UNCOVERING INEQUALITIES: 
ADDRESSING THE (RE)PRODUCTION OF POWER 
RELATIONS WITHIN FINANCIAL AID PROCESSES 
THROUGH INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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THE FAFSA AS ORGANIZING TOOL: THE PROBLEMATIC WITHIN FINANCIAL AID PROCESSES

IE studies open institutions and institutional sites for deeper understanding by capturing individual experience, local practice and examination of discourse and text.

• Scholarly research on FAFSA asserts that process is lengthy and complex for students; affects access of information to marginalized groups.

• Underlying principles within the FAFSA--capitalism, patriarchy, militarism--alienates people unfamiliar with these hegemonic ideologies (1st generations students, low-income families).

• FAFSA applicants generally uniformed of the social organization (behind the scenes organizing) of FAFSA process to other bureaucratic agencies.

• Within institutions FAFSA socially organizes processes locally and trans-locally as a means to governing.
WHAT IS AN INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHY?

IE is a theorized way of seeing and knowing that re-orientates people in their everyday world. (Campbell & Gregor 2002)

• Developed by Canadian Sociologist Dorothy Smith (Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology 1987).

• Influenced by Marx, Foucault, Feminist Standpoint Theory.

• Is utilized to explore how knowing relates to power. How is one’s knowing organized, by whom and by what? (Campbell & Gregor 2002).

• Explicitly examines how processes emerge in association to the institutional locations that situate, compel, and organize them (LaFrance & Nicolas 2012).

• Complexity of Information is simplified by mapping to help ordinary people understand.
UTILIZING IE TO ANALYZE FINANCIAL AID PROCESSES

IE allows for the discovery of how individual relationships to processes occur within daily activities and extends that knowledge into a valuable resource that could be utilized to inform policy.

- IE is used by researchers as a tool to invoke activism/social justice.
- Allows for critical reflection as a means of extending conversations regarding structure and power.
- Traces the work people do with texts that puts “policy” into action and that produces what happens as “routine” in order to understand how governing and policy work. (Turner 2006).
- Utilizes the experiential knowledge of the researcher, in other words, uses the researcher’s knowledge as an insider to identify the problematic and ‘research up’ through processes.
RESEARCH DESIGN

“IE's tools for the examination of practice and the contexts that shape it have the potential to shine a light on how our institutional realities shape what we do and how we do it, as we seek out possibilities for reinvention, intervention, and reform.” (LaFrance & Nicolas 2012).

• Human Subjects approved study-6 financial aid staff and 3 administrative staff.
• Purposive sampling—Expert and Snowball.
• Fieldwork included Lobby observations of financial aid counselor and student interactions.
• Study included observations of staff as they carried out their daily duties, coupled with unstructured interviews to locate and explicate how things happen and gain insight into the practices and norms that shape individual experience.
RULING RELATIONS WITHIN PROCESSES

Social organization begins in the textual mediation and discursive activity located within institutional practice; these are the principal agents of governing and how ruling relations within organizations take shape.

- Tensions identified—counselor student/ body language, anxieties, “needy” persona (comfort ability/annoyance/fear).—Lobby observations.
- Difficulty of communicating multiple levels of extremely complex and rapidly changing policies to the public.
- Ethical issues of skepticism vs. authenticity of info for counselors.
- Objectification of students through text, language and forms.
- Subordination of human problem to FAFSA eligibility.
- Siloes of information, make understanding administrative process difficult.
- Student participation as a way of serving the ‘equitable university.’
MAPPING OF FAFSA PROCESS

Financial aid office
Verification of FAFSA info

College or University of Choice

Tax Information/Knowledge of IRS processes

National and Private loan Information

Federal/State/Institutional Programs and Policy

Registrar's/Enrollment Information

Academic Advising Information

Admissions/ Degree Program Information

US Citizenship Dept of Homeland Security Information

Demographic Info Marital Status Citizenship Gender

Number of Dependents Household Size

Military Status Social Programs

Tax Return Information Student & Spouse

Student Demographic Info Marital Status Citizenship Gender

Student's parents Demographic Info Marital Status Citizenship Gender

No. of Dependents Household Size

Tax Return Information Parent & Spouse

FAFSA PROCESS

Independent Student

Dependent Student

Dependent Students Parent(s)
REFERENCES


