

Institutional Ethnography

Newsletter of the International Sociological Association Thematic Group 06

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Institutional
Ethnography



International
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Association

From the President...

As I compulsively read the international news about the spread of the new coronavirus, I am particularly attentive to information about life in the countries where TG06 members live and work. I know that for some of you, the situation is very bad. Here in Calgary, Canada, we are bracing for things to get worse, while working and hoping for the best. I am staying at home and learning to conduct my professional and social life entirely via email and video-conferencing. And on my daily walks through the neighbourhood I am observing the slow transition to spring in this cold climate; nothing is green yet, but just the other day I saw a hare whose fur was starting to change from winter white to summer brown.

The IV ISA Forum has sensibly been postponed to February 23-27, 2021. These dates are not ideal for many of us, but they are what is possible for the local organizers. I have been told that there will be a process for re-opening the Call for Papers in the autumn. This will bring in additional participants to compensate for those people who will not be able attend during the new dates. We will share information about the postponed conference and our plans for our sessions as it becomes available.

On a positive note, we have made an application to upgrade from a Thematic Group to a Working Group. Thank you to everyone who sent an email supporting the application! We surpassed the requirements for support in terms of numbers and regional diversity. We will let you know when we hear back from the ISA Executive.

Stay safe and well.

Liza McCoy

From the Newsletter Editor...

Welcome to the twelfth issue of the ISA TG06 newsletter! Given the current pandemic this is a bit of a slimmed down version of the newsletter. I hope that all our TG06 members and their families and friends are healthy and safe and able to take up public health guidance around physical distancing.

My thanks go to all the contributors to this issue of our newsletter. I would also like to thank Leigha Comer for her assistance in compiling this edition of the newsletter. In this issue you will find heartfelt remembrances of founding TG06 president, Alison Griffith. Marj DeVault offers her reflections on the launch of *Institutional Ethnography in the Nordic Region*, edited by Rebecca Lund and Ann Christin Nilsen. Book announcements from TG06 members, Frank Wang and *Kjeld Høgsbro*, are a testament to the growing global reach of IE scholarship. Check out the special milestones of Leigha Comer and Alison Fisher on page 13. Please also take a look at the call for new Board and Executive members on page 14. We need to renew the leadership of TG06 as the terms for the current Board and Executive will soon end.

Please remember that in order for the newsletter to be a continued success we need to hear from you. We want to hear about your ideas for content and we want to share information about your publications, your research, readings that you've done, conferences that are upcoming or that you've attended, career milestones and accomplishments, scholarly events and other matters of interest to your TG06 colleagues. If there's something you'd like to see happen in the newsletter send an email to me with your suggestions. And if you'd like to be featured in our Getting to Know Our Members section send us a bio. Don't be shy. This is your newsletter!

Eric Mykhalovskiy

Remembering Alison Griffith: Reflections and Tributes from the IE Community

Alison Griffith, first president of TG06, passed away last fall. Alison was a visionary leader and network-builder, an energetic and efficient organizer, a generous mentor, and a central contributor to the practice and literature of institutional ethnography. Lois André-Bechely, Marjorie DeVault, Alison Fisher, Paul Luken, Naomi Nichols, Dorothy Smith, and Yoko Ueda share their memories and tributes.



Yoko Ueda: I met Alison for the first time at OISE in 1978, when I enrolled in Dorothy E. Smith's class in the Department of Sociology in Education. Until then, I only knew her as one of the students who came with or followed Dorothy from UBC. Students who were already in the department called this group of students the "UBC pack". According to gossip circulated at the time, the members of the pack were very smart and brilliant individuals whom Dorothy "hand-picked" from UBC. In fact, they later proved themselves by becoming the driving force of Institutional Ethnography as researchers and professors. Alison was tall, slim, red-haired, and often in blue jeans which sat well on her. Taking Dorothy's classes with the pack, and having coffee breaks together, I got to know them better. Although Dorothy had not fully developed Institutional Ethnography yet, we were inspired by her idea of doing sociological inquiry. Alison was good at mimicking Dorothy, saying, "We've got to find out how people are putting our everyday world together." Sitting in Dorothy's class and listening to her "proposal" for changing our way of doing sociology, which demanded us to make an "ontological shift," I completely understood why Alison and her UBC colleagues were driven to move to Toronto.

Probably because Alison and I were in the same age bracket as women, we had much in common. The commonality was, however, not necessarily a happy one. It was a series of struggles. Graduating from OISE /UT with a PhD, we could not find a so-called "real job," a tenure-track position in an academic institution. While Alison could manage to find short-term and/or temporary positions here and there, my SSHRC grant ran out. We decided to set up a research consultant business without any idea of the business. We even visited one of the Ontario government agencies to register our business. I would say that we were that desperate. In the meantime, we started to look for jobs in the US market. Although both of us were interested in a position in similar fields, we shared and exchanged whatever we found. In a year or so, Alison found a position at the University of New Orleans. She seemed confident in her work and settled nicely in the city. Encouraged by her, I too landed on Spelman College in the US. However, our common struggle did not end there. One day Alison called me to say that she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was calm and reminded me of our age and having a mammogram. The following year, I too was diagnosed with the same cancer. Just as in our job search, we now exchanged available information and compared our notebooks about pros and cons of treatments, prognosis and even survival rates. We found that Alison's cancer was more advanced than mine. When the cancer returned to Alison, I somehow felt Alison walking ahead of me again. I cried when Alison passed away, but felt peace in the middle of sadness. Alison and I shared many struggles and joys for many years as women, feminists, students, academics, and so on. I appreciate and treasure the legacy Alison left behind. She was truly a wonderful friend.

Yoko Ueda

Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Social Justice Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, Canada

Dorothy Smith: Alison and I first got to know one another at UBC when she took courses with me and I supervised her MA thesis. When I made my move to OISE. Alison, along with several other graduate students who had been working with me at UBC, transferred there for their doctoral work. In Toronto Alison and I hiked together occasionally on the ravine trails, sharing our experiences as single parents with two sons in public schools. The category of the "single parent" as it came into play in school administration and among teachers in Toronto became the focus of her dissertation. I saw this topic as having significant possibilities beyond the fine work she had done, and made a research funding application which was successful. This was the research that produced our first book together, *Mothering for Schooling* (2005). Our second project was stimulated by Janet Rankin's and Marie Campbell's remarkable study *Managing to Nurse*. Alison and I brought together in a workshop a number of institutional ethnographers whose research in various ways explored the imposition of new forms of management on Canadian public service. Of course it took a while to get from workshop discussions (in the fall of 2009) to a book bringing together the various papers developed from the workshop – see our edited collection *Under New Public Management: Institutional Ethnographies of Changing Front-line Work* (2014). In drawing the collection together we had to discover common threads in the accounts and looking back I feel we need more bringing together institutional ethnographies with a common focus to discover aspects of ruling relations that go beyond individual studies. Our final work together is called *Simply Institutional Ethnography*; it was finished in unedited form just before Alison died; that made her happy. It's now with the editor, Stephan Dobson, and then it will go for review by the University of Toronto Press which has recently opened an Institutional Ethnography series. Alison was an amazing person to work with on joint productions – creative,

inventive and wise. She was a highly original thinker with amazing insight; our occasional disagreements were always fruitful in their outcome. I learned so much working with her.

Dorothy Smith

Professor Emerita, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Adjunct Professor, University of Victoria
Canada

Marjorie DeVault: I know that Alison has been a much-beloved teacher and mentor for younger scholars in the IE community. They may not know that she was also a mentor for me back in the early 1980s, when we were both graduate students learning about institutional ethnography. As we “grew up” professionally, Alison became an extremely important colleague and I recall many lively conversations as we thought about how mothering might be “text-mediated.” Later, from the 1990s and onward, she saw and helped us all develop connections among the many IE projects that revealed consequential transformations in the public sector, and the neoliberal ideologies and technologies that were driving those changes. She demonstrated, through the very productive collective work she nurtured, the important ways that IE studies can be brought together to bring wider parts of the ruling relations into view. She was generous with newcomers to the IE network, and helped to build that network in many ways, including in the ISA. And whenever she brought IE’ers together, she offered not only insight and scholarly advice, but also comradeship, understanding, and fun. I’m immensely grateful for Alison’s work and the time we had together.

Marjorie L. DeVault

Professor Emerita, Department of Sociology, Syracuse University, USA

Lois André-Bechely: I was one of Alison Griffith’s students. When Alison first introduced me to the IE Network, many people assumed I was at York University, but I wasn’t. I was getting my doctorate at UCLA and while Alison was not a member of my doctoral committee, she was in almost every way my honorary dissertation chair. I had read some of Alison’s work and I found out that she was going to be at a research conference that I also planned to attend. I contacted her, told her of my interest in IE and asked if I could have lunch with her. We met and talked well into the afternoon that day. It was that first meeting when she agreed to guide me using IE for my dissertation but would do it from York. It was the beginning of our relationship with her as my mentor, as a colleague, and as a wonderful friend. When I was writing my dissertation proposal, she was reading my draft and emailing me with advice. When I started data collection, she was on sabbatical and she invited me to her home in New Orleans to help me with analysis. When I completed my doctorate, she wrote letters of recommendation for my job applications. Alison was always there for me just as if I had studied with her at York. I could not have been more fortunate. For the next twenty years, Alison and I became good friends and collaborated on IE work. Our husbands got along well and when we all traveled to international conferences they played, and Alison and I did IE sessions. Alison Griffith was that very special mentor and friend who helped me become the professor that I am today. I miss Alison all the time.

Lois André-Bechely

Professor, Division of Applied & Advanced Studies in Education, California State University, USA

Alison Fisher: I had the honour of being one of Alison's last doctoral students in York University's Faculty of Education graduate program. My feelings of honour are very directly connected to the incredible energy that Alison put into being a supportive mentor for her students. I felt this energy from Alison and was a fortunate recipient, even as she was struggling with illness in the last five years of her life. She was a particularly fierce advocate for her students who, like her, did not entirely fit into the 'traditional' academy. She made space for us in the intellectual circles of her life, welcoming others who may not have been able to enter these spaces otherwise. She was earnest and passionate about engaged scholarship - about scholarship that considered how life could be better and more humane for people. Despite her illness these last few years, Alison continued to be a formidable intellectual force, helping to keep me on track as I struggled at times to actualize the principles of institutional ethnographic analysis in my dissertation. She continued to supportively connect with me to urge me to finish my project, even a few short weeks before her passing. As I prepare for my doctoral defence in a matter of days, my heart will be drawing upon her protective and supportive energy that she so generously and unequivocally shared with me over the eight years that I knew her.

Alison Fisher, PhD Candidate, Faculty of Education, York University, Canada



Alison Griffith (right), with Alison Fisher (left) and Marjorie DeVault (centre), at the SSSP Conference in Seattle, USA, in August 2016.

Naomi Nichols: I wrote a longer piece on Alison's profound influence on my sense of self and responsibility as a scholar in the [fall IE newsletter for the SSSP](#). Here, I want to highlight Alison's important contribution to critical educational scholarship. The full heft of what Alison and Dorothy were doing with *Mothering for Schooling* didn't strike me until I was trying to make sense of the data from the project Alison and I co-led, called *Schools, Safety and Urban Neighbourhoods*. With this project, it wasn't that individual teachers or principals or school police officers were racist and classist (although I'm sure some were); rather, it was that the entire education system was organized to produce vastly different educational outcomes among the young people and families I was working with (Black, typically single-parent, economically struggling, institutionally wary) than it did for me and my own children (white, two-parent, economically comfortable and institutionally entitled). As I was trying (and failing) to write this up, it struck me that this was a similar problematic to the one that Alison and Dorothy were explicating in their book (i.e., that the institutional organization of public schooling requires and obscures the work of middle class mothers in two-parent households), and that in the absence of this unacknowledged set of social conditions, schools struggle and families are blamed. Their analysis is only more relevant today, as activists and scholars are actively pushing back against individualized/individualizing accounts of social problems that clearly have systemic roots. We are past the point of documenting instances of racism or sexism or homophobia between individuals; the work now is to uncover how ordinary institutional processes perpetuate and sustain historically situated inequalities. Alison's scholarship in this area was ahead of curve and is instructive today as people grapple with questions of how to illuminate the ways that entire systems of thought, organization and governance privilege and/or oppress particular groups of people.

Naomi Nichols

Assistant Professor, Department of Integrated Studies in Education
McGill University, Canada

Paul Luken: I have had a hard time writing about Alison because I never made the effort to get to know much about her. I didn't need to. Quickly Alison became someone that I felt I knew all my life. She was always so easy to be around and talk with. She had a fine sense of humor and an unflagging commitment to IE. That became evident in her presentations and her work as a Board member of SSSP, chair of the Institutional Ethnography Division, and first President of ISA Thematic Group on Institutional Ethnography. While sitting in on discussions after presentations at these meetings, I never knew what Alison might say, but I knew she would have something to offer and it would be interesting. I could depend upon her. I have a hard time writing about Alison because I still miss her.

Paul Luken

Associate Professor Emeritus, Department of Sociology
University of West Georgia, USA

The Nordic IE Network's Book Launch

By Marj DeVault



*Kneeling, center: Rebecca Lund (U. of Oslo), Ann Christin Nilsen (U. of Agder), Editors
 Front row: 6th from left: Karin Widerberg (U. of Oslo, Emerita), Founder of the Nordic IE Network
 7th from left: Marj DeVault (Syracuse U., Emerita)
 Back row: 4th from left: May-Linda Magnussen (U. of Agder), Organizing team for the event; Book contributors gathered in the center of the group, surrounded by well-wishers.*

I met Karin Widerberg, briefly, some time ago when we were both young feminist scholars, intrigued and inspired by Dorothy Smith's "sociology for women." I met Rebecca Lund much more recently, when she presented her impressive IE research on academic work in the neoliberal university at an ISA meeting. I had the pleasure of seeing both of them again recently, when Rebecca invited me to attend the celebratory launch for the book she has edited with Ann Christin Nilsen. We gathered at the University of Oslo, for an afternoon seminar hosted by their Centre for Gender Studies. The book, *Institutional Ethnography in the Nordic Region* (Routledge, 2019), provides an English-language

collection of IE research conducted by members of the Nordic IE network founded by Prof. Widerberg, and it is an impressive and important collection for our scholarly community.

I'd like to underline two contributions of this collection to our collective discussions. First, the contributors are interested how their IE scholarship is inflected by the distinctive character of Nordic life and governance, and how the ruling relations they explore are shaped by regional and national histories. IE developed in a North American context, and these authors provide a model for thinking about regional differences that may influence our investigations. In addition, these Nordic IE scholars have a thoughtful and productively provocative view on the question of whether and how IE might be combined or supplemented with other theoretical perspectives. I have myself been skeptical of this idea, but these scholars have pushed me to see the question with a more open mind. I'm impressed with their attempts at combination for two reasons: First, these are writers whose IE work is well-informed, and they are committed to maintaining the integrity of the IE approach whether or not they deploy other ideas. In addition, they do not rush to a synthesis of IE and something else, but rather make room for what they call "hybrid" approaches, which put IE approaches "in conversation" with other perspectives. They haven't quite won me over, and I shared with them my concern for retaining IE's critical ontological foundation (always focused on people doing things and the coordination of those doings). But it's clear that they are advancing this discussion in useful ways.

The day before the book launch, I had the opportunity to meet with graduate students from several Nordic universities, and we discussed their projects in a lively seminar. Some are pursuing projects that explore institutional processes in Scandinavian welfare states, in areas such as education, work and welfare services, health, and digitalization in these areas and others; some are exploring dynamics of immigrant and refugee incorporation in their societies. Some were advanced students completing their projects, and I imagine you might be seeing them soon at ISA meetings; others are just beginning to explore IE and its potential. We talked about their projects and began to identify institutional linkages we could see, a first step toward preliminary mapping for analytic work. We also addressed questions they'd sent me, including some of the issues that students face everywhere (e.g., how to explain IE to my committee members; how to get started with analysis; how to show that my analysis is rigorous), and also issues they're facing in particular projects as they develop analyses. I think we all enjoyed the time together—I know that I did!

Of course, the world has changed dramatically since we met so happily on Feb. 27-28. I'm writing now, in mid-March, as all of our communities are "locking down" to various degrees, in attempts to mitigate the dangers and damage of a global pandemic. I fear that for a while we will not have opportunities for the kind of face-to-face exchange that has been so important for the growth and development of institutional ethnography. Let us all practice good public health and also work on creative ways to stay in touch.

Also: While we celebrated, I had the chance to see Kjeld Høgsbro's new English-language book, *How to Conduct Ethnographies of Institutions for People with Cognitive Difficulties* (Routledge); having appreciated his presentations at ISA, I was delighted to see it. It's great to have both of these new texts available now to a broad international audience.

New Publications

A delayed birthday gift – The first Chinese book on Institutional Ethnography in Taiwan was published in February 2020

By Frank T. Y. Wang

Since Dorothy Smith visited Taiwan in 2004, the ideas that make IE an alternative sociology have attracted many Taiwanese academic and practitioners. Most readings about IE are either written in English in the context of Western societies or translated into Chinese. Can IE be applicable to another culture? How does IE evolve in a different context and language during the transnational process? As an IEer in Taiwan, teaching my students to grasp the ideas of IE has been the core of my academic career. After 15 years, I am pleased to announce that the book *Decoding the Game of Power: Institutional Ethnography in Taiwan*, edited by me and Li-Fang Liang, has just been published in February 2020 by Socio Publishing Co.

Developed as an alternative sociology to the theory-driven mainstream one, putting experience ahead of theory is a central step in how IE challenges taken-for-granted assumptions and relations of power. Taiwanese scholars adapted and applied institutional ethnography to explicate the changing mode of power as Taiwan has become a new and active democratic society. This book is a collection of institutional ethnographic studies in Taiwan, showing how it has been interpreted within the theoretical landscape of social scientific research in Taiwan, as well as the institutional particularities of the Taiwanese social system.



Decoding the Game of Power: Institutional Ethnography in Taiwan, edited by Frank T.Y. Wang and Li-Fang Liang

This book is privileged to have a preface by Dorothy Smith. In her preface, Dorothy remarks on how practicing IE in different settings provides new openings for IE to develop. She refers to her recent idea about “treating words as people’s practices so that they could be incorporated into ethnography as they coordinate people’s consciousness” in order to encourage Taiwanese IEers to “advance the capacities of IE to expand its research possibilities.”

The book contains twelve chapters, which are examples of investigation into the social organization of institutionalized power by Taiwanese researchers. As an introduction to IE through cases, the book is aimed to demonstrate how IE can be applied to research. We organized the book into three sections that correspond to three key concepts in institutional ethnography: disjunctures in everyday life; work and work knowledges; and text and ruling relations. Three cases are presented in each section with a brief discussion of the key concepts. A fourth section entitled 'theory, practice and dialogue' offers a critical review of IE from the perspective of Taiwanese academics. It contains three chapters. The first chapter by Frank Wang reviews the development of IE research in Taiwan and the historical conditions that shaped the interpretation of IE in Taiwan. The second chapter by Wei-Hsian Chi outlines the roots of and theoretical debates about institutional ethnography from a sociologist's perspective. In the third chapter in response to Chi, and as a tribute to George Smith, Frank Wang writes about his involvement in research on family violence to show how IE can be adopted for activism and social action.



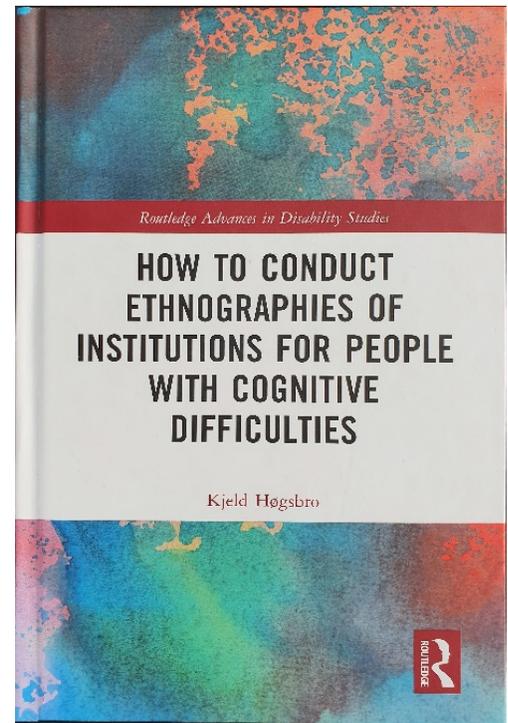
Frank T. Y. Wang and Dorothy Smith with a copy of ***Decoding the Game of Power: Institutional Ethnography in Taiwan***

In 2005, I promised Dorothy Smith that I would write a book on IE in Taiwan as a gift for her 80th birthday. I remember Marie Campbell came to Dorothy's house with a gift. Marie held Dorothy, telling me, "This woman changed my life!" I looked around and realized the house was full of people inspired by IE who were a collective with a commitment for social change. I left the house, telling myself "I need to find my own group in Taiwan." It took me fifteen years to build my IE group. I have taught IE in my qualitative research course in the Graduate Institute of Social Work of Chengchi University, supervising students to conduct IE-based research. Dorothy Smith visited Taiwan for the second time in 2012 along with Marie Campbell and Marj DeVault. After that, we had two study group projects involving 15 scholars and some graduate students for two years. With friendship and solidarity, this book became a reality. I thought I would embark on a one-person project of writing an IE book, but it turned out to be a collective project involving individuals who were stuck in institutional power relations and were searching for a way out. The book is a testimony to the IE community building process.

About my new book, *How to conduct ethnographies of institutions for people with cognitive difficulties*.

By *Kjeld Høgsbro*

In this book, I have tried to give a comprehensive introduction to the methodological and theoretical considerations, which I find necessary when you are conducting ethnographies of institutions for people with cognitive difficulties. When entering this world, with its strong dominance of user organizations and professional discourses, it is necessary to have an overview of different alternative approaches to evaluation and applied social research. It is necessary to be able to argue for the use of ethnographic approaches and know exactly how they contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms which influence the everyday of users and professionals. Mechanisms, which are either taken for granted or simply belong to other actors' doings on other levels of the institutional complex. It is urgent to know the concepts and theories within disability research so you do not disgrace yourself in the discussions. Thus, the book presents an overview of applied social research and its historical experiences from trying to contribute to the development of welfare institutions. Following this, it presents both the meta-theoretical discussions and specific methodological guidelines for ethnographic research projects. Then, it introduces the accepted premises for disability studies and the specific state of the art for understanding different social aspects of cognitive difficulties. Finally, it presents the "backstage" experiences from eight research programs: some have involved several researchers; others have been accomplished by a single researcher for two years; and three of them have been used for master's theses.



Personally, I want to see the book as an extension of the tradition of institutional ethnography because the methodology it presents is strongly inspired by the premises of the tradition. It aims at identifying the problematic. It takes its point of departure in the everyday world of people with cognitive difficulties and goes from there to the study of the interaction with professionals and the trans-local conditions which influence this interaction. But it also includes the art of identifying cultural themes and it includes a discussion of the relationship between culture and creativity, structure and existence. Thus it draws on the whole tradition of hermeneutic ethnography and social anthropology.

I am looking forward to getting any form of critique and feed-back from those who would be interested in reading it.

Kjeld Høgsbro, *How to Conduct Ethnographies of Institutions for People with Cognitive Difficulties*. London: Routledge, 2020.

Announcements

Congratulations to **Alison Fisher**, York University, Faculty of Education who, on February 26, successfully defended her dissertation entitled *The 'Equity Work' of Activist Teachers: Navigating Educational Policy on Gender-based Violence in Neoliberal Times*.

Abstract: In the last fifty years, the transnational re-organization of the economy has similarly re-structured education in the West to reflect a focus on standards, assessments, accountability systems, and performance indicators (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010). Social democratic notions of equity in education have been reframed through a discourse of economism (Ball, 1999; Rezai Rashti, Segeren & Martino, 2017). Critical policy studies informed by Foucauldian notions of discourse have provided key insights on changing global governance relations in education – mediated largely by texts - and the impact these relations have had on local equity discourses of gender, sexuality and race embedded in various policy texts. However, less prevalent are empirical studies that show how these complex relations operate 'on the ground' in schools to (dis)organize the equity work of teachers and the impact these broad trans-national policies have on teachers and students in particular localized settings. My dissertation project builds on this existing literature by applying the theoretical insights of Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990, 1993, 2005) in order to better consider how global forms of educational governance and extra local 'relations of ruling' are shaping equity policies on gender-based violence and the work of activist teachers who actualize these policies in schools. I begin from the experiences of activist teachers to explore the 'equity work' that they do to address gender and sexual (in)equities arising in classrooms and schools throughout the Toronto District School Board. I illustrate how first, global relations of power constrain teachers' work on gender and sexual equity projects in particular ways and also how activist teachers creatively and strategically disrupt the coherence of these relations. My work suggests new sites of intervention in critical equity endeavors to re-enliven democratic public education and move beyond the constraints of a neoliberal imaginary of schooling.



Welcome, Baby William!

TG06 Editorial Board member Leigha Comer, her husband Subbu, and their older son, George, have welcomed a new addition to their family: William Elio, born February 5, 2020 at 9.1 lbs. Both mom and baby are doing very well! Congratulations!

**Would you like to be President, Vice-President, or Secretary/Treasurer of TG06?
Or serve on the Board?**

The terms of office of the current Executive and Board of TG06 will conclude in December 2020. Consider putting your name forward for a four-year term starting in January 2021! We will recruit self-nominations and hold elections electronically in the latter part in 2020. In the meantime, if you would like more information about these positions and the work involved, don't hesitate to contact any member of the Board or Executive.

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