

Policy, Procedure, and Perceptions

Mapping the Sociomaterial in Academic Libraries

The librarian performance peer review process is a cornerstone of professional advancement, with outcomes that carry real weight for all participants. Many academic librarians may recognize familiar, and often stressful, scenarios that recur across institutions.

A senior colleague who is being reviewed has submitted evidence of their effectiveness as a librarian, and a committee of their peers has met with this colleague in advance of the performance review meeting, bolstering their optimism. Everything seems to be working according to the procedures and policies that guide the performance review process, but the colleague becomes visibly upset and surprised with the final report of the committee, finding it inaccurate and unfair. Equally likely is a new librarian who has never gone through a peer review process being confused by the policy documents and unclear on how the process works. They ask their peers what is expected of them and get differing answers. They turn to the policy documents again to see if they can reach clarity, and they walk away with more questions. These are not isolated incidents; they represent a fundamental disconnect in the review process.

The subjective experience of candidates shapes their understanding of the process, and these perceptions of fairness, clarity, and collegiality are carried forward, influencing future reviews whether they participate as a candidate or a review committee member. To understand this disconnect, we can turn to sociomateriality, a theoretical lens that has emerged in organizational studies over the past two decades. Sociomateriality positions the social (e.g., bias, confusion, emotion) and the material (e.g., written policy, procedures, rules) as inherently entangled rather than separate domains.¹ Academic librarian performance review systems aim to evaluate librarians' effectiveness for the purposes of retention, promotion, and tenure. Performance review criteria, standards, and procedures are often regarded as well documented and typically enacted with the primary intention of being objective, evidence based, and repeatable.

We can think of this as *material*. Conflict, emotional responses, or even conformity in the interpretation of review criteria and standards can be considered *social* phenomena. Social phenomena, particularly when review stakes (and emotions) run high, can be organizationally awkward. These may be dismissed as irrational, inappropriate, or antagonistic behaviors that need to be deescalated in order to move forward. But what if the social phenomena of a material-based process were included in organizational assessment? Could that allow

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organizations to improve? Or conversely, what happens to an organization that does not recognize or strategically utilize social phenomena, especially the uncomfortable or awkward aspects? Employees in environments like these may fall to “maladaptive self-regulation strategies” like cynicism and disengagement.² Identifying pain points in the sociomaterial can be an opportunity for the organization to improve processes or, if ignored, can contribute to employee burnout.³

Developing a Visual Methodology

Observing these dynamics across multiple institutions, the authors noted that though material artifacts like policy documents remained stable, their interpretation was in constant flux. To investigate this further, two authors from the University of Utah (UU) sought to capture these observable but undocumented phenomena. They theorized that a visual representation could make the entanglement between the documented process and librarians’ lived experiences tangible. Their initial prototype (see Figure 1) was a mind map on a whiteboard with the material process drawn in black ink (e.g., populations, documentation, reports, votes) and the associated social phenomena overlaid in red (e.g., surprise, worry, consensus).

The result was a fascinating, multilayered insight into their local performance review system. To test the transferability of this idea, the UU authors collaborated with librarian peers at two California-based institutions: San Diego State University (SDSU) and University of California San Diego (UCSD). This partnership led to the design of a more formalized mapping exercise. Using SDSU’s retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) documentation as a test case, the team developed and refined the SDSU RTP material process map to ensure it accurately reflected the documented process.

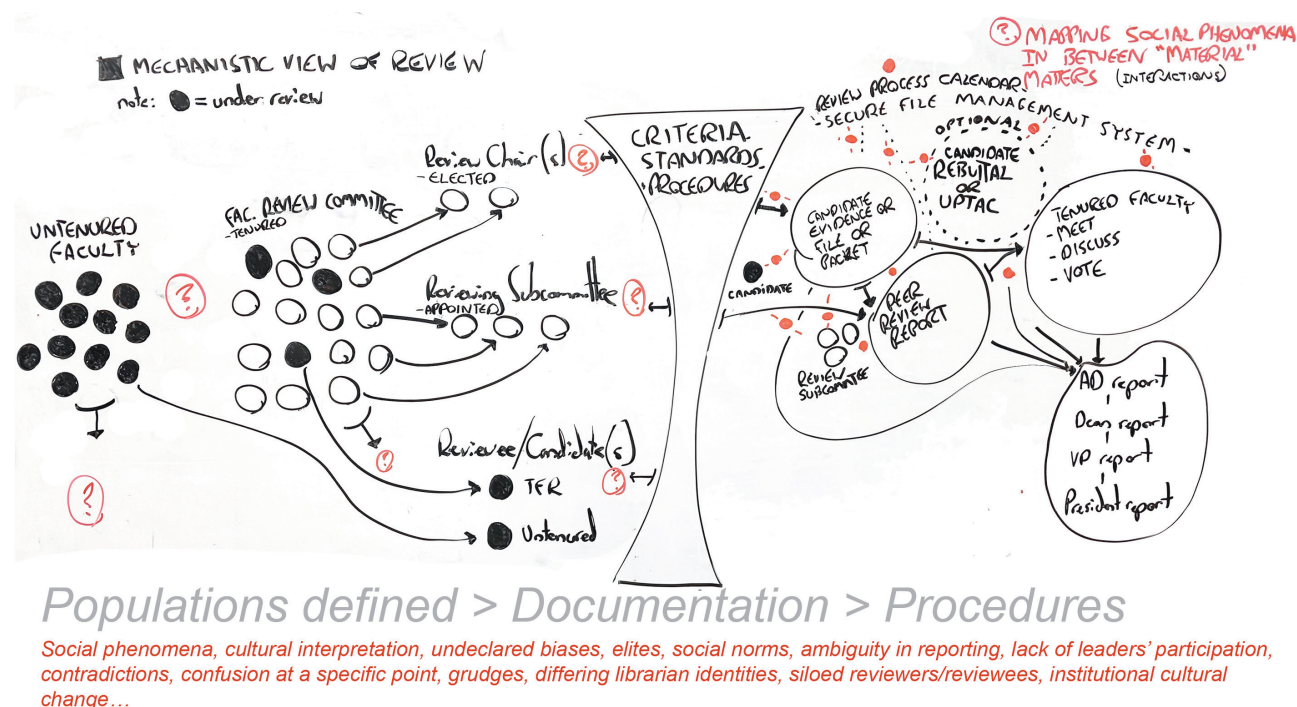


Figure 1. Early conceptual prototype of a whiteboard UU retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) process map.⁴

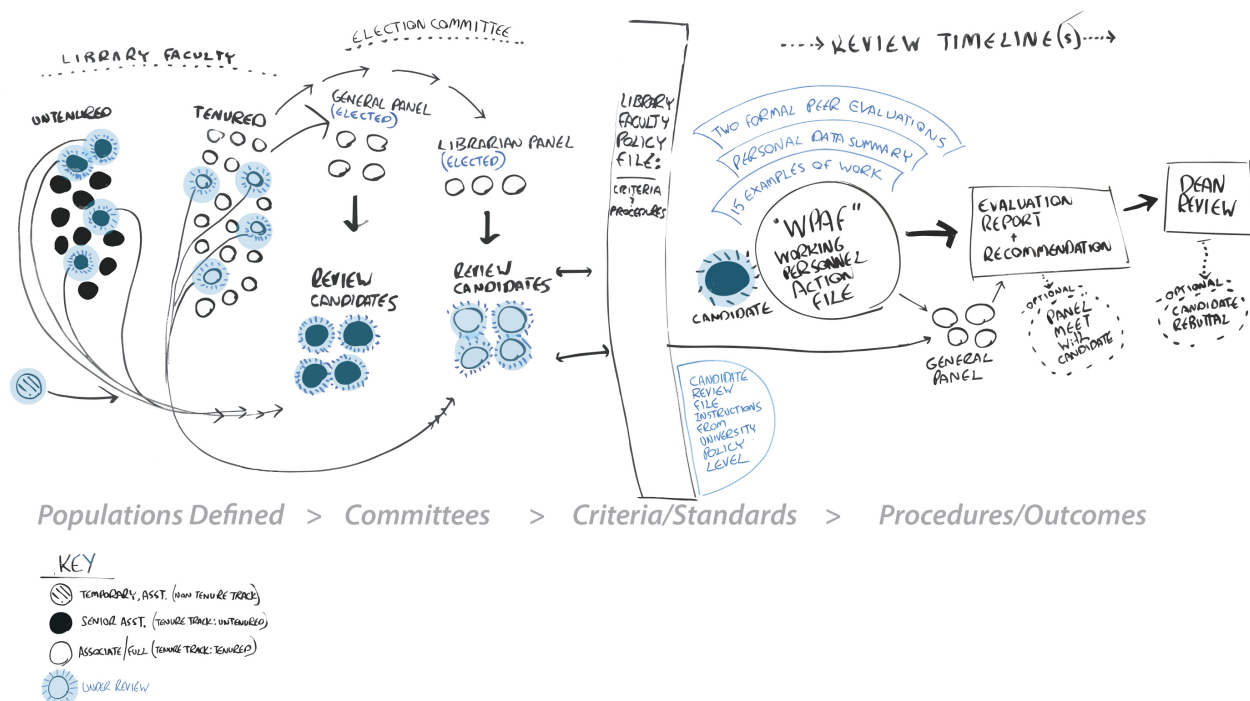


Figure 2. Revised SDSU RTP material process map.⁵

Pilot Study: The Mapping Exercise in Practice

Using the revised SDSU RTP material map (see Figure 2), the SDSU authors conducted a study to test the process of annotating it with social phenomena. They invited eight librarians at various career stages, from pre-tenure to post-tenure. Six librarians (a mix of senior assistant and associate ranks) ultimately participated in the ninety-minute exercise, held in May 2025.

The SDSU authors presented the concept and contextualized the process. Participants discussed what was meant by social phenomena and were shown examples of both the social phenomena and the final map from the UU prototype. A large version of the SDSU map was printed and hung on the wall with an explanation of how it represented the RTP process. The group collaboratively brainstormed a list of social phenomena specific to SDSU. SDSU authors facilitated the brainstorming session by asking: What have you experienced or heard of others experiencing during the review process? Participants were encouraged to engage in free-form brainstorming, initially adding a numbered list of comments to a shared document. They were asked prompting questions, such as:

- Did you feel confusion at any point in the process?
- What about anxiety, anger, etc.?
- Did you feel helped and supported?

What Happened

The exercise started slowly as participants worked to grasp what “counted” as a social phenomenon, but momentum quickly built as they began sharing and validating one another’s experiences. An hour was scheduled for the exercise beginning at 4 p.m., but the participants were so engaged the session lasted 90 minutes and people voluntarily stayed past the end

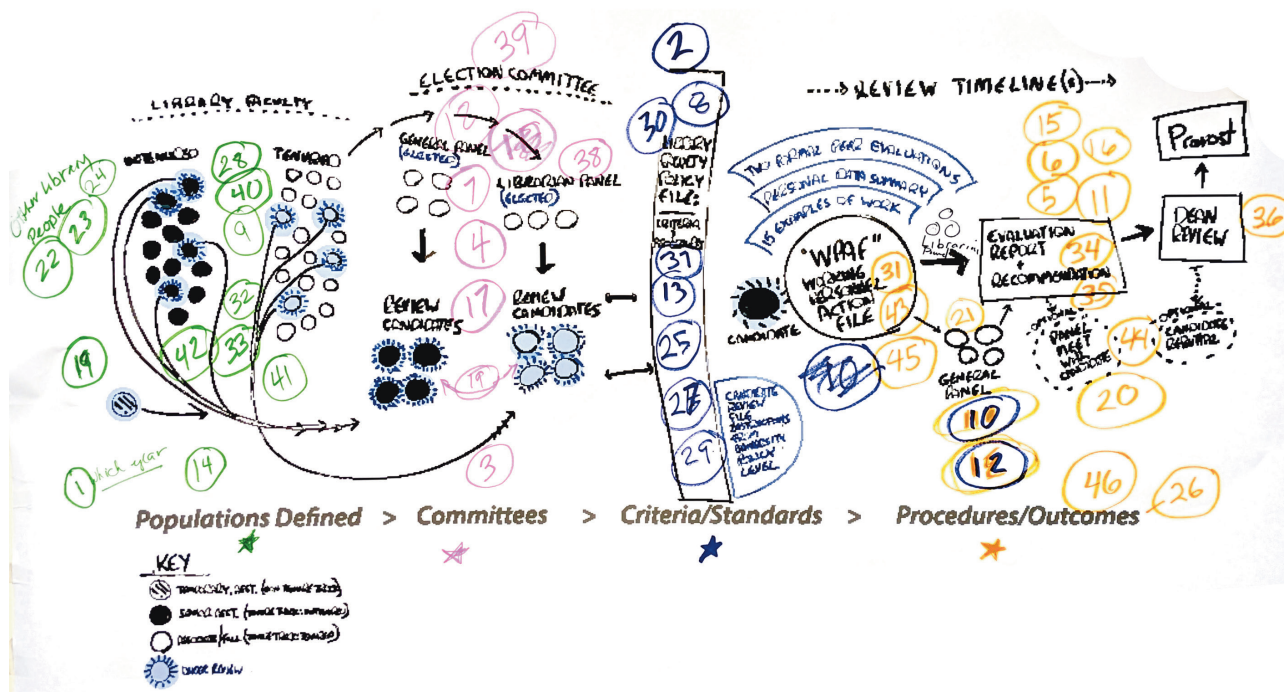


Figure 3. Revised SDSU RTP material process map with social phenomena annotations from the May 2025 exercise.⁷

of their working day. Participants discussed as a group where in the process each numbered phenomena occurred. Often phenomena like confusion or anxiety were noted at multiple steps in the RTP process but about different aspects. Some experiences were unique to an individual, but many of the experiences were generalizable to the majority of participants.

The raw list of phenomena was deduplicated and numbered, resulting in dozens of unique items (see Figure 3). Some key themes emerged:

- **Policy/process ambiguity:** Persistent confusion exists around basic timelines (e.g., “Confusion about if you are in year one or year two of the process”).
- **Undefined language:** Key terms within the policy lack clear definition, leading to subjective and varying interpretations (e.g., “Everyone has a different idea of what *significant* means”).
- **Emergent “mythology”:** Unofficial standards and expectations arise as a result of institutional, professional, or popular culture, creating pressure on candidates beyond the written policy (e.g., “People holding themselves or others to standards that aren’t in the policy file, such as ‘You must publish five articles.’”).⁶

The completed mapping exercise reveals pain points and a lack of clarity in policy leading to significant social phenomena experienced by RTP participants. The exercise surfaced shared but unspoken anxieties and transformed them into potentially actionable data and provided immediate motivation to begin addressing several issues. A limitation of this initial exercise was the phrasing of the prompts, which skewed toward negative experiences. The SDSU authors did not provide as many prompts for positive social phenomena, which might have revealed which aspects of the process work well and foster support and collegiality. Nevertheless, the pilot demonstrated that this exercise could be scaled to include all library faculty, providing a powerful diagnostic tool for mitigating undue stress and improving the overall health of the RTP process.

Broader Applications and Conclusion

Although this pilot focused on peer review, the sociomaterial mapping process holds significant potential as a versatile tool for reflective practice across academic librarianship. By visualizing the complex interplay between social practices and material artifacts, librarians can gain deeper insights into the realities of their work.

For instance, in the context of information literacy instruction, this mapping process could illustrate how instructional design, learning technologies, and student engagement (or disengagement) are intertwined, revealing the reciprocal influences that shape teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes. Additionally, when applied to collection development, the process could help librarians visualize the relationships between user needs, institutional priorities, and the characteristics of the materials themselves, thus informing more strategic and responsive collection strategies. Furthermore, in the area of research support services, mapping sociomaterial entanglements could illuminate how collaborations with faculty, changes in research trends, and emerging technologies interact to impact the delivery of support services, ultimately fostering a more adaptive approach to serving diverse user populations. By extending the mapping framework across these various aspects of librarianship—to name a few—academic librarians can gain deeper insights into the nuances of their practice and enhance their ability to navigate the complexities of the academic landscape.

In conclusion, the sociomaterial mapping process offers a framework for organizational analysis and improvement. By making the observable but unacknowledged social dimensions of our work visible and legible, we create opportunities for open discussion and targeted change. It transforms anecdotal experience into collective evidence, enabling academic libraries to more effectively and equitably navigate the complexities of their practice. *~*

Notes

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3. Lise A. Van Oortmerssen, Marjolein C. J. Caniëls, and Marcel F. van Assen, “Coping with Work Stressors and Paving the Way for Flow: Challenge and Hindrance Demands, Humor, and Cynicism,” *Journal of Happiness Studies* 21, no. 6 (2020): 2257–77, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-019-00177-9>.
4. Dale Larsen, Lux Darkbloom, Crystal Goldman, Katherine Holvoet, and Rebecca Nowicki, “This Performance Review Is F*cked: Librarian Peer Review through the Lens of Sociomateriality” (Conference presentation, Empirical Librarians Conference, Richmond, VA, May 21–22, 2025).

5. Larsen et al., "This Performance Review Is F*cked."
6. Rebecca Nowicki and Kate Holvoet, "Sample of SDSU RTP Social Phenomenon," May 14, 2025, https://docs.google.com/document/d/e/2PACX-1vT_6ym1OmOXKYd0JevTv0Izy7q-MQzr8RjYuj1QU6KfzdcQZxhWoRhObcAcW6ZMbuY9azpf8JZJdCZw/pub.
7. Larsen et al., "This Performance Review Is F*cked."