions that can either create a more just society or that can, in their failings, promote injustices, we have been investigating the workings of a society that is organized by larger economic systems. We have been investigating how things are “put together,” and thus are not surprised that the pandemic has served to exacerbate existing inequalities and the tenuous existences of marginalized people. Perhaps also we are not surprised that concerns about the current protests for racial justice are often being caged in public health concerns, rather than in an examination of racism and discomfort with system-level analysis. In other words, as we have engaged in understanding the larger discourses that organize our worlds, we know that it is easier for people to retreat to those discourses that serve to allow them to “know” the world in certain ways, rather than to interrogate the systems that have created that knowledge. There is so much that sociologists—and institutional ethnographers—can analyze in these times. So, where does that leave us? I imagine that, also, moving “forward” we can be instrumental in discussions of how best to re-build. So much remains to be seen about how things will go. Will these movements for racial justice be stamped out by a fascist police state? Or will they open the spaces for larger conversations about how things got to be this way? Or perhaps some of both? We have long known that, as institutional ethnographers, our work is important. We do not engage in the production of knowledge for its own sake (whatever that would mean) but instead we are motivated by the need to make social change in the work that we do. In these times, many of us, regardless of where we focus our research attentions, understand that our training as institutional ethnographers has equipped us with the tools to consider the broader implications of the current pandemic, how it disproportionately impacts certain individuals, and what systemic/institutional arrangements need to be re-built in order to create a more just world. My hope is that the drastic changes that we are seeing will open up opportunities for more public discussion about these crucial issues, and that institutional ethnographers can actively participate in these discussions. That is my hope.

### *Musings about COVID-19*

**Catherine Ringham**, Canadian Institute of Health Research (CIHR) Health System Impact Fellow (Postdoctoral), Alberta Health Services and the University of Calgary Faculty of Nursing

COVID-19 has undoubtably changed the world—the way we go about our everyday lives, “evidence” related to the science of this disease and illness, and the coordination of health services and care for example. The scale of the impact on people locally, and far beyond the reaches of our own social places, has been and will continue to be enormous. My life is organized by a plethora of Zoom meetings and my own self-imposed “structure” intended to demonstrate academic productivity. While there is a certain amount of freedom, or perhaps flexibility, in not having to do the daily trek to work, COVID-19 is organizing every aspect of my life: grocery shopping, medical appointments, (cancelled) surgery, job interviews, care of elder family members, and so on. How I do each of these activities has changed. A whole new set of steps is required for shopping—hand sanitization and donning a mask, maintaining 6 feet distance from anyone, *no longer using cash transactions*, follow the arrows on the floor, returning to plastic bag supplied by the store, and the list goes on. In the complex matrix of social order, we have all shifted how we think about and proceed with our daily activities.

I was in the midst of data collection and analysis when the COVID pandemic hit, the project: Mapping institutional processes to facilitate scale and spread of Family Integrated Care (FICare). I struggled with whether the work is important at this point given the overwhelming issues my nursing and healthcare provider colleagues are navigating. The study is not directly related to

COVID concerns but *is* important research for sick infants and families who are in the neonatal intensive care, as well health system decisions leaders who are working to implement new care practices. The social organization of implementation is fascinating and complex, and the map of the processes, texts and activities involved stretches across a large whiteboard in my office. There will be no more data collection so I must work with what I've got, yet the halting of non-COVID research is lovely data in itself! I have the privilege of showing how implementation activities, done by real people in real places in particular moments of time, are changed by unexpected happenings that shapes how research, practice changes, and decision making unfolds. As I reflect on the state of COVID-19 and how this pandemic has impacted my life, I muse about how IE can offer a unique perspective on how health policy actually plays out in practice with actual people. And I realize there is more work to be done than I have the capacity to do in my lifetime!

### *Can IE Save the University from Itself?*

**Gina Petonito**, Visiting Associate Professor, Miami University

The academic mission of any university is to teach students, and the faculty sit at this mission's center. Over the past 30 years, however, faculty's position at the heart of the university is gradually eroding. Administrators routinely, it seems, replace tenured lines with underpaid visiting faculty who are easily swapped with a new crop of visiting faculty after five years. Courses not assigned to tenure, tenure track and visiting faculty are farmed out to adjuncts, who are paid by the course, receive no benefits and of course, have no job security. A parallel trend is the rise of teaching instructors, faculty whose sole responsibility is to teach. Typically, they have a higher teaching load than tenure and tenure track faculty, and of course, lower salaries. Often, only Master's degrees confer eligibility for such jobs. According to the AAUP, such non tenure type appointments account for over 70% of all instructional staff appointments in US institutions of higher education. According to a 2009 Department of Education report, 51.6 are women, and 81.9% are white. People of color, then account for 18.1% of contingent faculty. Looking at the statistics again in 2016, the TIAA institute concluded that faculty are becoming slightly more diverse, but not on the tenure track. Underrepresented minorities hold 13% of faculty jobs in 2013, but only 10% of tenured jobs. Women hold 49% of totally faculty posts but only 38% of tenured jobs. The diversification of the professoriate by gender and race is closely associated with precarity.

Enter COVID-19. When the economic shut down government, businesses and schools began, institutions of higher education got hit with dizzying projections of multi-millions and even billions of dollars in budget shortfalls. Administrators moved to take draconian measures to balance strained budgets. And the immediate reaction at several schools was to jettison the cadre of contingent faculty. My university, Miami University in Ohio cut 200 faculty from its ranks. Ohio University cut 53. Missouri Western cut 31. And the list grows. Perusing a Facebook faculty site reveals that people are still waiting to hear if their job is next on the chopping block. Yes, staff and administrators at these various universities are also losing their positions, but my focus is on faculty, workers who directly advance the university's teaching mission. What will happen to the courses they teach, and the students who want to take them? Some will be absorbed by the mandated higher teaching loads tenure and tenure track faculty are asked to bear. Undoubtedly, some courses will evaporate. And what departments will be negatively impacted: Social Sciences and Humanities, Women's Studies and Black Studies? Are Business and Engineering Departments losing faculty at the same rate? How many of these faculty are now facing tenuous existences, devoid of health insurance in the middle of a pandemic? It seems that the higher education mission can be sidestepped or reconfigured at any time just by activating a text (the one-year or course by course contract) to flimsily connect the contingent faculty to the institution. Clearly, approaches like IE are needed, to examine how institutions find it so easy to organize so that they can easily

sacrifice the most vulnerable on the altar of balanced budgets. Further, IE's unique stance allows us to critique the larger structural forces that create these inequities and to examine the discourses and rhetoric that justify such processes. Hopefully, IE activists will apply the approach to re-create a university that is just, equitable and true to its mission.

## Welcome New Members

Twelve new members have joined the IE Division since the publication of our last newsletter. Welcome all!

Laura Connoy  
 Tanis Crawford  
 Joseph Andrew Guzman  
 Alex Hotere-Barnes  
 Barbara Imle  
 Jaein Josefina Lee

Kristen Angela Livera  
 Laura Lubin  
 Linn-Marie Lillehaug Pederson  
 Courtney R. Petruik  
 Ashley N. Robinson  
 Astrid Schorn

## Members News and Notes

**Naomi Nichols** and her graduate student **Sarah Lewington** have published a new article. The citation is: N. Nichols & Lewington, S. (2020). "Stepped Care" and the Work of Being Well on Campus: An institutional ethnography. *Youth Studies*. Here is a link to access a free version: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/SMA9VVFEVH3GHU7WMAZA/full?target=10.1080/13676261.2020.1757633>

**Chris Hurl** and **Janna Klostermann** recently published an article, "Remembering George W. Smith's Life Work" (2020) in *Studies in Social Justice* that revisits political activist ethnographer George W. Smith's intellectual and political legacy, with a focus on his engagement with and conception of "life work."

**Janna Klostermann, Samantha McAleese, Lauren Montgomery** and **Sarah Rodimon** recently published a reflection piece, "Working the Project" (2020), in the *Canadian Review of Sociology* that provides four condensed research proposals - on the social organization of care work, sex work, criminal justice, and abortion care - to support emerging institutional ethnographers with scholarly writing and research design.

**Eric Mykhalovskiy, Jacqueline Choiniere, Pat Armstrong, and Hugh Armstrong**, edited a book in 2020 titled *Health Matters: Evidence, Critical Social Science and Health Care in Canada*. It is published by the University of Toronto Press. <https://utorontopress.com/ca/health-matters-2>

**Eric Mykhalovskiy, Chris Sanders, Colin Hastings, and Laura Bisailon** published an article in 2020 titled "Explicitly Racialised and Extraordinarily Over-Represented: Black Immigrant Men in 25 Years of News Reports on HIV Non-Disclosure Criminal Cases in Canada" in *Culture, Health and Sexuality*.  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/EP2RJHVP5FQP87B3TSUY/full?target=10.1080/13691058.2020.1733095>

**Colin Hastings, Eric Mykhalovskiy, Chris Sanders, and Laura Bisailon** published an article in 2020 titled "Disrupting a Canadian Prairie Fantasy and Constructing Racial Otherness: An Analysis of News Media Coverage of Trevis Smith's Criminal HIV Non-Disclosure" in *Canadian Journal of Sociology*.45(1):1-22.  
<https://journals.library.ualberta.ca/cjs/index.php/CJS/article/view/29472/21504>

**Catherine Ringham, Janet Rankin, and L. Marcellus** published an article in 2020 titled “*The social organization of neonatal nurses’ feeding work,*” in *Neonatal Network: The Journal of Neonatal Nursing*, 39(5).

**Catherine Ringham and Karen MacKinnon** published a paper in 2019 titled “*Mothering work and perinatal transfer: An institutional ethnographic investigation,*” in *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*. DOI: 10.1177/0844562119884388

## Resources for a Study of IE and Policing

Given the recent call for defunding the police by BLM and other activists, we compiled this list of recent published articles dealing with IE (or IE inspired) investigations of policing. We hope such a list will inspire future work, or simply help readers become more fully informed about investigations of policing from an IE perspective.

Nancy Naples, (2008), Economic restructuring and the social regulation of citizenship in the heartland, in *People at work: Life, power, and social inclusion in the new economy*. DeVault, Marjorie L., (Ed); pp. 112-138; New York, NY, US: New York University Press.

Naomi Nichols & Jessica Braimoh, (2018) “Community Safety, Housing Precariousness and Processes of Exclusion: An Institutional Ethnography from the Standpoints of Youth in an ‘Unsafe’ Urban Neighbourhood,” *Critical Sociology*, 44: 157-172.

<http://rave.ohiolink.edu/ejournals/article/350535881>

Ana Muniz, (2014), Maintaining Racial Boundaries: Criminalization, Neighborhood Context, and the Origins of Gang Injunctions, *Social Problems*, Volume 61, Issue 2, 1 May 2014, Pages 216–236. <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.miamioh.edu/10.1525/sp.2014.12095>

Kevin Walby, (2005), “How Closed-Circuit Television Surveillance Organizes the Social: An Institutional Ethnography,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 30: 189-214.

## IE Doctoral Defense

**Colin Hastings**, Sociology, York University, Toronto, Canada successfully defended his dissertation entitled *Writing for digital news: The social organization of news stories about HIV criminalization in an age of convergence journalism* on March 20, 2020 His dissertation was also nominated for a University thesis prize. Congratulations Dr. Hastings!

## SSSP in San Francisco Cancelled Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic



### Half Day Virtual Meeting

Friday, August 7 from 12:00pm–5:00pm (EDT). The schedule of events will include:

**SSSP Business Meeting** 12:00-1:00 pm

**Presidential Address** 1:15-2:15pm

**Awards Recognition** 2:30-3:15 pm

**Plenary Pandemic Focused Session** 3:30-5:00 pm

This program is offered as a *complimentary* benefit to current SSSP members. SSSP sends a special thanks to the Mansfield Institute for Social Justice and Transformation at Roosevelt University and Oxford University Press for their financial contributions to these virtual program activities.

### 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