

Understanding Contradictions in Public Irrigation Practices in Post-socialist Central Asia: An
Institutional Ethnography

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1. Introduction:

I am drawing on my recent doctoral research on a public water management project in Uzbekistan to speak about methodology for development work. What seemed important for me to understand in my research was a problem that plagues development research and as McDonald (2012) indicates, too often undermines well-intended projects. I found the categories and conceptual frameworks through which the project was implemented and administered being inattentive to the diverse circumstances of people's lives – and to negative outcomes for certain groups. McDonald (2012) has noted that municipal management is not devoid of particular ideological undercurrents which suggest particular priorities guiding the work of municipal developers and frontline practitioners. Informed in such manner, municipal service may work unfairly. Even the most progressive ideas to bring improvements to community may fail. One example is the recent idea of remunicipalization of water services, i.e., putting services back in public hands, which seems to excite many post-privatization scholars. Regardless of its benign intent, it has been said to often fail to take equity and public engagement seriously, perpetuating marginalization of low-income households (McDonald, 2012). Similar to McDonald's concerns with making water available as a public service, the project I studied was designed to improve access to irrigation water for agricultural production. In my case, the policy took place in one region of rural Uzbekistan undergoing increased scarcity owing to the drying up of the Aral Sea. My research interrogated the differences that were built into the project, apparently without any such intent, between men's and women's involvement and eventually to women's inequitable access to water. This paper's focus is on my research approach – institutional ethnography - that opens up to view what actually happened and how it happened, making visible what official accounts seemed to mystify. But first, I will describe the project and then explain some key features of institutional ethnography that underpin the particular approach I took to doing the research. Then I'll explain my findings about what actually happened - the socially organized inequality in this water management project that was supposed to be not only democratically participatory but gender-neutral.

2. The Uzbek water management project

My research was based in Uzbekistan, where water management continues to be a largely public (state-owned and operated) enterprise. With sixty percent of population living in the rural areas engaged in irrigated agriculture, water for agricultural irrigation is a very important sector in the national water systems. The demand for well-managed irrigation is increasing with the environmental degradation that increases water scarcity in the entire region. My research took place in the small village in Uzbekistan where water resources are seriously depleting. The province is located at the end of the irrigation infrastructure beginning in the drastically desiccated Aral Sea that moved water through Amu Daryia River toward the village at the furthest end of the publicly serviced irrigation canal system. Therefore, issues of water and accessing it are crucial for the inhabitants of this village who are largely dependent upon irrigated agriculture for subsistence.

The structure of rural population is characterized by two predominant groups of agricultural activities: a small group of so-called "elite" or "private" farmers and a larger population of peasants. Both groups are the products of the Soviet system of agricultural governance and what came after as post-Soviet attempts to decentralize and privatize agrarian

land and production. The government of Uzbekistan assigned farming rights in an authoritarian manner to some of the former employees of the Soviet communal farming institutions. These farmers signed contracts with the government according to which they are obliged to submit their produce to the state at price fixed by the government in exchange for free land tenure. The current Uzbek peasant population emerged from the large body of employees at the former Soviet communal farms who were not chosen to become elite farmers but were allocated plots of agricultural land (approximately 0.12 hectares) to grow food. The produce from these fields typically supplies households with nearly all their subsistence needs, however, provide little opportunity for cash income (Kim, 2014). As a result most of the male peasants are engaged in waged labor not only outside the village, but mostly outside the country. The large population of Uzbek labor migrants work under precarious conditions in Russia or Kazakhstan. With their income unguaranteed and unreliable, so is any financial support for their families. Some of them find new families in their new places of work and never return to their villages. In these circumstances, peasant women must work hard to ensure that their fields are maximally productive and generate enough food to keep their families fed. At the same time, their access to irrigation water, fundamental to their agriculture, is limited.

In early 2000s the Uzbek government introduced reforms into the public system of irrigation water distribution. Water User Associations were established as part of the national policy for improving irrigation systems. The latter came to decline when the collapse of the Soviet Union entailed disintegration of the communal farms which formerly took responsibility for the local irrigation management and maintenance. Water User Associations were put in place as alternative to state-owned or privately-run irrigation management which focused on involving local communities. It was expected that this policy reform would contribute to the overall national agricultural development strategy which ultimately aimed to facilitate poverty reduction and provide “social assistance to the most vulnerable groups” (Asian Development Bank, 2010, p. 11). As a policy concept WUA were seen as “good water governance” (Garces-Restrepo, Vermillion & Munos, 2007, p. 16), wherein local communities themselves organize to make decision about the use and management of irrigation water, distribute water fairly and sustainably, mobilize and effectively use their own funds, increase their agricultural production and, ultimately, improve their livelihoods (Djanibekov, Hornidge & Ul Hassan, 2012). However, in the Uzbekistani context, the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources of Uzbekistan (MAWR) enforced the establishment of WUA throughout the country (Zavgorodnaya, 2006). The government made it compulsory for the farmers to become WUA members while the local authorities selected and supervised the WUA’ leadership and technical staff (Yalcin & Mollinga, 2007). In this manner, by the mid 2007 the total number of new WUA in Uzbekistan accounted to 1,654 (World Bank, 2012).

3. Everyday water struggles: learning from the women’s experiences

In my research I use institutional ethnography approach developed by Dorothy E. Smith (1987, 2005) which is designed to shift the focus of social science research “away from questions generated by administrative concerns and toward the puzzles of people’s everyday lives” and to “map the operation of ‘ruling relations’ (Smith, 1999) in ways that might be useful to people who are subject to those regimes of power” (DeVault, 2011). Institutional ethnography includes international development among the institutions along with the law, management, education, etc., that provides ruling frameworks and “institutionalizes” them through coordinative practices. Alternatively, as Smith (2005) says, the methodological commitment of institutional ethnographers is “to remain in the world of everyday experience and knowledge, to explore ethnographically the problematic that is implicit in it, (but) extending the capacities of ethnography beyond the circumscriptions of our ordinary experience-based knowledge, to make observable social relations beyond and within it in which we and multiple others participate” (p. 43). An institutional ethnographer problematizes what is actually happening in a research site and tracks the social organization that coordinates it. “The notion of social relations offers analytic access to power as present and enacted in people’s everyday lives, and to the connections between local experiences and the extra-local ruling apparatus operating through institutions” (Rankin & Campbell, 2014).

Beginning with data collected in observations and interviews with women peasants in the village, I decided on a problematic about which I would conduct an inquiry. My research questions were not formulated in advance, and were not based on theoretical explanatory frameworks. Nor was my study used to test hypotheses. Instead, I begin with the actualities of the social relations in which the informants are enmeshed, as they tried to secure irrigation water. Following the precepts of institutional ethnography to take the standpoint of those informants who are subject to ruling relations, I explicitly adopted the standpoint of the women peasants. From observing these women’s work and using what they told me about their experience of accessing public water services I moved to identifying the institutional relations that organized their consistent failure to be involved in and benefit from the water management scheme.

As I spoke to these women, spent time with them while they worked in their fields and as I lived in one family in spring and summer 2011, I saw the struggles that they engage in on a regular basis to make sure that their fields are irrigated. The irrigation water supply system in this village was not characterized by a continuous flow. Water in irrigation canals was only available several times per irrigation season for a limited period of time. Access to this inconsistently provided water was problematic for the women, both in terms of whether there was water or not, whether there was enough water for them and whether they would know on time that water was available so that they could “catch” it. To illustrate, one of the women, called Saparkul, told me that during the previous month she missed the water twice. First time she was visiting her niece in a hospital and the second time she was working in another farmer’s field in exchange for his permission to collect dry stalks which she needed for cooking. On both occasions when she arrived home, it was too late and the water was not available anymore. It was apparent that if she knew in advance about the upcoming water arrival, she would organize her activities differently. Interviews with other women, however, also indicated that even if the women were able to learn on time that there would be water in the canals, they were still uncertain if there would be enough water for them. This is illustrated in the interview with Rokhathzon, who complained that last time the water was available, “we could not irrigate our kitchen gardens and fields because after the farmer had used the water, nothing was left for us“.

In both cases, women would have to wait until the next opportunity to irrigate, and such opportunity may only come in several weeks.

I saw and heard that women worked very hard, devised various strategies and even risked their health to grab the dim opportunities to irrigate their small fields. Frequently, the women had to walk long distances to the canals to see whether there was water flowing. Often they would have to return in the darkness risking their safety. They were watchful of the farmers to try to figure out when the water would arrive. For instance, one woman said that she listened to what happens in her neighbor's field. The latter was one of the twenty nine elite farmers in the village and when she heard a metal grinding sound, she would know that it meant he was preparing his water pumps. This indicated that water would arrive to their canals soon and she must stay home and watch for it. Another woman reported that she waited for a water master to walk by her house to ask him about water. This would add even more load her already busy working days.

The ontology of institutional ethnography proposes that the differences in perspectives and experience in participants must be recognized and used in mapping institutional processes. The experience of one informant may include references to other positions or people involved in the same institutional process. These references are treated as empirical doors that can be opened by interviewing someone on the other side whose perspective and experience complements the work and experience of the first informant (Smith, 2005). From the talks with the women I began to recognize that some individuals living in the village were more privileged in terms of receiving water, or at least being current with the situation of water supply in the village. Not being these privileged individuals created extra problems for the success of the women's subsistence crops but of course the women I interviewed did not know that their troubles were shaped by an institutional organization. Based on my conceptual framework I understood that there were institutional relations entering and shaping women's difficulties which needed to be explicated. This is what is meant by institutional ethnography extending what a knower located in the everyday world knows from her experiences there. From the traces of social relations in my data, my research moved to finding how they entered women's lives. Relations of power associated with the water management institution coordinated what happens in the village – who gets water, who does not, and how easy is access to water for different groups of villagers. My focus became concentrated on finding out precisely how it was possible that rural groups differ in terms of their access to these public irrigation services.

I understood that how the public irrigation practice is set up to work institutionally organized the women peasants' experiences of exclusion. I needed to empirically study the actual work activities constituting public irrigation looking at how people at various levels were tied to the routine use of textual documents. As an institutional ethnographer I understood that any social setting was put together in people's activities, with text-mediation carrying ruling influences into local settings from outside. I learnt that since 2005 the on-village irrigation was administered by a Water User Association (WUA) located in the village and run by the representatives of the village. The oversight of the WUA was performed by the state organization for water management called the District Water Resource Department, one of the functionalities of the Uzbekistan's Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources. Since 2008 a German-funded development project worked with this WUA to increase its institutional capacity and better manage irrigation resources. The project also undertook activities to increase the community's awareness about the WUA and their entitlement to use its services. I studied the work of the WUA staff which included five water masters, a chairman and a secretary/accountant. All of these staff members acted as intermediary between the villagers and

the District Water Resource Department. The latter organized the scheduling of access to irrigation water among the villages which use the same irrigation canals. During the irrigation season the District Water Resource Department convened regular meetings among all the WUA in the district and announced the schedule. Each WUA then knew when they could expect the water to arrive into their village through the canals. They would bring this information to their respective villages. However, how exactly WUA disseminates this information to its water user communities is unclear. How is it that certain individuals are properly notified, while others, such as the women peasant remain uncertain? In order to better understand this process I studied how these processes actually take place.

4. How water management works

I collected ethnographic data in the WUA observing closely the work of the water masters and the WUA chairman as well as the WUA secretary/accountant. To analyze this information, I used Smith's (2005) understanding of "work knowledge", i.e., participants' experiential knowledge of the work they are involved in doing. A researcher is oriented to learn from people's experiences regarding how their work is organized. Here, they are treated as experts in what they do and of the conditions that complement their work. A worker's experience of their own work is one aspect of the work knowledge, the second one is the implicit or explicit coordination of their work with the work of the others. Both are important for an institutional ethnographer's analysis and treated in specific ways. More specifically, these data are not reinterpreted or assigned a value that the participants did not claim. Rather, an analyst keeps in mind that each informant contributes only a piece of a social organization that is achieved through coordinated doings of people. The idea is to assemble the different work knowledges of people situated in and contributing differently to the process on which the research focuses. Important analytic work is to explicate how people's work is coordinated in a given institutional process. Thus, a researcher never treats a given work knowledge as an end in itself but looks for the sequence of actions in which it is embedded and how people are materially connected to each other and institutions (Smith, 2005). Of special importance here are the institutional texts that enter into the organization of people's work and how texts coordinate different work processes. In fact, Smith argues that "institutions exist in that strange magical realm in which social relations based on texts transform the local particularities of people, place, and time into standardized, generalized, and especially, translocal forms of coordinating people's activities" (2005, p. 101). Analysis of such texts in a research is necessary for any institutional ethnography and provided a trustworthy way of learning about how things actually work. People's knowledge of their work and how texts coordinate this work offer for an analysis an empirical entry into the practical work of the conceptual practices of power that are exercised institutionally. The purpose here is to illustrate how what people in their workplaces, such as the water management organization in Uzbekistan, know and do, participates in achieving institutional goals. Often this happens without people knowing about it. Smith (2005) refers to this as 'ruling' and brings attention to how knowledge is strategically organized. She shows how institutional practices make use of institutional knowledge and can displace people's experiential knowledge by making this form of knowledge inadequate for professional decision making. My analysis shows such a dynamic in detail.

During my meeting with the WUA chairman I learnt about the everyday organization of public irrigation management work. Water masters must ‘deliver water’ to people. When the village receives access to water, these professional irrigators monitor the water flow to ensure that it goes in the necessary directions. Also, they make decisions about the sequence of irrigation within the village, examine the passability of canals and ditches, etc. Organizationally, their work is distributed evenly among the water masters. The WUA chairman explained that “each water master is assigned to particular seven or eight private farmers and they make sure that their respective land is irrigated properly and timely”. Water masters work closely with their assigned clients before the water arrives in the canals, during and after the irrigation is over. This is one of the water masters talking about how he works with his clients:

I have telephoned them [clients] three days ago [to tell about ‘water’]. Before [that] I went and saw which land must be watered and which can wait. During [water] I go around the farmers’ land and look.

From the talks with the WUA chairman and the water masters I understood that their work attention was focused exclusively on one category of clients, i.e., the farmers. I was surprised that they never mentioned peasants in their talks and I asked them directly to describe the work they do precisely with the peasants. This solicited interesting reactions. The water masters would be taken aback, think for a moment and admit that they did not actually work with peasants. They acknowledged that they never communicated with the peasants and neither informed them. In fact, when these professionals accomplished delivering water to the farmers’ land, their work was essentially done. Delivering water to the peasants did not seem to be part of their work routine. They simply knew that the peasants would “find out anyways” and expected them to serve themselves and “look at the canals”. This contradicted to my data from interviews with the chairperson of the District Water Resources Department who told me that there was a set of rules about how water must be sequenced in the village. One rule was that settlements located at the furthest tail end must be served first. Another rule was that peasants, whom he also called the “people”, must be served before anybody else does. It was apparent that the second rule was consistently violated.

The data revealing the less than carrying attitude, or rather, an explicit neglect of the peasants as clients of the water delivery services are important. But the purpose here is not to categorize this public service as good or bad for particular clients. Instead, I propose that this lack of interest is not accidental but a product of a set of practices that organize how water managers are instructed that their work must be done. I set out to discover how such water managers make decisions about with whom to work and what they do for which categories of clients.

5. Water management as constituted in text-based practices

For Smith (2006) people’s engagement with texts can be framed as “text-reader conversation” wherein the reader uses the text and in this process responds to it, interprets it and acts from it. I found that in conducting the work of efficient distribution and delivery of irrigation water, water masters use particular institutional texts to make decisions and guide implementation of their duties. One of the texts is called the “contour”. Water masters work with contours every day they irrigate. The document itself contained information about specific segments of agricultural land in the village, each denominated with a unique digit. Each segment

is then described in terms of particular characteristics such as its size, the type of crop grown within it, how much irrigation water it needs, and the actual quantity of water it received, as well as any shortage of water on the territory of a respective segment. Water masters must fill out these forms as they irrigate the clients' land and have this information confirmed and signed by four individuals, i.e., a representative from the District Water Resources Department, land surveyor, WUA representative and a farmer. The contours are also used to by the WUA accountant who receives them at the end of each irrigation day. The accountant looks at these reports, makes conclusions about whether the irrigation was complete or the village requires a prolonged access to the water and communicates this information to the District Water Resources Department. When the contours indicate shortage of water, actions can be undertaken to address the problem.

Water masters organize their work around the categories of the contours. Each water master fills out one contour for each of his assigned farmers. They enter the relevant number of the land segment and add information that the form requires about each of the segment. As one water master informs "looking at contours is necessary to control the irrigation of his hectares" and that he "always looks at the contours" to know what to do next. Once the contours are filled out, the work of the water masters is considered accomplished.

The problem with this text-mediated work is the absence of peasants within these processes. The WUA chairman confirms that contours "defined farmers' land only". When the irrigation service is organized around the categories indicated in the contours, this leaves no opportunity for the peasants to benefit from it. The water masters conduct their work knowledgeably and professionally. They know how to do their work and they do it well. The contours inform them about what needs to be done. The quality of their work is defined by how well they are able to do the work that is indicated in this form. When the form is for "the farmers' land only", their performance is defined by how well the land of the farmers was irrigated. Whatever else irrigation needs there might be they will be framed outside the irrigators' attention and their professional responsibilities. When knowledge is not indicated in this form it becomes institutionally irrelevant. Peasants' absence in this particular text excludes them from the entire irrigation service. Their needs for a prolonged time to access water cannot be made visible to the institutional actors such as the WUA accountant. Nothing holds the water masters to working with peasants and this is how water masters are institutionally organized not to pay attention to them as full clients and just let them "look at the canals" or merely "find out" somehow. Differentiation between the categories of the clients is a practice that is discoverable and I have shown how.

6. Discovering the ruling institution

In any institutional settings, text-reader conversations are integral to the ways in which institutional discourses regulate people's local activities. The discoveries in the everyday practices of irrigation management leaves questions about a larger institutional organization that is accountable for instituting the use of the ruling texts. How did it happen so that the water managers use the farmers' contours? From an institutional ethnographic position I know that contour is an institutional text that keeps the water masters' choices focus on priorities that have relevancies which have been institutionally defined. The confident use of contour is a textual technology that establishes and accounts for water management service participates in achieving institutional purposes. I studied various documents of the WUA, legislative acts, research reports

and conducted more interviews to find that contour was a local expression of an external authoritative knowledge apparatus. In analyzing these data I kept in mind Smith's understanding about institutions, i.e., them being functional complexes of observable organizations and discourses that are focused on achieving a particular function such as education, government, law, etc. They do not become objects of investigation but come into view partially as they are explored from the standpoint of people who are involved in them. My exploration at this time focused on the institution and the ruling of it. Its power being a "complex and massive coordinating of people's work" (Smith, 2005, p. 183).

I tracked the origins of contours in the institutional organization of the WUA and found that the WUA charter is a key instrument in defining the legitimacy for irrigation services from the WUA infrastructure. This document stipulates that the WUA takes the responsibility for "*water delivery from the state irrigation systems and its distribution among the WUA members*" (WUA Charter, p. 1). Thus, it will be the WUA members who are legitimate beneficiaries of the WUA services. However, not everybody in the village can become a WUA member. In order to become a WUA member a water user must sign an agreement with the WUA which must necessarily be registered by stamps from the WUA, District Water Resources Department and the water user (Paragraph 9.1 of the "Agreement between water user and WUA", p. 4.). This is where peasants and the farmers are strikingly different. The WUA accountant who registers agreements explains that peasants cannot enter agreements because "they do not have a stamp, while farmers have the contract with the State. They have cotton and wheat..., while they (smallholders) do not have a stamp". To explain her words, when the government of Uzbekistan reformed the agrarian organization from collective farming to the decentralized forms of production it created new form of agricultural enterprise called «private farming». Individuals among former collective farm leadership were assigned to become new private farms, and given land for cultivating their crops. The lease contracts were signed with the state (namely with the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resources) obligating the farmers to the annual submission of their produce to the state at a fixed price in exchange for the "free" land tenure and subsidized services. Having stamps was necessary for the farming to enter the land lease contract, thus, private farmers were registered as independent juridical entities at the moment of their creation and would have stamps right away. What private farmers produce in their fields constitute the goods which are traded on the international agricultural market by the Uzbek state. All of their cotton and a certain amount of wheat which each farmer grows must be sold to the state at the price significantly lower than those in the open market. This products account for sixty percent of export revenues and thirty percent of its gross domestic product (Asian Development Bank, 2001).

Peasants, as an agrarian category, were established with different goals in mind. They were given small plots of land (about 0.12 ha) to alleviate the growing rural poverty as "home consumption" farmers (Kandiyoti, 2003). They were not formalized as juridical entities and were not expected to produce crops for the state. Peasants' legal status as physical entities did not require them to have stamps. But as it became known, without stamps they could not sign agreement with the WUA to receive its services. At the same time, as the WUA chairman exclaimed

"agreement is the most important; if there is an agreement, there is water; no agreement means 'no water'" .

When there is an agreement, there is water delivered to the fields. Contour is an appendice to the agreement that helps to determine the quality of irrigation (from the interview with the Distric

Water Resources Department representative). Any difference between the required amount of water and the amount of water actually received there would indicate such a quality. When water masters notify farmers about the upcoming water arrival, they contribute to this quality because farmers can better prepare for irrigation by fixing the pumps, cleaning ditches, mobilizing their employees, etc. Information about the quality of irrigation is important for making many decisions such as prolonging the time for accessing water or imposing fines upon private farmers if they did not submit the required amount of produce while the supply of water was adequate. Peasants do not participate in this system of state agricultural production and are ruled out by the same text-based practices.

Irrigation management is importantly linked with agricultural production and trade. In fact, irrigation was conceptualized as part of international marketing monopolized by the state. Hence, public irrigation in Uzbekistan is organized to serve the state's interests in agricultural commerce. WUA themselves accompanied the agricultural reform aimed at increasing production of strategic exportable crops. When the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan adopted a policy according to which all agricultural enterprises were reorganized into private farming entities¹, in an appendix to this policy WUA were established as main organizations to manage and use water resources in order to support agricultural production among farmers. In this appendix all the necessary definitions, jurisdictions and even model constitutive documents were provided for establishing and managing WUA. These documents included the charter, agreements, schedules, calculations matrices and even the text of the contours. The policy implementer, the Ministry of Agriculture and Water Resource Department oversaw the creation of WUAs around the country and circulated the model policy texts. The WUA I studied in this research also received this package from the District Water Resources Department and used it since it was established. Non-farmers, that is, peasants were not part of this reform because they did not participate in the agricultural trade, they, therefore, were formally excluded from these agricultural production policies. When the market interests of the Uzbek state become pushed down to the text-mediated practices in the most on the ground levels of irrigation management, peasants did not appear there either. Professional staff carrying out their institutional tasks properly, unknowingly and unwittingly prohibited peasants to benefit from public irrigation.

7. Conclusions

There seems to be a generally positive understanding of municipal services, especially as they are contrasted with privatized ones. In 2013 Sultana et al. found that municipally administered water provision systems were broadly understood as more reliable, more cost efficient and equitable. They were also expected to better “attenuate poor women's struggles” and “buffer the hard realities that women face” (p. 12). In Uzbekistan, where this study took place, apparently progressive reforms introduced into the public system of water distribution were also expected to ultimately improve the livelihoods of all rural citizens. I analyzed this public irrigation policy and revealed that in its operation it actually excluded poorer groups of water users, in this case, small-holding peasants for whom their agriculture was the only source of subsistence. These Uzbek peasant women are excluded from participating in and benefiting from the public service and, surprisingly, their exclusion was overlooked by everyone involved.

¹ Cabinet of Ministers Decree No. 8 “On measures of reorganization of agricultural enterprises into farming entities”, adopted on 5 January 2002

These results may be uncomfortable for the policy makers and developers, for the front-line practitioners and more privileged groups of clients. But they are useful in illustrating exactly what McDonald (2012) warns us about, i.e., the ideological undercurrents that keep the front-line workers' focus on particular priorities. I have scrutinized the routine operation of a public water management system, and identified texts which instruct and shape the irrigation work on the ground as well as the reporting work that accounts for it and holds local participants to the correct practices. In this way, I learned precisely how good policy may not automatically translate into envisioned/claimed progressive change even when organized using the best institutional practices. Discriminatory practices often occur invisibly through activities which are taken for granted as correct professional practices. Tracking the institutional roots of these practices I have identified institutional spots where things go wrong for women's participation in a public service. These spots can be made actionable by people who are interested in making the public service work for public.

It is important to reiterate that my results which map in detail how discrimination in a water service actually happens are produced from a particular standpoint, that is the standpoint of the most tail-end public. Scrutinizing a municipal policy from the standpoint of those at the receiving end has the capacity to produce new knowledge about what goes wrong in the actual practices of service delivery. This research has shown that understanding how a municipal policy, even an apparently progressive one, works requires more than using available theories or hypotheses about how the world must function. If we ever want services to work for its intended publics, their concerns, interests and positions must be taken seriously, and this is the message that institutional ethnography carries to its followers.

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