

WRITING SAMPLE

The Map Before I Knew What I Was Mapping

Narrative Nonfiction | Social Psychology | Public-Facing Research Writing

Domenica Campbell

Adapted from a nonfiction manuscript in progress

...

Years before I had the language for any of this, I drew a map. It was large, handwritten, and crowded, with arrows crossing one another and words pushed into whatever white space remained. At the center was a single circle containing two letters: ME.

Around it gathered the institutions, relationships, identities, pressures, and experiences that seemed to have something to do with who I had become. Corrections sat near education. Family collided with courts. Healthcare, work, stigma, class, politics, community, conformity, power, empathy, and control pressed in from the edges. It was not particularly orderly, but neither was the thing I was trying to understand. At the time, I thought I was mapping my life. Looking at it now, I think I was trying to map the self inside systems.

That is a different question.

We tend to talk about systems as though they exist somewhere outside us. Government, education, healthcare, criminal justice, social services, the economy: the words themselves sound large and impersonal, as though systems live in buildings, departments, policies, and organizational charts. But systems are usually experienced much closer to the skin. They arrive as expectations, deadlines, classifications, forms, routines, decisions, professional roles, and consequences. They tell us what someone in a particular position is supposed to do and what is likely to happen if they do not. They shape behavior long before anyone stops to call what is happening a system.

None of us lives outside them.

Some people simply happen to have a job where their email address ends in .gov.

That does not make them creatures of the system while everyone else remains free-range humanity. It means that in a particular setting, the system has assigned them a role. That role may give them authority over another person while also sharply limiting what they themselves are permitted to do. A worker can disagree with a rule and still be responsible for administering it. A person can hold considerable power in one room and very little in another. Someone can resent a system they still depend on, or enforce a policy they would never have written. Once we begin looking closely enough, the neat division between the system and the individual becomes difficult to maintain.

Social psychology has always been interested in what happens when people enter roles, groups, hierarchies, and structured situations. Human beings can be maddeningly unpredictable, yet recognizable patterns emerge when people are placed inside environments with clear expectations, norms, incentives, and consequences. That predictability is not incidental. Systems depend on it. Large institutions cannot function if every person reinvents the rules at

every encounter. Coordination requires a certain amount of conformity, and conformity is not automatically sinister. Much of ordinary social life would be impossible without it.

The difficulty is that people are not infrastructure.

They do not move through systems with the consistency of machinery. They hesitate, improvise, misread, comply reluctantly, resist inconveniently, and sometimes behave in ways that make perfect sense only after the surrounding situation comes into view. A worker may become more rigid than a policy actually requires because discretion feels risky. Another may quietly create humane space inside a structure that allows very little of it. Someone may follow a rule they believe is wrong because refusing it threatens their job, while another person in the same role decides the cost of compliance is worse. Systems may depend on predictable behavior, but the self keeps intruding.

Sometimes that intrusion is barely visible. It is the moment when a person looks at an arrangement everyone else has learned to treat as ordinary and thinks, That makes absolutely no sense.

That moment interests me.

It is the beginning of what I mean by contrariwise.

Contrariwise is not rebellion as identity. It is not automatic distrust of institutions, and it does not assume that the person refusing to cooperate must therefore be right. It is a way of looking again when the official explanation no longer seems sufficient. It asks what becomes visible when we change position and examine not only the behavior in front of us, but also the structure surrounding it. The point is not to reverse every institutional explanation and replace it with an equally simplistic one. The point is to complete the explanation.

A person may be described as noncompliant, and that description may be technically accurate. Contrariwise asks what compliance required of them. A child may be labeled truant, but the attendance record cannot tell us by itself what was happening in the child's life before absence became the behavior everyone decided to measure. A worker may correctly apply a policy that produces a harmful result, and neither the worker nor the policy disappears simply because we widen the frame. The larger question becomes what the role, hierarchy, institutional norms, and available resources made easier to do, harder to resist, or difficult even to notice. If a system describes something as a choice, we may need to know what refusing actually costs before we understand how freely the choice was made.

The point is not to excuse behavior. The point is to complete the explanation.

There is another moment that matters just as much: the moment the person inside the system notices friction. Sometimes there is no dramatic confrontation and no obvious ethical crisis. The policy may be perfectly clear. The person may know exactly what is expected of them. Yet the act of carrying it out produces an internal resistance that is difficult to explain. The body may register the contradiction before the mind has found words for it. A person finishes the interaction, completes the paperwork, moves to the next task, and still carries something away from the encounter. Nothing officially went wrong, but something did not settle.

Social psychology gives us language for parts of this experience. Cognitive dissonance helps describe the discomfort that can emerge when belief, identity, and action no longer fit neatly together. Reactance helps explain resistance to perceived threats to autonomy. Role conflict

captures the tension that develops when competing expectations pull the same person in incompatible directions. Perceived control changes how pressure itself is experienced. But lived experience often precedes terminology. The discomfort comes first. The theory catches up later.

That was true of my map.

The original version of this project began as a much more personal question: Who am I in these places? Over time, I became less interested in myself as the object of study and more interested in everything crowding the edges of that circle. The institutions became harder to ignore. So did the roles. The pressure became more interesting than the biography, and the contradictions more revealing than the chronology. I began noticing the ways environments shape behavior while still leaving enough room for people to comply, refuse, reinterpret, accommodate, and surprise one another.

The question changed.

It became: What happens to the self when institutional logic, social pressure, and human reality do not line up?

That question inevitably leads to another. What happens when a person is not merely acted upon by a system, but is also required to act by their own hand within it? Policies do not administer themselves. Procedures do not look anyone in the eye. Eventually, institutional logic becomes a human action. Someone has to deliver the decision, interpret the rule, enforce the boundary, make the exception, deny the request, sign the form, or decide that this particular situation does not fit cleanly inside the available category.

That is where responsibility becomes complicated.

A system may create the conditions, but a person often becomes the point at which those conditions become real for someone else. That person does not stop being a self simply because they are performing a role. They bring values, histories, loyalties, fears, assumptions, practical constraints, and conscience into the encounter. Sometimes those things align easily with what the institution requires. Sometimes they do not. Sometimes nothing technically goes wrong, and yet the person leaves the encounter knowing that something did not sit right.

Contrariwise lives in that gap.

It is interested in what systems ask of people and what people become while responding. It is interested in why ordinary, reasonable human beings can behave so differently depending on where they are standing and what the surrounding structure makes possible. It asks how institutional language can make human consequences easier to overlook, how a procedure can be followed correctly and still leave moral unease behind, and how people adapt to environments that ask for consistency while remaining stubbornly human inside them.

The map I drew years ago was messy because I did not yet know what belonged together. I could see the forces, but I could not yet name the relationships among them. I knew the self was in the middle of something, but I was still treating the surrounding pressure as background instead of part of the explanation.

Now I think I understand what I was looking at.

The person in the center was never the whole story.

The story was always the relationship between the self and everything surrounding it.

The map came first.

This book is my attempt to return to it with better language.