

# UNDER NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIES  
OF CHANGING FRONT-LINE WORK



EDITED BY

**ALISON I. GRIFFITH AND DOROTHY E. SMITH**

# Under New Public Management

*Institutional Ethnographies of  
Changing Front-Line Work*

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AND DOROTHY E. SMITH

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# UNDER NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

## Institutional Ethnographies of Changing Front-Line Work

*Edited by Alison I. Griffith and Dorothy E. Smith*

The institutional ethnographies collected in *Under New Public Management* explore how new managerial governance practices influence the activities of people doing front-line work in public sectors such as health, education, social services, and international development.

In these fields, public organizations have increasingly adopted private-sector management techniques, such as standardized and quantitative measures of performance focused on cost reductions and efficiency. Using research drawn from Canada, the United States, Australia, and Denmark, the contributors expose how standardized managerial requirements are created and applied, and how they are changing the ways in which front-line workers engage with their clients, students, or patients.

ALISON I. GRIFFITH is a professor in the Faculty of Education at York University.

DOROTHY E. SMITH is a professor emerita at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, and an adjunct professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria.

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UNDER NEW PUBLIC MANAGEMENT

Institutional Ethnographies of Changing  
Front-Line Work

# Introduction

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ALISON I. GRIFFITH AND DOROTHY E. SMITH

## Behind Our Backs

The institutional ethnographies collected in this book make visible changes in the front-line work of organizations delivering services to people – changes that are going on behind our backs. Our collected ethnographies explore the introduction of new forms of management, which, we have come to believe, has to be understood in relation to changes in the nation-state.

Go back a few years to a time when a national government had the capacity to manage its economy. Keynesian theory and policy derived therefrom assumed that the state could actually oversee and control its economy to a significant degree. Today globalization, however we interpret that term, means an economy in which commerce, financial organization, and corporate functions are organized and operate transnationally (Mahon & McBride 2008). A major corporation such as Nike (Dicken 2003), for example, has its head offices in Beaverton, Oregon (at the time of writing this Introduction). That is where research is done, where some specialized product lines are produced, and where its central management is located. That central management coordinates a production process, which is organized largely through contracts with other companies that are located in various parts of Southeast Asia, in China, and in other parts of the world. This how Nike now exists as a corporate body (Dicken 2003: 235–6).

Felicity Lawrence, a writer/journalist specializing in the transnationality of foods, summarizes the “global shift” as follows: “While traditional multinationals identified with a national home, TNCs [transnational corporations] have no such loyalty. Territorial borders

are no longer important. This had been the whole thrust of World Trade Organisation [*sic*] treaties in the past decades. Transnationals can now take advantage of the free movement of capital and the ease of shifting production from country to country to choose the regulatory framework that suits them best" (2011: 20). Like it or not, our everyday living depends on the transnational organization of the economy in which TNCs play a major part. The accounting companies littering the global landscape have been systematizing accounting procedures across borders (Eaton & Porter 2008). The enforcement of legal contracts among transnational corporations becomes the responsibility of the relevant regional government authority (Cutler 2008). Free trade agreements undermine the traditional territorially defined boundaries of government control of commerce. Transnational forms of economic governance (Beder 2006) have been established: the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Customs Organization (WCO), the G8, the G20, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and the various bodies of the United Nations. In this changing context of operation, national governments and their various subordinate powers such as states, provinces, and municipalities must now compete with other governments to secure capital investment or commercial advantage: "Instead of the interaction among states constituting the bottom line of world politics, that bottom line now consists of a range of multi-layered processes of conflict, competition and coalition building among a growing diversity of actors, large and small, old and new" (Cerny 2010: 26). Over time, governments move increasingly towards what might be described as a *service* relation to capital. Neoliberal discourse comes to govern both economic policy and how economic issues are represented in the media (Bashevkin 2002; Brunelle 2007).

In the 1950s in Canada, the move towards what we might call the *service* state can be seen in national educational policies. Vis-à-vis the orientation towards promoting capital investment, the people of a country become *human resources* – in Canada what was formerly the Department of Manpower and Immigration (DMI) became the Department of Human Resources and Skills Development Canada (HRSDC) (Smith & Smith 1990). Originally "human resources" was a term used in the corporate context as a label for the special function of departments responsible for recruitment, for managing employee-corporate relations, and so on (Wardell 1992). The use of the term to define the functions of a national government department in Canada suggests a shift away

from service to citizens towards a labour force management strategy oriented to providing a service to employers. The transnational organization of competing labour forces has been facilitated by, among others, the OECD (Pal 2008), which has developed for member states such as Canada standardized measures of students' learning achievements such as those examined in this book in Richard Darville's and Lindsay Kerr's chapters (Chapters One and Three, respectively); these standardized measures are oriented towards the labour market. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) enables comparisons of labour force qualifications transnationally (Rubenson 2008). The 1999 Bologna Accord, European-based but including many other countries (among them Canada) in addition to the 20-plus European signatory countries, represents a commitment to a transnational standardization of higher education outcomes (AccessMasters 2012).

In the context of a transnationally organized economy, citizens' living standards come to depend on how successful governments are in developing in directions that attract and sustain investment and promote commercial opportunities for transnational capital enterprise. Taxation policies aim at increasing a country or region's attractiveness to investment and at facilitating the expansion of commercial relations more generally. As such, what we have described here as the "service" state is also one in which "tax rates must be downwardly harmonized to ensure that the tax regimes do not present a disincentive to investment" (Shields & Evans 1998: 129). Public service costs must somehow be reduced. Alan Sears (2003) describes an emerging regime he calls the "lean state," in which principles of lean production, developed in the capitalist restructuring of the 1970s, are transposed into the design and management of public service with the ostensible aim of reducing costs while improving efficiency.

### **New Public Management**

The reorganization of the public sector on which most of our institutional ethnographies focus is known as the New Public Management (NPM). It involves the imposition of managerial regimes modelled on those already operative in the sphere of private enterprise. "Management" in relation to business developed as a discourse in the late nineteenth-early twentieth century (in institutional ethnography, discourse identifies texts connecting people through what they read, how they talk, what goes on meetings and conferences, and so on and so on).

Distinctive in the emergence of systemaetic approaches to management was Frederick Taylor's application of scientific research to the study of work process (see Montana and Charnov 2008: 15–16). As management's major principles were laid out, most influentially by the French engineer Henri Fayol (see *ibid.*: 19–20), organization came to be conceived as a unit to which individual interests were to be subordinated. Fayol's thinking marked a distinctive and influential shift in two ways:

1. An emphasis on managing as something to be learned (and hence implicitly calling for a management discourse); and
2. A differentiation between supervision as direct control over work processes and management as an overall governing function and authority.

Further developments in managerial discourse and practice took place largely in the United States, focusing first on behavioural approaches and later increasingly on administration and administrative practices (*ibid.*: 23–30). Based on these historical resources, management science has now developed as a generalized discourse (with many subspecializations) taught at all levels in colleges and universities.

Applying what has come to be called New Public Management has involved the adoption and adaptation of strategies and textual technologies that revolutionized corporate management during the 1980s and 1990s (Drucker 1964; Osborne & Gaebler 1993; Davidow & Malone 1993). NPM is a major institutional specification of neoliberalism aiming to produce in the public sector a simulacrum of private-sector organization and management (Aucoin 1995; Shields & Evans 1998; McCoy 1998, 1999; McBride 2005; Savoie 2003). Some aspects of NPM focus on reproducing in the public sector the marketized relations characteristic of business corporations (Osborne & Gaebler 1993; Hood 1995; Newman 2002; Wright 2008). More directly relevant to the institutional ethnographies collected in this book are those elements focused on how new management functions within units and, in particular, on managerial control of workers and their work. Here, from his original list of seven, is Christopher Hood's description of "moves" introduced by the NPM that are particularly relevant in this context:

1. A move towards greater use within the public sector of management practices which are broadly drawn from the private sector ...

2. A move towards greater stress on discipline and parsimony in resource use and on active search for finding alternative, less costly ways to deliver public services ...

3. A move towards "*hands-on-management*" (i.e., more active control of public organizations by a visible top manager wielding discretionary power) as against the traditional style of "*hands-off*" management in the public sector, involving relatively anonymous bureaucrats at the top of public-sector organizations ...

4. A move towards more *explicit and measurable* (or at least checkable) standards of performance for public sector organizations, in terms of the range, level, and content of services to be provided, as against trust in professional standards and expertise across the public sector. (1995: 97)

The institutional ethnographic investigations collected in this book explore how new managerial practices are imposed and operate in public sector services in which the major work focus for realizing objectives is done at the front line. Public sector front-line work presents some special (though institutionally various) problems in realizing NPM objectives, particularly those objectives that seek to establish standardized evaluations of performance or outcomes and enable comparison with similar services.

In an early study of social work and the theory of organization, Gilbert Smith (1970) took up and developed the concept of front-line organizations as it had been originally formulated in Dorothy Smith's (1963) study of a state mental hospital in California. Gilbert Smith described social work as functioning in organizations wherein a centralized hierarchy cannot effectively command units at the periphery. He described "the distinctive characteristics of 'front-line organizations'" as follows:

1. The organizational initiative is located in front-line units;
2. Each unit performs its tasks independently of other units; and
3. There are obstacles to the direct supervision of the activities of such units. (1970: 37)

Gilbert Smith emphasized the importance of professional training in ensuring that those making decisions effective for clients at the front line "have internalize[d] standards of commitment and acquire[d] levels of competence which ensure that he [or she] acts in accordance with a given set of norms even in the absence of intensive supervision" (ibid.: 41).

As John Clarke and Janet Newman have argued, it is precisely these discretionary powers of professionals as well as the rigidities of bureaucratic organization that the “moves” (Hood 1995) towards “managerialism” displace. At the same time, the problems remain of how to manage organizations in which people working at the front line must align their activities with these new major objectives, whether in work they themselves are producing or in work dealing directly with those being served. New public management has had to and continues to struggle with developing forms of control that are responsive to the new practicalities. Managerial forms of control in business settings take for granted production processes standardized to fit the categories of managerial accounting systems, thus enabling decisions, planning, and command to be centralized and hierarchic (see Zurawski, Chapter Eight). However, as managerial systems developed for business corporations are translated for public-sector front-line organizations, the distinctive characteristics that Gilbert Smith lists are not done away with, but must somehow be entered into managerial practices of control. Hence, the focus of the ethnographies collected in this book is on how that which Clarke and Newman label “the managerial state” reorganizes work performed at the front line, including at the interchange between institutions and the people served.

### **Our Starting Place**

This book developed out of concerns we, the editors, were beginning to have about what was going on in our society (as well as elsewhere) “behind our backs.” Studies such as Clarke and Newman’s book (1997) alerted us to the possibility that changes happening in Britain had their parallels in Canada: new accountability routines, cutbacks in the public sector, and the decline of professional autonomy. So, too, the institutional ethnographic research presentations we were hearing and the papers we were reading also spoke of change – a reorganization of people’s everyday/everynight lives and how their work was being transformed. Across professional and disciplinary boundaries, the similarities between the described changes were striking. For us, it was as if this research, starting in the everyday world of work, school, and home, was exploring a range of mountains we could see in the distance – each study opening up a new trail and discovering more of the mountain range. Yet there was much still to be learned, particularly about how the complex of social relations was being put together as people’s



everyday activities. Our discussions were further stimulated by reading institutional ethnographies of front-line managerial reorganization, most notably, perhaps, Janet Rankin and Marie Campbell's (2006) study of the managerial reorganization of hospital nurses' front-line work in British Columbia. Of course, there were other sources describing the phenomena we were becoming increasingly aware of (e.g., Ball 2012; Rizvi & Lingard 1999). There was little, however, that would allow us to explore, beyond people's everyday activities, the complex of social relations that organizes their work.

Opening up further routes of discovery into the range of mountains that our discussions and reading had brought into view became a focus for the working conference that we organized entitled "Governance and the Front Line" funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and held in the Fall of 2009 in Toronto. We invited institutional ethnographers and researchers using related approaches whose work was showing us directions into this mysterious mountain range but who had not yet fully explored them. Those faculty and graduate student researchers who were able to attend came mainly from Canada but also from the United States, Denmark, and Australia. Our research topics included nursing, education, families and schools, health work, international development, literacy work, and new methods for collecting data. We came together as a group to discuss our research and to push further to bring into view the institutional technologies of change that were starting to show up in our research. Exploring the routes and where they led became the focus of our workshop sessions. The chapters in this book were developed by participants out of their current research, their workshop presentations, and the group discussions at the conference; research, thinking, and writing continued beyond the workshop and in some cases were completed only two or three years after the workshop was concluded.

We modelled our workshop on a previous one organized by Pamela Moss and Kathy Teghtsoonian in 2005,<sup>1</sup> creating as best we could a dialogue among participants. Before the conference, we asked the participants to write a short description of their line of research as the starting point for our work together. After sharing research descriptions among participants, we established working groups that were asked to sketch out a paper during the conference. Our hope was that the participants would be able to bring their research to bear on the more general topic they had selected and produce a set of papers speaking to the new pathways we wanted to open up. Indeed, for two groups, this