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Navigating Ruling Relations in Institutional Ethnographic Fieldwork

Reflections on the Ontological Shift and Activists' Work

Naviguer les relations de pouvoir dans le travail de terrain en ethnographie institutionnelle

Réflexions sur le virage ontologique et le travail des personnes militantes

Hye-Su Kuk

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NAVIGATING RULING RELATIONS IN INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIC FIELDWORK: REFLECTIONS ON THE ONTOLOGICAL SHIFT AND ACTIVISTS' WORK[1]

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Abstract

Based on year-long fieldwork on activist-educators' work in South Korea, I reflect on how my research complicates the ontological shift in institutional ethnography: that is, the shift that emphasizes how ruling relations are coordinated through the very actions of people. I discuss two facets of reflective pauses. First, I discuss how the ruling relations of research practice in South Korea render the ontological shift "slippery." I argue for a need to understand the ontological shift in relation to external contexts of research instead of an individualized approach. Second, I detail the process of a comparative research design looking at activist-educators with differing levels of engagement with the Korean state. I highlight how a transitional void that emerged after democratization prompted different activist strategies. I call for a need to reconsider the connection between activists' work and institutional ethnography, where investigating activists' work provides a lens into the ruling relations.

Résumé

En m'appuyant sur le travail de terrain d'un an de personnes éducatrices-militantes en Corée du Sud, je réfléchis sur la manière dont mes recherches complexifient le virage ontologique en ethnographie institutionnelle : c'est-à-dire, le virage qui souligne la coordination des relations de pouvoir par les actions mêmes des gens. J'aborde deux dimensions des pauses réflexives. Premièrement, j'aborde en quoi les relations de pouvoir dans la pratique de recherche en Corée du Sud rendent « glissant » le virage ontologique. Je soutiens qu'il est nécessaire de comprendre le virage ontologique en lien avec les contextes externes, au lieu d'une approche individualisée. Deuxièmement, je décris le processus d'une recherche comparative sur les personnes éducatrices-militantes dont varient les degrés d'implication auprès de l'état coréen. Je souligne de quelle manière un vide transitionnel ayant émergé après la démocratisation a mené

1 I would like to express my wholehearted gratitude to activist-educators who participated in my research, as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their dedication and time that made this article possible.

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Keywords

institutional ethnography, citizenship education; ontological shift; ruling relations of research; qualitative fieldwork

Mots-clés

ethnographie institutionnelle, éducation sur la citoyenneté, virage ontologique, relations de pouvoir en recherche, travail de terrain qualitatif

A Sociology for People, Activism, and Praxis

A dedication shared by institutional ethnographers is to build a sociology *for* people rather than *of* people. More specifically, this dedication is closely connected to Dorothy Smith's call for research that contributes to activism, contrary to research that ends up objectifying the activists. A key ontological shift in institutional ethnography is to view ruling relations as a set of complex social relations, where it is often the case that the practices of ruling occur through texts that "travel" across people, activated by people's actions. The focus is to uncover exactly how these processes work, so that the research could shed light on how activists organize resistance against the ruling relations.

Many researchers have drawn on institutional ethnography to achieve real and meaningful changes in society. George Smith (1990) made the connection between institutional ethnography and activism even more explicit in his article "Political Activist as Ethnographer," which involved two specific sites of activism. The first was his work on police raids of gay men's bathhouses in Toronto in the early 1980s. Going beyond an abstract notion of the potential homophobia of individual cops, his research illustrated the institutional processes that underpinned the police raids and pointed to phrases in the *Criminal Code* as the basis of such raids. He also uncovered the institutional processes behind injustice in his second study, where he delved into the social organization of AIDS/HIV treatments. He revealed that there was no mandate for any level of government to introduce new medicine or treatments that could help people living with AIDS/HIV. His research was representative of how the foci of research are on the institutional processes of ruling relations—how police raids work, how new AIDS/HIV treatments are dealt with at varying levels of the government. As such, his life and explicit call for political activist ethnography inspired many other researchers to pursue praxis through their research (Choudry, 2013; Frampton et al., 2006; Kinsman, 1996, 2018).

There have been variations on how activist researchers draw on institutional ethnography for their activism. Ruling relations cannot be separated from activists' work. For example, Thompson (2006) illustrated how police arrests of activists who participated in anti-globalization protests in Washington, DC, sparked a series of jail visits as a form of direct action. Thompson looked into the process of organizing jail visits, which in turn created opportunities for participants to learn how jails work and to identify the underlying

gendered stereotypes that shape jail visits. Ng (1996, 2006) delved into the globalized regime of ruling that shapes the fragmentation of immigrant garment workers. Gary Kinsman (2006) more explicitly questioned relationships between ruling relations, activism, and research. He asked: "How can we develop knowledge that understands that certain parts of movements are much more implicated in ruling relations than other parts?" (p. 150). In other words, under the banner of activism, there are variations regarding activists' strategies to work against, parallel to, or within the ruling relations. How do these variations complicate the process of institutional ethnographic research?

Another aspect to consider is that praxis, which I interpret in relation to institutional ethnography as the research project actually leading to concrete contributions for activist work (Naples & Robinson, 2023), is not a given. It is something to strive for. Nichols (2016) articulated a candid reflection on three institutional ethnographic research projects she engaged in, recognizing that "the utility of this sociological approach [as an institutional ethnography] is not always fully realized" (p. 3). She reflected on how she had remained external to the activists whose work organization she was seeking to understand, and how, over time, she developed strategies to ensure her research could make concrete contributions to activism. In fact, when reading examples of institutional ethnography, it is often the case that as the researcher engages in a thorough analysis of how ruling relations work, the ruling relations seem even more impenetrable. Of course, published materials such as journal articles or books are not fully representative of researchers' work. Perhaps there is activist work stemming from research that has not been published in academic circles. The point I want to make is that institutional ethnographers go through a process of navigating within, on the margins of, or in opposition to ruling relations as they seek to contribute to activism through their research. This article is a result of my reflections on this process.

I document reflections I had as I engaged in an institutional ethnography of three different organizations that have different relations with the South Korean state. First, I discuss pushback I experienced against the ontological shift central to institutional ethnography, which was influenced by the ruling relations of research practice that were more familiar to the Korean activists. Second, the comparative design of my study of three groups of activist-educators in democratic citizenship education illustrates how multiplicities of resistance are activated under the category of democratic citizenship education. Amidst these multiple and evolving layers of the study, I found myself continuously questioning what it means to do research that benefits the activists. I found myself in reflective pauses amidst these moments, rethinking how best my institutional ethnographic endeavour could contribute to the activist-educators working to deepen democracy in South Korea.

The Ontological Shift, Institutional Void, and Activist-Educators' Standpoint

The ontological shift in institutional ethnography is based on an awareness that actors enact social phenomena—whether those phenomena consist of the ruling relations that condition everyday lives of people or the resistance against such ruling relations. Institutional ethnographers investigate the processes that comprise what are often abstracted as "institutions" or "culture." They delve into how actions are coordinated across different sites and by different actors, and are often mediated through texts. Such coordination is not easily visible without starting from a concrete position—a standpoint. An institutional ethnographer works from a standpoint of people who have been overlooked or marginalized

from dominant relations in society, tracking how a series of actions are coordinated across institutional complexes to condition this person's everyday life. Based on such ontological shift, it is a corollary that the research problematic stems from the informants' standpoint. The tensions, conflicts, anxieties, uneasiness that informants face build the problematic that directs the research.

The research problematic of this study evolved through a dialectical process. I began from an uneasiness about how the dominant notions of "democracy" in South Korea after its democratization did not feel embodied in everyday lives around me. On one hand, actors ranging from the government to community activists celebrated the history of democratization with notable successful political mobilizations, such as the candlelight rallies after the tragic Sewol ferry accident that led to the impeachment of Park Geun Hye in 2017. On the other hand, political apathy was prevalent (Seo et al., 2023), the student movements that had been a key part of mobilization for democratization had diminished significantly (S. Y. Lee, 2021), and political polarization was intensifying (Seok & Chang, 2017). In other words, what it meant to live democratically, to become politically active in everyday life, was becoming illusive, if not "outdated." Activist-educators seeking to build democratic participation through education were at the forefront of this problematic.

However, I felt that pinpointing a specific standpoint did not fit the direction of my research. First, *which* standpoint would best capture the "hollowing out" of the concept of democracy? Choosing the standpoint of a particularly marginalized population would highlight the exclusionary practices of citizenship (e.g., Choo, 2016), but this standpoint would be about how the *margins* of citizenship work in a society rather than how its *prevailing mechanism* works to build up to democratic erosion. Second, whereas institutional ethnography begins from an awareness that people's coordinated *actions* underlie ruling relations, I noticed that ruling relations—particularly cultural formations that make up the "common sense" of everyday lives—are also shaped by *inactions* due to an *institutional void*. At least partly at issue with democratic erosion is the belief that adults do not need separate experiences of political learning and education. Mainstream approaches to citizenship education in Korea focus on the school level, based on an assumption that what students learn at schools regarding democracy and political participation will foster "responsible citizens" of the future (e.g., H. Park et al., 2021). This approach assumes a certain temporal logic that requires the youth to "age into" a well-established democracy. However, the South Korean community organizations in civil society demonstrate how a certain *institutional void*—which I specify as a *transitional void* below—emerged in the political education of adults after the 1987 democratization, which activist-educators in the organizations began to occupy. Through their actions, it was possible to investigate the ways in which they are seeking to address the question of democratic participation and ways of being. It was by taking the standpoint of these activist-educators in South Korea, who are challenging the ruling relations of democracy, that their responses on how to deepen democracy in South Korea became conspicuous.

For this reason, the coordinated work of activist-educators engaging in adult education for democratic participation became the focus of my institutional ethnographic project. I understand that this focus diverges from Dorothy Smith's caution against using institutional ethnography to investigate activists' work due to the threat of objectifying their work rather than putting the analytic focus on ruling relations (see D. E. Smith, 2005). I argue that ruling relations also operate to *invisibilize* certain work, which gives no other choice for

the institutional ethnographer but to engage in activists' work that seeks to address such institutional voids and lack of action. Often this results in activists working in or with the state to fill the areas that are lacking. In my study, it was through these activist-educators' work that the ruling relations of democratic participation and the (non-)coordination of the political learning of adults became visible.

The ontological shift involved in this research project connects and adds to several discussions and debates on institutional ethnography. First, I seek to add nuance to the caution against researching activist work in institutional ethnography. I seek to navigate situations in which it is only through activists' work that ruling relations become visible—a direction that sits in tension with Dorothy Smith's caution against having activists' work as the focus of research. Second, connecting to the notion of standpoints, institutional ethnography is often used as an approach for social justice allies who prioritize the standpoints of a specific marginalized population (Ridzi, 2023). However, centring activists' standpoints opens the potential for institutional ethnographers to work with recent attention to space-based approaches to activism (Haug, 2013) by focusing on the oppositional spaces created through activists' work, which is different from agent-based approaches. Third, in relation to the single institution tendency that has been discussed by institutional ethnographers (Hastings & Mykhalovskiy, 2023), my research projects are examples of an institutional ethnographic project with a comparative dimension across different types of functional complexes. Fourth, my research exemplifies how institutional ethnography becomes contextualized in non-Western contexts, which I discuss in the following sections.

Taking An Institutional Ethnographic Lens: Citizens' Movement Organizations in South Korea

Activist-educators in my research identify themselves as part of citizens' movements, a type of social movement that emerged in South Korea after its democratization in 1987. Citizens' movements are characterized as located within the ruling relations of liberal democracy achieved through democratization, yet these movements involve efforts that seek to challenge the ruling relations of liberal democracy and shift them toward more participatory ideals. This characterization of working within the democratic institutions afforded through democratization becomes more evident when understanding the historical development of citizens' (*shimin*) movements that ended up in separation from people's (*minjung*) movements after democratization.

The consensus among Korean activists and scholars is that citizens' movements encompass a range of diverse movements that emerged in the newly achieved civil society after Korea's democratization in 1987 (H.-Y. Cho, 2000; S.-H. Kim, 2019; S.-K. Kim, 1992). Despite the large-scale protests that erupted in 1987 against the Chun Doo-Hwan dictatorship, radical potentials of struggles have been distorted through the process of democratization where only political elites had access to shape the new institutional order of democracy (Im, 1990). Evaluated as a "passive revolution" in Gramsci's term (cited in H.-Y. Cho, 2003, p. 241), the pro-democracy protests, buttressed by the coalition among peasants, workers, students, and political figures, were wrapped up by the June 29 Declaration of 1987, where democracy was narrowed down into a liberal notion. Such arrangements led to fissures within the pro-democracy coalition, with some participants—many from middle-class backgrounds—actively engaged in the newly opened political space of civil society, while other participants

from peasant or working-class backgrounds prioritized class consciousness, focusing on bread-and-butter issues of enterprise-based labor organizing (H. Choi, 2007; S.-H. Kim, 2019).

However, dismissing citizens' movements as bourgeoisie does not do justice to what citizens' movement activists have achieved. H.-Y. Cho (2000) points out that mainstream citizens' movement organizations have in fact taken on roles of proxy representation in a context where the links between everyday lives of people and political parties rarely exist in the current political system of South Korea. In other words, citizens' movement organizations like People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD, one of the organizations in this study) have taken on the role of political parties to represent the interests of people while explicitly refusing to become political parties themselves. PSPD activists' explicit refusal to be institutionalized into a political party stems from their caution against corruption and their recognition of the relatively weak foundations of democracy in Korea (Jeong, 2013). Remaining outside institutional politics, citizens' movement organizations have excelled in a politics of pressure (D.-Y. Cho & C.-K. Kim, 2007; Cohen & Arato, 1992). PSPD has been vocal in organizing in the public realm on issues ranging from legalizing national basic livelihood subsidies to pressuring conglomerates to decrease the cost of cell phone bills. Identifying activists in *minjung* movements as "radical" and citizens' movements as "reformist" is not strictly correct either (Koo, 2008). Through a life history study of activists, Koo points out that activists from both movements no longer believe in revolutionary or subversive approaches to social change that follow an external ideology but seek to engage in opportunities for social change from within their lived realities. Even though citizens' movement activists do not prioritize class as the foremost contradiction of the current society, they are still a part of the struggles against the ruling relations of capitalist and liberal democracy that have become hegemonic in Korea.

In such a context, educational activities for democratic participation designed and conducted by citizens' movement organizations are an important arena for professional activists to reach out to the everyday lives of people. Education programs offer an opportunity to explore other potentials for participation—regardless of whether the enrolled learners become involved in the citizens' movement organizations. However, these backstages of citizens' movements have received relatively less attention in the Korean literature. A large proportion of research sheds light on citizens' movements by addressing the significance of these movements at the macro-level (Bae, 2007; H.-Y. Cho, 2003; S.-H. Kim, 2019). Another line of research highlights activists' perspectives through life history methodologies or narratives (J.-S. Choi, 2015; Koo, 2008). As an institutional ethnographer, I wanted to direct the focus to the resistance that these activists engage in and, in turn, address how they seek to challenge ruling relations of how democracy works in South Korea.

I got involved in the citizens' movement organizations through this research. I openly shared my academic background as a doctoral student studying at a U.S.-based university and stated my interest to study the work of activist-educators across varying levels of interaction between the citizens' movement organizations and the Korean state. While the extent to which each organization was familiar with engaging with university-affiliated researchers differed, a common response that I encountered as I met with them and explained my research intentions was their surprise at my intent to prioritize their problematic—meaning the tensions and uneasiness they face in their everyday lives embedded in the ruling relations—as an institutional ethnographer. Most times, this flexibility actually resulted in a

barrier at first, where activists felt unsure about how they could contribute to the research. A key problematic that drove the work of activist-educators was how to attract potential learners for democratic citizenship education programs, which would shape how they organized their work. This focus on their work was central to the research, which in turn revealed how ruling relations around the organization of education activities to promote democratic participation operated in different forms.

Beginning from my fieldwork at PSPD, I established contact with key citizens' movement activists and activist-educators who specifically focused on democratic citizenship education. This allowed me to map the broader layout of the field as well as to get recommendations on which organizations to include in the study. Through this process, a comparative design incorporating institutional ethnography emerged. It was a comparison across three organizations: 1) People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) that ran based on its own funding base; 2) Gwangmyeong Centre for Democratic Citizenship Education, which is a publicly funded organization contracted out to Gwangmyeong YMCA, a community-based nonprofit organization; and 3) Democratic Civic Education Project SIDE, a small-scale nonprofit created by activist-educators who focus their work specifically on democratic citizenship education, through which they engage in project-based invited spaces for education throughout local, municipal, and national levels of the government.

Based on the comfort levels of activists from different organizations, I adjusted the extent to which I engaged in participant observations, document analysis, and interviews as well as small talk. My fieldwork with the organizations took place over twelve months, during which I shifted the sites that I would focus on for my participant observation. At Academy Neutinamu at PSPD, I participated as a learner and volunteer over the course of six months, with four months of extended participant observation for whole working days, three to five days a week. At Democratic Civic Education Project SIDE, I engaged as an active participant and worked alongside the activist-educators on their projects. I worked over a period of six months, during which I shared the offices with activist-educators and travelled with them on education projects. For these two organizations, I conducted "formal" interviews with activist-educators I worked with lasting 1 to 1.5 hours, in addition to the conversations I had during participant observations. For Gwangmyeong Centre for Democratic Citizenship Education and the fabrics of democratic citizenship education that spanned several organizations in the area, I mostly engaged in 1.5- to 2-hour interviews with various activist-educators and public bureaucrats who were involved, totalling twelve interviews. I interviewed people who worked in the municipal system and representatives from five community organizations, including people who had worked in the municipal system previously. Whereas opportunities for participant observations were limited at this site, I found value in making the best use of the extensive collection of public documents available at the site due to its connections with municipal funding. As I navigated through the connected yet distinct sites for democratic citizenship education, I encountered dilemmas on what it means to do a sociology for these activist-educators, which I address in the next two sections.

Slipperiness of Navigating an Institutional Ethnography on Democratic Citizenship Education in South Korea

Citizenship education in Korea has taken a unique pathway connected to the country's history of colonialism, dictatorships, and democratization. "Citizen-making" was often of interest to the ruling elites, with elites maintaining a relatively "untouched" status even after independence from Japanese colonial rule and into several regimes of dictatorships (Cha & Kang, 2016; Chun, 1995). During these times, citizenship education meant working from a state-led definition of "citizenship" with a narrow focus on civility (Chun, 1995; D. Kim, 2023). One of the changes that occurred with South Korea's democratization in 1987 was that pro-democracy activists took the lead in citizenship education, reclaiming their activities as "democratic citizenship education." This shift meant that, in contrast to the state-led, top-down character of citizenship education before 1987, this area of education, particularly targeted toward adults, flourished from the ground up from citizens' movement organizations. During this time, state institutions supporting liberal democracy spearheaded the construction of ruling relations through which democracy would be officially known and practised. These institutions included major political parties or the Korean National Election Commission. However, in terms of democratic citizenship education for adults, the state-led initiative stopped short at the formal school level, with activists holding the ground for adult education. I argue that with democratization, a "transitional void," which I refer to as an arena with minimal influences from both prior ruling relations and emerging ruling relations, was created surrounding democratic citizenship education for adults. No legal framework existed that would directly address democratic citizenship education for adults. It was in this context that citizens' movement activists in their organizations began building and articulating their own versions of education activities, under the overarching signifier of "democratic citizenship education." This transitional void turned out to be a double-edged sword, as it provided much autonomy and freedom for activist-educators but in turn subsumed their education activities under the marketized environment.

As I engaged in institutional ethnography of how activist-educators in democratic citizenship education filled the transitional void, I experienced what I call "slipperiness," conditioned by the ruling relations, the activist-educators' work, and my position among these relations. The dictionary definition of "slippery" refers to "[a surface or object being] difficult to hold firmly or stand on because it is smooth, wet, or slimy" (Oxford Languages, n.d.). In this paper, I use "slipperiness" to refer to how my assumed position and ontological sensemaking as an institutional ethnographer continuously became "difficult to hold firm" because of two processes. The first process involved contextual factors that challenged my ontological standpoint as a researcher, including previous research practices that activist-educators were familiar with. The second process came from a push from an unexpected direction, where my previously challenged position would partially be "resurrected" because of my connections with English-language academia. These two processes resulted in a constant need to navigate my positionality through slippery terrain under the influences of the ruling relations of research practice.

Ruling Relations of Research Practice

"We're used to having a few interviews with qualitative researchers for their research projects, but not involvement at *this level,*" an activist-educator involved in the study shared

with me (emphasis by speaker). This was during a retrospective conversation about my research engagement, and the activist-educator pointed out how "unusual" a researcher I was. I was not satisfied with having a few interviews—I wanted to get involved in their work in any way I could so I could understand, from their standpoints, how this work was organized. The initial layout of my research was quite open-ended, intentionally so, as I wanted to build my research from *their* experiences. This retrospective comment allowed me to better understand the initial hesitance I encountered at the beginning of my research. I had figured that the hesitance was something every qualitative researcher would go through as they built trust with potential research participants. However, what was also involved in the hesitation in this case was the influence of ruling relations around research in the Korean context.

Not only was institutional ethnography new to most activists, but research practices influenced by mainstream sociology still dominated the field of education. Korean scholars in the field of social work (called social welfare studies in Korean) have introduced institutional ethnography into the Korean context, with Dorothy Smith's *Institutional Ethnography: A Sociology for People* (2005) translated into Korean and published by In-Sook Kim and her colleagues in 2014. Among 21 peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings that contain "institutional ethnography" in their abstracts, gathered through the RISS (Research Information Sharing System) database, twelve are in the category of social work,[2] while five are broadly in the category of education.[3] A tendency of researchers drawing on institutional ethnography in Korea is that there is a widespread interest in delving into publicly organized institutions, particularly in the field of social work, to make the system work better for marginalized groups such as the disabled, care workers, or the lower classes. It is notable that researchers often begin from the standpoints of practitioners working as part of the larger institutional framework, such as social workers, care workers, public officials, or teachers. It is rare to see the standpoints of self-identified activists in these institutional ethnographies, with the exception of Hwang (2020), who studied activists working to support women who had previously engaged in sex work. The point I want to make is that not only is institutional ethnography new to the field of adult education in Korea, but there has also not been great exposure of institutional ethnography to Korean activists on the ground. Activist-educators seeking to enhance democratic participation have worked with researchers ranging from graduate students to faculty members, but my experiences in the field demonstrated that their "norms" for participating in research aligned more with so-called mainstream approaches in sociology that institutional ethnographers critique.

As for research on the topic of democratic citizenship education, a large part of the literature has been dedicated to school-based activities as part of the state-led curriculum (e.g., S.-Y. Park, 2020; H. Song & Yoon, 2021). In terms of democratic citizenship education for adults, a large proportion of the literature has been dedicated to an attempt to build a national-level institutional framework for democratic citizenship education. The tendency has been to begin from an *a priori* definition to determine the boundaries of democratic citizenship education, whether the starting point is philosophical discussions (Chang, 2019),

2 Hwang (2020); Jang et al. (2020); I.-S. Kim (2013, 2017, 2020); J. O. Kim & Yeom (2022); J.-S. Kim & Kang (2020); Kwon et al. (2017, 2018); Lim & Jin (2022); K. Park & Lee (2018); Yeom (2022).

3 Y.-A. Choi & Kim (2017); J.-M. Hong & Jang (2022); E.-Y. Lee (2021); Oh (2015); Ryou (2021).

comparisons with the German Beutelsbacher Consensus as key principles (Han, 2022), or an investigation of historical attempts to institutionalize (Jung, 2014).

This tendency in research often resulted in activist-educators or other researchers that I encountered during fieldwork asking how I defined democratic citizenship education. As an institutional ethnographer, I thought that drawing on a fixed definition from the beginning implied an intent to prioritize academic categories over actual practices of activist-educators—in other words, to impose sociological concepts on their practices to distinguish if a certain practice counts or does not count. Resisting these demands for academic definitions, I sought to delve into how activists themselves drew boundaries. For example, how did they make a connection between a theatre class and deepening democracy? How did activists understand mothers gathering in the community to share their experiences about childcare as democratic citizenship education? This foray into interpretations and definitions from the ground up revealed crucial distinctions that activist-educators made. Activists who actively engaged in state-led frameworks readily used the concept of "democratic citizenship education," whereas activists who remained detached from such attempts more readily used "citizenship education" to refer to their activities. In other words, parting from the ruling relations of starting from research-based definitions led to analysis that illustrated tensions and distinctions that existed in actual practices.

Another variation that reflected the ruling relations of research practice was the persistent demands for a theoretical framework that would be set before I began my fieldwork and would shape my analytic lens from the beginning. This tension often emerged in my encounters with other researchers who were working with activist-educators. They had often earned their doctoral degrees, and many of them were trained in (mainstream) sociology. These researchers would inquire about my theoretical framework, and I faced direct and blunt comments when I stated that my theoretical framework remained fluid and that I would come back to them after I fully understood the work of activist-educators. I did not wish to position myself as an "expert above" activist-educators.[4] The continual demands for definitions and theoretical frameworks that I encountered during fieldwork are reflective of the sociological tradition that Dorothy Smith (1999, 2005) originally sought to challenge.

Whereas my positionality as an institutional ethnographer would continuously "slip" as I found myself navigating dominant sociological research practices, I also sensed another pull that made inroads with potential research participants despite my "unusual" approach: my status as a researcher coming from a university in the United States. None of the research participants in my study had met a doctoral student who was studying at a university based in the United States. This unfamiliarity often resulted in activist-researchers asking if there were any notable practices of democratic citizenship education to learn from the U.S. context. While it was understandable that their curiosity would be directed toward developing new and innovative practices in democratic citizenship education, I often observed how this connection with the United States contained a sense of cultural imperialism (Yim, 2009;

4 I deliberately tried to avoid being positioned as an "expert" because of my connections with academia. This is why I sought to work with and alongside activist-educators as much as possible, and this was part of the reason that activist-educators regarded my participation as markedly another level, as implied in the quote I mentioned earlier. However, "expertise" continued to emerge throughout my fieldwork through the two processes I describe.

Yoon, 1991), with U.S. practices conceived as "more developed" than those in South Korea. The fact that my research into the activist-educators' work would be published in the English language appealed to them as well. I still struggle regarding this appeal. Although it meant that a larger audience (English-speaking readers) would read about democratic citizenship education, it also would require an additional step of translation into Korean in order for the research participants and related actors to understand and use the research for their activism. Sometimes when activist-educators met officials from the government or activists from outside the internal team dedicated to democratic citizenship education, I would see them introducing my background as a U.S.-based researcher to highlight the importance of their work. Whereas my "expertise" was at times challenged because I did not conform to the previous ruling relations of research, it would be partially resurrected because of my U.S.-based affiliation, which I felt uncomfortable with. I found myself continually trying to establish my existence and positionality as an institutional ethnographer, even as the ruling relations of research and geopolitical dynamics made it difficult to do so.

A Comparative Lens and Multiplicities of Resistance

Although there was a transitional void in the state-led institutional frameworks around democratic citizenship education, this did not mean that education activities halted. Rather, activist-educators employed different strategies to continue their provision of education opportunities, often as part of larger citizens' movement organizations. Because of the need for resources to support education activities, activist-educators diverged on their stances on whether to engage with the state to sustain these activities. A large group of activist-educators in democratic citizenship education organized themselves into coalitions to support the enactment of a national-level law to lay the groundwork for public funding and support for democratic citizenship education (Chang, 2019; Jung, 2014; J.-G. Kim, 2020; Sin, 2009). Not all the activist-educators were actively engaged in this process. In the case of activist-educators at PSPD, they were influenced by their larger organization's principle of remaining independent from the state. The substantive practices that added flesh to democratic citizenship education were heterogeneous and even, to an extent, contentious among activists.

The transitional void, and the ways activist-educators entered into the void, affected my research in two ways. First, I narrowed my focus to activists' work within the loose institutional boundaries of democratic citizenship education. There were texts that governed their actions in their respective organizations, and I began to pay close attention to these texts. Many institutional mechanisms were enacted at the organizational level, with differences in terms of their engagement with the state when it came to funding or public program initiatives. Second, a comparative design was crucial for my research project in order to fully understand the ruling relations around democratic citizenship education through the myriad practices of resistance employed by activist-educators at different organizations. The comparative design is not often seen in institutional ethnographies, with most empirical studies drawing on a specific organization or activity as a starting point and mapping the ruling relations from that point. I needed multiple points of entry to view social relations around the organization of democratic citizenship education because of the diverse approaches under a loose institutional context.

At PSPD, activists position themselves as outside the state and in civil society, thereby pressuring the institutionalized politics in the current Korean democracy. The major subdivisions within PSPD involve activists who design campaigns, rallies, or protests in several areas critiquing institutional politics. Academy Neutinamu, the education branch of PSPD, allows a broader range of topics to be included under the agenda of democracy, even if some topics may not currently be imminent topics for organizing within PSPD. Such topics include gender and queer issues, environmentalism, and arts-based activism, with activist-educators working with activists from other organizations to develop a course at Academy Neutinamu, or education activities developing into concrete projects, such as introducing a gender-neutral restroom in the building of PSPD, or learners putting on a performance at protests. Another layer of education attempts to debunk the psychological barrier associated with identifying oneself as an activist. Activist-educators at Academy Neutinamu encourage learners to embrace identities as activists, regardless of whether their home organization would become PSPD or not. Activist-educators at Academy Neutinamu challenge the ruling relations of liberal democracy by encouraging people to engage in activism in civil society within or beyond PSPD, while defining civil society as a distinct arena against the state.

Different from Academy Neutinamu's approach, activist-educators at another organization, SIDE, focus on how to increase people's experiences of what "democratic participation" could mean other than voting. Activist-educators at SIDE focus on the fact that many people in Korea might not be familiar with cultures of debating in the public sphere or participating in governance, due to the rapid changes in the political economy. With modules developed to facilitate debates, activist-educators at SIDE provide programs in various spaces created at national, municipal, and local levels of the government as well as for various age groups ranging from adults to adolescents. Alongside such education activities, activist-educators at SIDE have been involved in efforts to enact a legal framework that supports democratic citizenship education. These activist-educators emphasize reaching out to a wider range of people, often getting involved in government initiatives that seek to incorporate certain participatory mechanisms into their policies. While recognizing that such initiatives could be co-opted to serve the interests of the status quo, activist-educators at SIDE believe that the dangers of co-optation are exactly why activists should engage *more* in such initiatives, since these spaces afforded within governance are increasingly being occupied by corporations without activist intentions.

Meanwhile, activist-educators at Gwangmyung YMCA focus on the local community level for their democratic citizenship education. Reflecting on her experiences seeking to establish a YMCA at Gwangmyung, activist Young-yi Lee recalled how she realized the importance of paying attention to who the residents are and what they care about. Recognizing an opportunity to reach out to and potentially organize housewives, Young-yi Lee, one of the founding members of Gwangmyung YMCA, took an explicitly feminist approach. By offering a space for reading groups, which also led to community organizing in the region, activist-educators at Gwangmyung YMCA show how the concept of "citizen" can take root in the concrete community context rather than being abstracted into the national level. Such trajectories of democratic citizenship education accumulated at Gwangmyung YMCA give activist-educators relative authority in the area of democratic citizenship education when interacting with the publicly funded and institutionalized Lifelong Learning Center in the local community. Distinctive textually organized practices are undertaken at each site, and

a focus on these practices brings into view specific tactical differences in activist practices (especially those oriented to align with or to resist state-led initiatives).

In my research, I found Korean activist-educators challenging the ruling relations of liberal democracy and the state from various angles, with their own substantive understandings of what education for democratic participation entails. Whereas previous research tended to explicate how *ruling relations are embedded* in people's everyday lives, exploring the work of activist-educators foregrounded how *ruling relations are challenged* through their work. Delving into how the concept of "citizenship education" is embodied in the practices and interpretations of activist-educators made it possible for me to map how these activist-educators are engaging in different textually mediated strategies to disrupt the status quo of liberal democracy. In other words, by exploring different manifestations of citizenship education and attempts to enhance democratic participation, I was able to map how the current ruling relations are being challenged from the margins.

The relative independence of PSPD empowered it to actively broaden the boundaries of democracy to encompass issues such as queer and environmental activism, with its newly developed programs publicly available on the PSPD homepage—which many activist-educators from other organizations would refer to, considering the representative status of PSPD as a citizens' movement organization. Activist-educators at PSPD are primarily engaged in the arena of building cultural hegemony, in Gramscian terms. While this is important work to sustain efforts for social change, the textually mediated approach taken by PSPD activists raised the question of how to connect such efforts to large-scale public policy.

Activist-educators at SIDE, who intentionally take a more fluid approach to organization to better seep into the institutional affordances for democratic citizenship education, have actual hands-on interactions with people who participate in these publicly funded education initiatives. Activist-educators at SIDE heighten participants' awareness of the boundaries of contention in policies of the state, at the local, municipal, and national levels. While this awareness builds up to opportunities in which they can exert more autonomy, working with state actors and with institutional requirements results in a divergence of SIDE activist-educators' limited time, resources, and energy, with textual agendas developed by participants through their workshops losing their strength as they enter the bureaucratic processes.

Activist-educators at Gwangmyung have articulated democracy in terms of concrete issues surrounding the lives of community members. Such actions provided firm foundations for the direction of the organization to resonate with community members through reading groups that eventually developed into organized protests against corruption at schools. However, the dwindling sense of "community" in the region (which is an overall tendency in metropolitan Seoul) means it is a challenge for activist-educators to make the texts in new reading groups "flow" into spaces of organizing.

While my decision to foreground the work of activist-educators provided much insight into how efforts to deepen democracy in South Korea manifest in educational practices, I ran into the question of whether this approach is objectifying their work at the expense of revealing how ruling relations work. By illustrating visions for a deeper democracy and the ways that activist-educators engage in education work, am I objectifying them? Has my project to engage in institutional ethnography benefited activist-educators' work? Kinsman's (2006) question, cited at the beginning of this paper, re-emerges: "How can we develop knowledge that understands that certain parts of movements are much more

implicated in ruling relations than other parts?" (p. 150). My research is an example of how activist-educators situated differently by, and in relation to, the Korean state developed a range of adult education activities to concretize what it means to deepen democracy. By illuminating the textual organization of these diverse efforts to deepen democracy, I hope this article does strengthen activist work by providing an analysis of institutionally organized affordances and constraints associated with each effort.

Discussion

This paper documents my reflections as I sought to actualize a sociology for activism through an institutional ethnographic approach. Starting from my reflections on using institutional ethnography for fieldwork in South Korea, the discussions connect to the wider literature on research and political activism, on the power relations between the researcher and activists, as well as on what kind of knowledge is produced and valued in research (Brown & Strega, 2005; Choudry & Kapoor, 2010; Hussey, 2012; Nichols & Guay, 2022). My experience of embarking on an institutional ethnography is characterized by two types of unfamiliarity: the ruling relations of research practice in South Korea, and the loosely institutionalized character of democratic citizenship education, with the resulting focus on activists' work. These two characteristics spurred me to reflect on three aspects in relation to connecting activism and research.

First, I emphasize that the ontological shift is not an individualized transformation or revelation: it is connected to the external relations that condition where the researcher is positioned, which may in fact deter the shift. The ontological shift that grounds research in the everyday lives of activists is key to institutional ethnography (Rankin, 2017; D. E. Smith, 2005). However, I point out that there has been a tendency to individualize this shift. The slipperiness I experienced as I was navigating institutional ethnography during fieldwork illustrates that the shift cannot be separated from external conditions, such as the ruling relations of research practice. On the one hand, faced with a pull toward a sociology in a more "traditional" sense, I faced dilemmas when I saw that my connections with English-speaking academia in terms of studying in the United States or writing in English seemed to provide some grounds for pushback on the other hand. My argument is that for the ontological shift to fully blossom in an institutional ethnography involves a constant negotiation with the external contexts of research, including prevalent norms of academia, activists' previous experiences with research, as well as how activists make sense of knowledge that contributes to their work.

Second, the examples illustrate ruling relations and resistance amidst the lack of a widespread institutionalization of democratic citizenship education. Contrary to state-led frameworks for citizenship education at the school level, the loosely institutionalized nature of democratic citizenship education for adults offered activists room to populate that space with their own knowledge, visions, and practices. In this context, my research followed the processes by which activist-educators organized their work. With activist-educators employing different strategies with the Korean state to continue their education activities, it becomes ambiguous whether I am keeping my focus on the ruling relations or on the activists. In other words, amidst the contested and interrelated relationships between activist-educators and the Korean state, I run into the question of whether I am objectifying activists' work. This led me to parse out two layers through which objectification could

happen: (1) as researchers impose sociological concepts on activists' work; or (2) as the analytic focus is aimed at the attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours of activists, rendering them as objects of the study. I question if the latter layer, focusing on the attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours of activists, is at all times inapplicable to institutional ethnography. In particular, when activists are engaging with the state and seeking to work through the system, investigating the ruling relations could be the other side of the same coin as studying the thoughts and actions of activists. In fact, by analyzing the actions, attitudes, thoughts, and behaviours of activists' work in different directions, I argue that institutional ethnography provides a map of which terrains are being explored through activists' work—what roadblocks there are in a specific route, which way to take when going on foot, which routes could potentially merge together into a collaborative direction. I argue that mapping the current knowledges and actions of activists is a way to build organized resistance and strengthen challenges against ruling relations.

I interpret this tilt toward the knowledges and actions of activists that occurred in my research as a potential means to connect institutional ethnography to highlight the knowledge-practices of social movements, in addition to its strengths in uncovering how ruling relations work. Knowledge-practices refer to the situated, embodied construction of knowledge by activists from the ground up (Casas-Cortés et al., 2008; Choudry, 2013). The emphasis on prioritizing activists' problematic and navigating how texts are activated by people in institutional ethnography empowered me to map the knowledge-practices of activist-educators, with their simmering knowledges and experimentations to deepen democracy in South Korea. This is where I see further potential for institutional ethnography. It involves working alongside activists to learn from their knowledge-practices. A comparative lens as a researcher also helps build connections across knowledge-practices outside the boundaries of respective organizations, making their connections as a field in solidarity much more visible. I call for a need to pursue diverse processes through which institutional ethnographies could contribute to activism. Praxis in institutional ethnography emerges in several shapes and forms.

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