# Dorothy Smith and Knowing the World We Live In

Marie Campbell
*University of Victoria*

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MARIE CAMPBELL

University of Victoria
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*The paper presents an account of the scholarly work of Canadian sociologist, feminist, theorist and activist, Dorothy E. Smith, leading up to her development of institutional ethnography as "a sociology for people." Drawing on selected writings, the author discusses some of the major ideas, debates and practical influences that are part of Smith's scholarly trajectory. The line of thinking that is illustrated is how her feminism was integral to her celebrated critique and re-writing of sociological method.*

This article introduces some of the theoretical underpinnings of institutional ethnography, the kind of sociological inquiry that takes as its problematic people's experiences in the everyday world. It may seem simply straightforward and logical that a researcher would be interested in discovering and disclosing how things happen. And for many who do institutional ethnography, it has become exactly that. Yet, that goal for research did not just arise spontaneously. Rather, querying how things happen signals a particular interest for social researchers, a special focus for research that Dorothy E. Smith has been working toward across several decades. This is an entirely different research goal from making an explanation of events through the application of theory. Smith's approach to research draws on diverse antecedents. Learning feminism and practising feminism turned out to be crucial to the critique of sociology that she was making. My goal in this paper is to show some of the influences that have shaped Smith's development of institutional ethnography as a *sociology for women* and that has become *a sociology for people.*

How Smith's scholarly and practical work began to influence each other will be explored by reviewing important ideas from some of her writings. But, the purpose of reviewing the roots of institutional ethnography is not to understand Dorothy Smith as historiography. We can identify in her theory and methodology the results of her contesting of the philosophical and sociological ideas and practices she encountered. Looking back from a position in the 21st century gives us a certain advantage. Now, it is possible to see how things fit together as an approach with the name institutional ethnography. Smith's references to, and use of, as well as arguments with many other scholars throughout the course of her career help us identify the route along which she travelled. Although not exhaustive of the ideas that have been important to her, I have selected some that seem central to institutional ethnography.[1]

Besides reviewing its beginnings, this paper also looks briefly at how institutional ethnography stands with regard to contemporary intellectual debates in the first decade of the 21st century. Language itself had always held a special interest for Smith and even prior to attending university, as a young clerical worker in London she had read philosophy—for pleasure, she says. Later, she was intrigued by the way that the Oxford philosophers were writing about "ordinary language" philosophy. She liked to see how people used words and how words could be made to "mean." This made literature—novels and poetry—as well as scholarly commentary on them—influential in Smith's own thinking and her quest to understand everyday life. Postmodernism and post-structuralism have not passed by unnoticed in Smith's work and later on I touch briefly on her engagement with some of these debates. But the linguistic turn in scholarship has not overwhelmed Smith's thinking partly because attention to language use was always important to her project of trying to "write the social" as people live it. Her efforts towards knowing take up Ludwig Wittgenstein's (1953), whom she quotes as "bring(ing) back words from their metaphysical to their everyday uses" (Smith, 1999, p. 242). It has been her prevailing interest to figure out and teach a method of social analysis that is reflexive to the material contours of people's lives. Some of Foucault's (1970,

1984) interests in discourse and Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) insistence on the discourse's local accomplishment appear in Smith's formulations of how sequences of local action are hooked into a "discourse-driven dialogue" (Smith, 1999:121). She says "truth and knowledge are grounded in the foundational moments in which the social comes into being through language and through the sensory ground that human organisms share" (1999:128).

## Feminist Beginnings of a Method of Inquiry

After Smith took her first degree (in social anthropology) at the London School of Economics she enrolled in a Ph.D. program in sociology at the University of California, Berkeley. Here she worked with faculty who were mainly doing and teaching the conventional positivist sociology prominent in the USA in the early 1960s. Her thesis supervisor, Erving Goffman, was a notable exception, Smith says. He made the everyday world visible to sociology; (indeed, the book that first made his work known and notable was called *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*). Goffman invented ways to show what people are doing in their ordinary interactions. Although Smith did not take up his dramaturgical approach, like him she has never been confined by sociological convention.

Reflecting on other influences from her graduate education, she mentions taking a graduate course on George Herbert Mead that enlarged her thinking about language use. She says that Mead offered her new ways of "bringing things from the abstract realm and seeing them more as problems of how people talk about things." She had had discussions with ethnomethodologists while a student at Berkeley, but it wasn't until later when she was teaching sociology at the University of British Columbia beginning in the late 1960s that the real upsurge in non-positivist sociology occurred. This non-positivist literature found its way into her own teaching, where Smith employed it to interrogate such concepts as "deviance" in the social psychology courses that, as a female faculty member, she was expected to teach. Her teaching, like her writing, drew from the thinking of Alfred Schutz and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in phenomenology, George

Herbert Mead in symbolic interactionism, Harold Garfinkel and his students in ethnomethodology, as well as Marx and the other more traditional social theorists.

James Heap, one of her first Ph.D. students at the University of British Columbia, speaks of how he learned from Smith about "interpretive procedures . . . procedures for knowing, and the nature of things known" drawn from her engagement with this set of theorists (Campbell and Manicom, 1995: x). In noting this, Heap was making the point that it is often forgotten that these interpretive influences predated Smith's feminism and laid the basis of her later work. He wants both to be remembered. Yet here, in this article, a different emphasis is developed and a different point is being made—that the feminism at the heart of institutional ethnography is often overlooked or misunderstood. Smith had always been impressed by the work of Marx (trans. 1954) that she had read in the original while at the LSE. In the 1970s she would go back to Marx and put his writings together with her newer thinking, particularly with her feminist concerns and interests. At first, she was working within a discourse constituted almost entirely by men.[2] She engaged with their ideas and, where necessary to her project, debated them from a standpoint made accessible by the feminism developing in the last half of the 20th century.

Several of Smith's early articles are especially helpful in understanding her own developing thought. These pieces contain ideas that stayed important and are increasingly elaborated in successive lines of inquiry throughout the next decades. Students then (as now) puzzled over her dense writings as newer ones kept appearing on her course reading lists. Engagement with her students' class assignments fuelled Smith's own thinking, as for example in her article "K is Mentally Ill," an early 1970s piece that wasn't published in English until 1990. That paper circled back into continuing discussions with new students throughout the 70s and 80s. Its data came from a class exercise that asked students to find and interview someone who could describe someone else's experience of becoming "mentally ill." From one student's report, Smith saw the opportunity to interrogate facts and how factual knowing occurs. What she saw in the interview text was to be a key element of Smith's thinking, writing and teaching

on into the next decade—the possibility (and practical necessity, especially for women) of interrogating taken for granted practices of knowing. In this early paper she identified the work-up that the interviewee and student were doing to construct the report. She identified how selected pieces of experience are relied on to arrive at a story that anyone could recognize as mental illness. Smith's argument was that these features of making sense in ordinary ways are noteworthy in themselves. Pushing them out into the open, not leaving them buried and disattended makes visible how people arrive at particular meanings. Of course, as she illustrates in "K is Mentally Ill," when the work-up is made visible as people's practices, the authority of the account is unsettled. That move forms a gestalt—with a foreground that shifts to background when a different frame is used. In this case, discovering the construction work inherent *in* the story made it almost impossible for Smith to revert to her former reading. This analysis was to be massively influential in her developing critique of sociological method and to her insights about the way that texts and textual practices are an essential part of the meanings that they apparently simply carry.

Smith's paper "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology" was similarly ground-breaking and inspirational to her contemporary feminist colleagues. Delivered at a conference in 1972, this paper was passed from hand to hand across North America before it was published in a sociology journal in 1974 and then reprinted in Sandra Harding's influential *Feminism and Methodology* in 1987. The 1970s was the era when women from various locations in society were identifying conditions in their lives that chafed and stultified them. Women academics were bringing these critiques into the academy and into their intellectual work there. Smith's analysis in this particular piece showed how the conceptualizing of sociology was a male activity, and that it depended upon certain conditions for its achievement that men, but not women, could take for granted. For instance, women's domestic work routinely provided the conditions for men to live in the head world, their work lives untrammeled by responsibility for managing their mundane daily needs—for food, clean clothing and a quiet, tidy work space and so on. In contrast, as was the radical direction of Smith's analysis, women's standpoint

arose precisely from their bodily connection to knowing. Men's ideas, Smith claimed, carried authority, even though as she was showing, their alienation from a firm grounding in the materiality of everyday life distorted men's understandings. These analytic observations were the starting point for Smith's work toward a different sociology for women.

Her dissatisfaction with sociological orthodoxy was the subject of her article, "The Ideological Practice of Sociology."[3] This paper carries Smith's important critique of sociological (and social science) method, drawing on Marx and Engel's (trans. 1976) critique of German philosophy that he had called "ideology." In this paper Smith explains how she departs from the distinction that conventional sociology would make between ideology and social science, where the notion of ideology is of biased or distorted statements, while social science is considered to be objectively truthful. Smith's analysis of ideological practices in social science focuses on the methodological moves that an intellectual makes to generate objective knowledge. Specifically, she argued that such methodological procedures end up cancelling the subjectivity of the knower so that knowing moves to an abstract conceptual plane. This, she recognized, was how she had been trained as a sociologist to understand the world. But now, she was comparing that approach with Marx's premise that (non-ideological) analysis is an explication of "actual people's activities and the material conditions thereof" (Smith 1990a:36). Reflecting on her own training, Smith has written:

> Sociology creates a construct of society that is specifically discontinuous with the world known, lived, experienced and acted in. The practice of sociology in which we were trained as graduate students was one that insisted that the sociologist should never go out without a concept; that to encounter the raw world was to encounter a world of irremediable disorder and confusion; to even begin to speak sociologically of that world required a concept, or concepts, to order, select, assemble, a sociological version of the world on paper." (1990b:2)

From Marx she had learned not to be satisfied with treating the conceptual as a given—rather to view "concepts and categories as expressions of social relations and hence as opening up a universe

for exploration that is 'present' in them but not explicated" (Smith 1990a:37). She claimed that what she called the ideological practices integral to social science had the effect of confining people who used them to a conceptual level that suppresses the presence and workings of the underlying relations they express. Making this critique demanded of Smith that she find another way of doing sociology, one that would build for all to see an account of how things work and, in particular, how they work against women and other oppressed people.

In the 1970s, besides her specifically intellectual work, Smith was part of a movement of community women who were attempting to understand and change the conditions of their lives. "Feminism and Marxism" a talk given to women activists in 1977 was published as a monograph in the same year. It presented in non-academic language her sense of how to work on behalf of women. She spoke about the distinctiveness of a feminist position, which for her had developed out of Marxism—out of turning to Marx's writings for help in understanding how the relations among and between men and women are organized. Employing a Marxist framework, she said, was the only way to discover "something about how the determinations of your particular space would be seen as arising as aspects of a social and economic process, of social relations outside it" (1977:12). So, for Smith, learning to work against women's oppression had led her not to a feminist theory, but to taking the standpoint of women in a committed way—a commitment that invoked the notion of sisterhood so important to the women's movement of that time (Smith, 1977:14). Sisterhood, as invoked by Smith, was not a sentimental idea but a way of speaking about the method of working she was developing. This method required relocation of the knower—moving from being an outsider in hearing of women's lives and troubles to "locating yourself on their side and in their position" (Smith, 1977:15). Later, her methodological writings advanced her thinking on how to conduct scholarly research this way.

The 1970s was a busy decade for Smith and her own reflections, written much later, suggest the level of creative activity that she was involved in:

> The intensity of those times is hard to capture in retrospect. (A feminist conference presentation) gave me an opportunity to pull together for presentation to other women the thinking I had been doing around a number of topics—the attempt to situate a sociology in a knowledge grounded in women's experience, the nature of the linkages of the university with other bases of power in the society, the peculiarities of the way changes occur around us (on the campus where I worked, one day there would be a grassy lawn, the next there would be hoardings and a hole in the ground), issues of Canadian cultural identity and of an independent Canadian sociology, my rediscovery of Marx, and specific inquiry in sociology.

She continues, explaining how she had benefited from those experiences:

> I had learned from the women's movement that I was not bound to observe the conventions laid down by men that constricted the relevances of my thinking. I understood therefore that I could move from what was going on around me to the world of theory and back. This lesson as well as these topics went into the making of "a sociology for women" (Smith, 1987:46).

Reading Smith, especially along side writings by the thinkers whose work she was reading and requiring students to read at the time, one can see how she takes up topics, interests and language from these writers and moves on from them. Like Alfred Schutz before her, she was interested in multiple perspectives, and how they emerge. She uses Schutz's own words in pointing to the significance in sociology of how "we live in a world not of our own making." It was her conviction however that the making of the world(s) that people live in, the social organization of those experiences, had to be accounted for in research and knowledge production to make it useful to women's lives. From the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Smith learned how to make experiencing, including the knower's own experience, central to research. In her paper "K is Mentally Ill," Smith had used that insight to explore her own reading of the text as a way of discovering how it had been put together. Exploring how people use concepts as if they are self-evident was to remain an important problematic for Smith. It required a dizzying shift in perception, where ordinary habits of thinking had to be replaced. Smith talks

about learning how to think as if she were inside what was happening, not external to it. This is the kind of thinking that for Smith makes the sociological notion of micro and macro analysis of social life obsolete. She recognized that when one knows from "inside" what is happening, there are no such separations. This is the notion of "experience" that she works with.

Ethnomethodology and ethnomethodologists have an important place in Smith's intellectual development. The ethnomethodological work of Harold Garfinkel, especially as taken up by a group of researchers at Santa Barbara, is reflected in institutional ethnography, (e.g., Smith, 1999:232–3; and 1990b:211). Ethnomethodology's foundational concerns include "treating facts as social accomplishments" (Garfinkel, 1967) and "studying a member's knowledge of his ordinary affairs . . . where that knowledge is treated by us as part of the same setting that it also makes orderable (having a recognizable order)" (Garfinkel, 1974:18, in Turner, 1974). Others working in the field talked about ethnomethodology as being interested in practical reasoning. Its practitioners aimed to make descriptions of how people worked at bringing into being those features of ordinary life that tend to be treated as just there or taken for granted. As Turner (1974:11) put it, ethnomethodologists explored and wrote about "suicides, ethnic groups, clear matters of fact and the rest of the furniture of everyday life" but their goal was to show how those occurrences were accomplished competently and were replicable. Such things were not to be understood as naturally occurring or objectively real. While Smith brought these views into institutional ethnography, she lost interest in the direction taken by some other ethnomethodologists. In Roy Turner's 1974 edited collection *Ethnomethodology*. Smith was the only woman published with seventeen male ethnomethodologists. She recalls that the men were pursuing the problematic of social order that Talcott Parsons had made central to sociological theory. She, on the other hand, was always on the lookout for "how things work."

Many ethnomethodologists were not querying the reality constituted by their own practices, just explicating them as members' methods of accomplishing reality. Smith, on the other hand, insisted that "the sociologist is and must be an active participant in constructing the events she treats as data" (Smith, 1990a:13). It

seems apparent as early as 1974, with her rediscovery of Marx, that Smith was moving in a different direction in her new project of writing a sociology for women. Unlike the ethnomethodological interest in practical reasoning and its empirical investigation in everyday sites, Smith didn't want to accept the limitations of a technique that separated out for analysis an event, a conversation, or some other practice from its place nested in the lived world of the subject. Doing so would confine understandings artificially, she saw, and was therefore not satisfactory to her purpose.

Smith had already come to the conclusion that sociological analysis should not separate what in the everyday world was already unified. Following the lead given by Marx's analysis of the economy of his own time, Smith began to see what it would take to connect her puzzles in the everyday world to the sort of dimensions that Marx was talking about. The connections were there, although they are invisible, as long as they remain unanalysed and unanalysable. She began to speak about the local world and extra-local domain or settings. She proposed that both were part of the social relations of any experienced actuality. The strategy for bringing them together was through an analysis that locates the knower (Marx's actual individuals) whose activities concert what actually happens in time and space. To make sociology politically committed, she had to overcome its practices of knowing that "exclude the presence and experience of particular subjectivities" (1987:2). Smith was putting together a materialist analysis for sociology that would account for the subject's presence, for her knowing and doing. And for how the subject enacted her everyday life in ways that connected her into relations outside herself and her experiences. This was the procedure that could lead a researcher into the discovery of extra-local relations and thus to see how the local setting worked.

Phenomenology had opened the possibility of a sociology that could address people's experiences. Ethnomethodology offered the specialized way of seeing people's activities as integral to any account of what was happening. From Marx came the notion of social relations that makes theoretical sense of Smith's conviction about the inseparability of micro and macro analysis. Seeing that people work *knowledgeably* to concert their action with ruling regimes puts the possibility of that material connection into the

analysis. For Smith, the latter is also how the politics of the setting can be dissected and viewed. No setting is an isolated unit, but is part of an organized whole. This underpins a strategy for identifying how power is inserted into (enacted in, actually) the experiential setting, often in silent and mysterious ways.

## Feminism and Smith's Sociology for Women

Feminism was a necessary component for Smith's rethinking of the methods of social analysis that were available in the 1970s. In feminist consciousness-raising Smith found inspiration for thinking about knowledge as a practical matter and how it relates to practical experiences. The philosophy of consciousness-raising and its strategies accorded women's voices authority in feminist circles. Smith's own daily pursuits as a worker, wife and mother informed her view that women, although precluded almost entirely from positions of authority, had one trusted source of knowing from which to speak—their everyday experience. Smith recognized the validity of women's anger when nowhere else were they treated as knowledgeable people. That had been a painful lesson Smith herself learned as a woman, mother and academic. Entering the academic world as a graduate research assistant, Smith had identified an uncomfortable rupture between the responsible person she was as a wife and mother and how she was expected to know and be as a scholar. At home, as a mother and wife she engaged in work that related to bodies— for instance, feeding the family, and bathing and clothing small children. Ways of knowing that were relevant there, even essential for giving and supporting life, were not recognized as a legitimate basis for knowing in the other world. Intellectual work was done in the head world, as if bodies didn't exist. There seemed to be a permanent rupture between the two kinds of knowing, not to mention a different valuing. Addressing the tasks associated with each seemed to require her to be two different persons. To be successful in the head world, it was not sufficient or even helpful to know the world in the ways in which women are authoritative speakers (Smith, 1990a:28). Just the opposite was true. Smith "learned" that to conceptualize in the standard scholarly manner was to repudiate experiential knowing. To work in universities

and in scholarship she had to suppress the knowledge from her everyday world, for which, she says, there was at that time no acceptable language.

As she made headway in developing her notions of knowing from the standpoint of women, her critical analysis of the practices of theorizing and knowledge generation converged with her political commitments. To explain what women in the 1970s were recognizing as their subordination, she argued that women's exclusion from the positions where society and culture were put together accounts for how social life is ordered by knowledge that doesn't fit women's realities. In other words, the world is not made for women. Acquiring the political stance of a feminist helped Smith recognize that to make knowledge that would work for women, knowledge practices had to be revamped. In her "Women's perspective as a radical critique of sociology" she turned upside down the approach to knowing that required living in the head world. In describing the traditional gender regime in which women keep house for men, she pointed out that besides attending to their bodily domestic needs at home, women perform analogous functions in professional and managerial settings, too. Smith wrote that women "mediate for men at work the relationship between the conceptual mode of action and the actual concrete forms" in which their work must get done (1990a:18,19). With women's help, men are lifted out of the immediate, local and particular place in which they reside in their bodies and are allowed to act as if they are living in their heads. The cost is borne not just by the women who do the background work, but also by the men themselves. Having their knowing mediated to them by other people and through their own objectified methods means that men lose touch with a certain level of reality. Being alienated from themselves as the knowing subject of their experience is consequential for what they can know. Men can make, believe in, and act on objectified accounts of the world that reflect only how it is known from their alienated place in it. This was also what Smith had been calling "ideological" about the standard procedures for doing sociology that she criticized. She saw that "the sociologist (was) an actual person in an actual concrete setting (who) has been cancelled in the procedures that objectify and separate him from his knowledge" (Smith, 1987a:90).

She and other feminists saw that men work as they do because women are there to provide for them. In feminist politics, this insight motivated women to redefine domestic relationships and try to change the division of domestic labour. In Smith's hands, the insight was also important theoretically. She contrasted embodied knowing with abstract conceptual knowledge. Her own theorizing showed how it is possible for men to forget their bodies and live and act in the conceptual mode in which business, academia and government are done. It became apparent that while thinking and working in an ideological manner may have originated with the men who were in the academy, professions and government before women were influential there, women can also learn to operate in the abstract conceptual mode. Indeed to be successful academics, women have had to gain skills in suppressing their experiential knowledge in favour of objectified knowing. For that reason, it hasn't helped women much to have more of them getting ahead in academia. Perhaps the same thing could be said of women in political life and government or in business and elsewhere—that women recently have made inroads into authoritative positions.

Speaking to an audience of women academics in the early 1980s, Smith (1984) made the point that as more and more women enter academia, they adopt conventional male-defined standards of scholarly achievement. The standards and conditions of acceptable scholarship have remained more or less as men defined them through decades of higher learning. In attempting to meet these standards, women take up the tools of the oppressors. Working ideologically, women scholars contribute to the research that determines how the world gets framed (ideologically) for those who live it. Ironically, as authoritative description accumulates on domestic areas such as the family, marriage, child rearing and schooling, the areas in which women have always been central, a contradiction grows. Women's experience of their everyday worlds of action where they have always been knowledgeable is ruptured from how their experience gets written about, and worked up officially. That new knowledge is then used against them authoritatively, to re-order and manage themselves and other women. Smith was coming at the problem of ruling and subordination as a feminist, informed by the emerging feminist

scholarship of the second wave feminists who had discovered a history of violent suppression of women's knowledge across the centuries.

Smith's insight about women's standpoint in experience being a beginning for inquiry was also the key to understanding ruling and domination wherever it occurs. This is how Smith moved from theorizing women's standpoint to make a radical turn in sociology, providing a method to investigate how certain forms of knowing authoritatively replace and undermine other forms. She had always been interested in documents, documentary realities, and their part in the constitution of authority and power. By the 1980s, she was talking about texts and the technologies of ruling that she argued are specifically knowledge-based. Now she described the ubiquity of text mediated social organization as the technology of ruling in late 20$^{th}$ century capitalist societies (1990b:209–224). In a knowledge-based society, ruling practices, she argued, rely on authorized versions of knowledge (such as routinely generated by sociologists, psychologists, political scientists, organization theorists and more recently, the information management scholars and consultants). If we accept Smith's view, no longer can we think of ruling being done by powerful others, somewhere out there, entirely separate from ourselves. We all take up ruling concepts and activate them as we go about our daily lives.


Texts, Ruling and Knowing the World from Inside Experience

Knowing in specific ways is integral to many, if not all, forms of organized action in contemporary society. Organization works smoothly when people are able to take up pieces of action and move them along easily and competently. People's knowledge of how to coordinate their action with others is a required feature of social life. Such knowledge is routinely counted on and usually is available as an unquestioned resource. As Smith continually asserts and illustrates, certain forms of knowing are the basis for ruling—in management, governing, the professions and so on. Text mediated ruling practices, Smith argued, subordinate local knowing, imposing ruling perspectives. Given women's experiences of being excluded and oppressed, learning how their

knowledge is undermined and replaced is an important prelim-
inary feature for empowering people. As Smith had discovered,
women's standpoint grounded in their everyday experience of-
fers a challenge to ruling perspectives. She saw this from her
early work on women's oppression and from analysing women's
crucial role in mediating for men their knowledge practices.

In the introduction to her 1990 collection of papers on the
conceptual practices of power, Smith identifies the connections
that she was beginning to make between women's exclusion as
subjects from sociology and questions of women's oppression
throughout history. "At the line of fault along which women's
experience breaks away from the discourses mediated by texts . . .
a critical standpoint emerges" (1990:11). Smith recognized that
women's standpoint grounded in everyday experiences was the
beginning of different approach to knowing fully and in a trust-
worthy way. Occasionally in the processes of being ruled or doing
ruling, someone involved has an experience of disjuncture, of
being out of step. When that person's knowing is being subordi-
nated by the organizational practices, this moment of disjuncture
locates a problematic—a latent puzzle. Perhaps the problematic
will be only for that person. Women have had this experience of
being "out of step" in many situations. Smith's whole scholarly
undertaking was inspired from such recognition and her work
benefitted from her discovery of a sense of solidarity and sis-
terhood with other women in this regard. She recognized that
knowing differently was the basis for changing the conditions
of women's lives. To begin to undermine oppression, one must
be able to identify and challenge the prevailing problems in
otherwise unquestioned, taken-for granted, prevailing ways of
knowing and acting. That is the sort of inquiry that Smith had
wanted to make possible. She imagined that when people begin
to see how they participate in their own and others' oppression by
using the oppressor's language and tools and taking up actions
that are not in their own interests, anti-oppressive work could be
advanced.

The contribution of institutional ethnography was in con-
structing accounts from the standpoint of those with whom or
for whom the researcher chooses to work. Beginning from peo-
ple's experience of being ruled, the practices of ruling could be

explicated in research accounts. This approach to social analysis insists that "we look at any or all aspects of a society from *where we are actually located, embodied, in the local historicity and particularities of our lived worlds*" (Smith, 1987:8). Researching from a particular location is one of the most important features of Smith's sociology for women. Not, of course, confined to inquiry into women's lives, it assumes a socially organized world where anyone's experience is intimately connected to their work of bringing into being the world as they live it. It assumes, in contrast to knowing ideologically, that what anyone knows experientially is always embodied and a subject always exists in a body that is located in time and space. Smith's materialist method uses this experiential basis for building dependable accounts of *how things work*. That goal for knowing stands in contrast to constructing ideological knowledge whose foundation is in theory and the discourses of ruling institutions.

The tools of Smith's method, specifically her recognition of the importance of texts, language and discourse in the social organization of people's knowledge of the everyday world, became a matter of some contention during the last decades of the 20th century. The linguistic turn in scholarship unsettled established ways of knowing as scholars in different fields began to recognize and criticize how the social and its representation were often treated as isomorphic. Insights of this sort led to claims that nothing could be known outside of discourse. Smith could not leave this claim unchallenged, as it undermined, she thought, years of feminist struggle to speak from one's experience—to be heard as having something to say. One important product of Smith's engagement with the "developing intellectual debates loosely described as post-structuralism/postmodernism" appears in her (1999) article entitled "Telling the Truth after Postmodernism." Smith begins by noting areas of agreement. Both she and the theorists whose work she analyses reject the claims of established sociology to be producing objective accounts of society. But those theorists derive their critiques from beliefs that differ from Smith's about the nature of social life and its representation in language. Smith's longstanding critique of sociology—was of its procedures for making objective knowledge, that she had argued, objectified what was known. Those objectifying procedures, Smith claimed,

seal off new knowledge from the realm of experience and from what people living the experience know. But this was not the issue for the post-structuralists and postmodernists whose work she reviewed. They take a more radical view of the possibility of knowing. She disagreed with their position that she said "den(ies) that categories and concepts can refer to and represent a reality beyond them, indeed, that it is meaningful to speak of a reality which is not in language" (1999:99). Smith claims that for post-structuralists and postmodernists "there can be . . . no reality posited beyond the text with reference to which meaning can be stabilized among different subjects" (1999:100). Or as Jane Flax writes "Truth for postmodernists is an effect of discourse" (1992, p. 452).

Smith found that in post-structuralist/postmodernist writings, the social—the core of her own theory—had disappeared. The knowing subject whom Smith insists is an actual person, located bodily, in time and space, is not there in those accounts. Agency or causal efficacy, she said, is reassigned by postmodernists to discourse, language, or culture. Smith took seriously the challenge that this practice presented to the very possibility of inquiry. She could not agree with those who suggest that "when we speak and write, the discourse speaks though us" (Smith, 1999:102). In "Telling the Truth after Postmodernism" she argues that people make meaning together and she illustrates this with examples. She relies on a similar dialogic approach in making an account faithful to the world of which it speaks. This kind of "truth-telling" occurs when what is known emerges out of "divergent perspectives coordinated in the social act of referring" (1999:128) to something seen, touched or otherwise discovered. Smith's reliance on dialogue appears again in her metaphor of a map as the project of institutional ethnography. She says that the map (metaphor)

> directs us to a form of knowledge of the social that shows relations between various and differentiated local sites of experience without subsuming or displacing them. Such a sociology develops from inquiry and not from theorizing; it aims at discoveries enabling us to locate ourselves in the complex relations with others arising from and determining our lives; its capacity to tell the truth is never contained in the text but arises in the map-reader's dialogic of

finding and recognizing in the world what the text, itself a product
of such inquiry, tells her she might look for. (1999:130)

## Conclusion

In 2003, Dorothy Smith continues to write, teach and refine her
approach to doing a sociology for people. Her four books (Smith,
1987, 1990a and b, and 1999) document her work and explicate its
principles and aims. Many students from different backgrounds
and part of varying struggles have taken up her method and are
adding to it.[4] As the introduction to Campbell and Manicom's
(1995) collection of her students' work noted, this diversity of
interest creates "a kind of laboratory where research problems
arise and must be solved, discoveries are made, limitations are
confronted, and possibilities explored" (p. 6). The knowledge that
results from such exploration, the map of the social relations that
constitute it as it is experienced, is there to be acted upon by
those who are building a more socially just world. The terrain
to be mapped is always in motion. That is the challenge for
those who would know it, analytically. And Smith's theory and
methodology are designed to permit this kind of discovery. Insti-
tutional ethnographers explore how puzzles they are interested
in are brought into being within the always shifting and changing
relations of ruling that are specific to a time and place. Explication
of how actual people put together the world also shows how it can
be acted upon. In Smith's (1999:95) own words, although "some
of the work of inquiry must be technical, as making a map is, its
product could be ordinarily accessible and usable, just as a map is.

## Notes

1. Although I discussed this project with Dorothy, and she generously com-
   mented on a draft, I take responsibility for the interpretation of her work
   presented here and for its possible errors.
2. One important exception was Jessie Bernard's important book, Academic
   Women, published in 1964. She speaks of her debt to her women colleagues
   in the first Women's Studies courses taught at UBC in the early 1970s—Helga
   Jacobson, Meredith Kimball, Annette Kolodny—and to academic friends
   such as Arlene Kaplan Daniels at Northwestern University, as well as to
   the women and men who were her students.

3. She presented it to several audiences of sociologists in 1972 and it appeared in print twice in 1974, in the journal *Catalyst,* and excerpted in a collection of ethnomethodology papers edited by Roy Turner.
4. For recent examples, see the Special Issue of Studies in Cultures, Organizations and Societies, 7 (2), 2001, guest edited by Dorothy Smith and Stephan Dobson; also see, among others, DeVault, 1999, DeVault and McCoy, in Gubrium and Holstein (eds), 2002, Campbell and Gregor, 2002. Diamond, 1992, Ng, 1996, G.W. Smith, 1990.

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