



“You’re not going to write about that are you?”: what methodological issues arise when doing ethnography in an elite political setting?

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Abstract

This paper discusses some of the methodological issues which arise for negotiation when carrying out ethnographic research in and on elite political settings. It focuses on dilemmas faced by those using participant observation and elite interviews and draws on experiences gained during ethnographic fieldwork carried out inside the European Parliament [EP] in 2010. The paper firstly discusses the revival of New Institutionalism in political science and then the need for ethnographic research of the EP within the current literature. It argues that ethnography has much to offer EP scholarship and political science more widely. It then explores some methodological issues typically raised in elite political settings; power relations, access, positionality, insider research, research relationships and ethics. The paper reflects upon them before stressing the importance of *reflexivity* in ethnographic work then discusses *partial truths* and the *added value* ethnography offers political research.

“You’re not going to write about that are you?”: what methodological issues arise when doing ethnography in an elite political setting?

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Introduction¹

Ethnographers believe they need to do more fieldwork in Brussels.

European studies draw on all sorts of disciplines, from political science and economics to law and history. Anthropology also has a contribution to make, but something is preventing EU ethnographic studies from having a broader impact

“You get a much richer sense of how an institution works and how the people within it act on a day-to-day basis,” says Prof Tim Bale, (SEI, University of Sussex). Ethnography can also bring out hidden factors. “Sometimes it takes an anthropologist to reveal the practices that are so taken for granted that no one in the institution regards them as worth commenting on, even though – to an outsider – they are fascinating and very important,” ...

[Prof Cris] Shore sees no reason why the different approaches should not go hand in hand. “However, I have often encountered hostility within the disciplines that dominate EU studies. Their accusation is that ethnography lacks rigour, is based on ‘hearsay’ and relies on unreliable ‘anecdotal evidence’.” It is a charge that is easily rebutted. “Human beings are not rats in a laboratory,” he says. “Ethnography aims to provide insight into issues of meaning and behaviour that cannot be grasped through conventional scientific approaches.”

Source: Mundell:2010

In October 2010, this article by Ian Mundell appeared in Brussels’ *European Voice*. It discusses the use of ethnographic methods by academics to explore what goes on in Brussels and inside the EU institutions. Mundell raises some of the issues faced by ethnographers who choose to carry out research using this approach in an elite political setting, as well as their fraught relationship with other members of the European Studies academic community and the challenge of demonstrating the quality and validity - and potential contribution – of their work.

This working paper discusses some of the methodological issues likely to be encountered by ethnographers working in and on elite political settings with “natives” who are conscious of their position and how research portrays them and their institution to the outside world. It takes

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Danish Political Science Research Program (Nepos.net) workshop “Ethnographic Methods in Political Science” held in Copenhagen in April 2011. I would like to thank the participants for their feedback, particularly Xymena Kurowska, Allaine Cerwonka and Lise Philipsen. I would also like to thank the MEP for whom I interned in 2010, for the opportunity to carry out this research, and the two assistants I worked alongside for their invaluable insights and friendship.

Brussels and the European Parliament [EP] as an example and argues that ethnographers must be continuously reflexive about these issues and how they shape research design, data collection, analysis and writing. However, with this in mind, the paper suggests ethnography has much to offer not only scholarship of the EP but political science more generally, by enabling deeper analysis of everyday political life, the behaviour of actors within their context and the meanings they attribute to it. Ethnography can also open up discussions about the importance of *reflexivity*; acknowledging the epistemological, political and other forces which condition research and writing (Whitaker:1996:470), *positionality*; that understanding is always mediated by the position of the inquirer (Cerwonka&Malkki:2007:26), and *research design* in political research.

The discussion will centre around a loaded and energetic phrase I encountered during my ethnographic fieldwork inside the EP when informants said; “*you’re not going to write about that are you?*”. This phrase was occasionally raised after people revealed their feelings about an event, task, habit, process or colleague and would spark a discussion about the aims and interests of my research and how their comments might relate (or not!) to these, and reassurances of the complete anonymity of individuals in the write up. This poignant phrase links together two key themes raised in this working paper; firstly what ethnography can contribute to the political science literature, and secondly what methodological issues may be faced by researchers conducting this kind of research. Sometimes the phrase was used by participants with good humoured disbelief that academics could be interested in researching what they saw as mundane, even irrelevant, everyday details of institutional life. As Mundell’s article suggests, ethnography reveals and highlights the importance of taken-for-granted everyday practices which are fundamental to the way politics is practised, and attaining this depth of understanding which other methods cannot achieve is the *added value* ethnography offers political science. On other occasions, the phrase was used by participants when they realised they had said or shown me something they did not want to be included in the study, with varying levels of humour. In these instances, the phrase exemplifies an issue ethnographers may face when working in political contexts with elites who control access to sites and information and may wish to influence what is written about themselves or an institution. These two issues demonstrate the centrality of *positionality* in ethnographic research and the importance of reflecting upon this in ethnographic writing. Positionality, (the position from where the research is conducted) shapes who and what a researcher is able to observe and hence the picture of the field-site they build, but it also enables an in-depth study to be carried out and knowledge to be built from this position (Cerwonka&Malkki:2007:27). For quality ethnographic research to be produced, these issues must be reflected upon. Discussing these issues could become more important as political science re-focuses on the institutions of political life.

(1) Ethnography and Political Science

Since the end of the 1980’s, Institutionalism has ‘come around again’ in political science (Lowndes:2002:91). Lowndes asserts that the New Institutionalism [NI] which has been practised since has been a reaction to Behaviouralism’s under-socialised character which dismisses institutions as the aggregation of individual preferences. She insists, after March and Olsen’s 1984 seminal text, that *the organisation of political life makes a difference* (1992:91). NI looks at formal and informal recurring patterns of behaviour, the way institutions embody values and power relationships, and crucially, it is concerned with the interaction *between* institutions and individuals. Lowndes introduces seven strains of NI present in the literature including; normative NI which explores how norms and values shape behaviour, sociological NI which studies the way institutions create meaning for individuals, and network NI shows how

regularised patterns of interaction shape behaviour (1992:96). For scholars interested in these issues and understanding how institutions work, insights can be gained from an ethnographic approach which looks closely at routines, habits, interaction and everyday behaviours.

There is evidence of growing interest from the political science community in the benefits of an ethnographic approach to the study of political life such as; discussions in journals, (Hilmer:2011, Tilly:2006, Bayard de Volo & Schatz:2004) workshops, (Nepos.net, CERES:2006) and the publication of new volumes (Schatz:2009, Ybema et al:2009, Cerwonka&Malkki:2007). Whilst, as Hilmer suggests, political science is probably not on the cusp of an ethnographic revolution, the two new edited volumes he reviews make a plea for methodological pluralism in political science and describe the insights participant observation and thick description offer, the depth of which other techniques cannot attain (Hilmer:2011). This contribution, and the addition of ethnography to the political science toolbox, can mean that a body of literature covering an institution or phenomenon is deeper, richer and practices and motivations are better understood.

The revival of NI in political science means there is renewed interest in political institutions *as organisations*, in how they work and how they might shape political behaviours. An ethnographic approach has much to offer research exploring everyday functioning. For political scientists willing to take up this mantle, it is likely that the setting in which they carry out their fieldwork (whether through observation, participant observation or elite interviews) will be an elite one. It might be a parliament, civil service, government department, party or interest group. Elite political contexts raise some particular methodological issues for researchers to negotiate. Despite the frequent use of elite interviews by political scientists, (as the main method or as part of triangulation) there is little reflective methodological writing in the discipline's literature beyond practical advice on technique (Berry:2002, Richards:1996, Dexter:1970, Davies:2001, Goldstein:2002, Leech:2002). Here ethnographers, with their tendency towards reflexivity in data collection and writing, again have something to offer the literature.

(2) Ethnography and European Parliament Research

One institution which has recently seen increased academic interest in its functioning is the European Parliament [EP]. However, former Secretary-General Julian Priestley has lamented that 'there is relatively little on the life of the Parliament' (2008:xi). Few insiders are yet to publish accounts (other exceptions being Corbett et al:2007, Watson:2010, Duff:2005, Plumb et al:2000) and much of the academic research consists of statistical analyses of roll call votes [RCVs]. This has left a gap in the literature for richer accounts of the everyday of the institution and internal processes.

In merely 50 years, the EP progressed from 'a token talking-shop' as the Common Assembly to the significant institutional player it is today shaping legislation for its 500-million citizens (Corbett et al:2003:354). Institutional reforms have made it arguably one of the world's most powerful elected chambers (Hix et al:2003b:192). Successive EU treaties, most recently Lisbon, have continuously empowered it in the EU policy process and academic writing has been 'a function of its powers and prestige' (Hix et al:2003b:192) increasing in quantity and sophistication alongside its influence. Early scholarship was largely descriptive, focusing on institutional development (Verzichelli&Edinger:2005:255). As their influence grew, attention turned to the MEPs' behaviour and EP politics (Noury:2002:34) through a variety of approaches (Blomgren:2003:5). Broadly, contemporary research suggests the EP has become an important institutional actor and has a competitive party system.

Work on inter-institutional relations has found that the co-decision procedure has increased the EP's influence in the EU policy process (Burns:2002, Earnshaw&Judge:1995, Farrell&Héritier:2004, Maurer:2007, Scully:2007, Hagemann&Hoyland:2010). Meanwhile statistical research on RCV voting behaviour suggests that; the EP groups have become highly cohesive, voting occurs along ideological rather than national lines, there is a left-right cleavage and a competitive, consolidated 2+several party-system (Ringe:2010:1, Hix:2001, Hix:2002, Hix et al:2003a, Noury:2002). VoteWatch.eu has recently confirmed these findings and adds that ALDE, the third largest group, is the 'kingmaker' and that relatively stable coalitions form for different policy areas in the absence of a permanent majority (VoteWatch.eu:2010). This research follows a tradition of RCV-based studies, notably Hix, Noury and Roland's extensive study which found that - despite the fact the EP asks hundreds of MEPs from different countries, cultures, languages, national parties and institutional backgrounds to work together - EP politics is not highly fragmented and unpredictable but has become increasingly structured (2007:3). Another important contribution has been the statistical rejection of the traditional functionalist assumption that MEPs *go native* in Brussels as voting records and time spent suggest 'they don't shift their activities, never mind loyalties' (Scully:1999, 2005). The literature has led some to suggest *politics as normal* for the EP (McElroy:2006:179).

Much of the post-Maastricht EP research has been of this quantitative nature. It has significantly contributed to explaining voting behaviour and institutional outcomes. However Ringe has said; 'we know surprisingly little about the micro-foundations of EP politics' (2010) and there remains a gap for research exploring *how* political processes are occurring *inside* the EP and which takes a broader approach to behaviour beyond RCVs. We have less understanding of everyday political processes, interactions and behaviour occurring *within* the institution itself and *how* plenary votes are produced. The committees and political groups are two central legislative and political organisational elements which remain relatively under-researched, as well as the Conference of Presidents, Bureau, Co-ordinators and inter-groups. McElroy denotes our understanding of EP legislative politics as in its 'infancy' (2006:176) and other scholars have recommended further investigation². Some qualitative and mixed methods research has begun to address this gap and open-up the black-box (Bowler&Farrell:1995:220) by investigating committees, (McElroy:2006, Neuhold:2001, 2007, Ripoll Servent:2010) roles, (Bale&Taggart:2006) internal processes (Ringe:2010) lobbying (Rasmussen:2011) and focusing on particular actors such as rapporteurs and co-ordinators (Marshall:2010). Ethnography could help us further explore internal processes and also everyday institutional life more deeply to understand what goes on inside this institutional black-box and bring *people* and the *real world of politics* back into political analysis (Vromen:2010, Ringe:2010).

Van Maanen describes ethnography as 'the peculiar practice of representing the social reality of others through the analysis of one's own experience in the world of these others' (1988 in Emerson et al:1995:10). It is part of the qualitative research tradition which has recently seen a resurgence in the social sciences (Ybema et al:2009:3). Qualitative research aims to enhance our understanding of social processes by studying actors in their natural setting, paying attention to contextual factors and seeking to understand phenomena and actors on their own terms; the *emic perspective* (Denzin&Lincoln:1998:1-5, Eriksen:2001:36). As multiple methods are often used, the researcher may be seen as a *bricoleur* - a jack-of-all-trades who uses whatever tools are at hand to explore the context, understanding that research is an interactive process shaped by

² Including Hix et al:2003b:197, Coman:2009:1112, McElroy:2006:176, Kreppel & Tsebelis:1999:934, Raunio:2006:258, Verzichelli & Edinger:2005:255.

themselves, the setting and participants at that moment. The emergent *bricolage* stresses the meaningful relationships that operate in the context (Denzin&Lincoln:1998:1-5).

Ethnography itself has three important characteristics. Firstly, it is often equated with the method *participant observation*, widely viewed as the ‘hallmark’ of Anthropology (Stocking:1983:70). Ethnographers seek the natives’ perspective of their world and behaviour in it through a period of fieldwork where they live among their informants gaining direct and sustained contact with the group (O’Reilly:2009:122). The resulting ethnography lies closely to the world as experienced and described by them (Eriksen:2001:36). Secondly, ethnography is committed to *methodological holism*; ‘accepting that in principle anything in the research context can be relevant and could potentially be taken into account’, so ethnographers must adopt a curious cross-eyed vision where one eye ceaselessly roves around the context considering all aspects, while the other is tightly focused on the research topic (Gellner&Hirsch:2001:7). Thirdly, some describe ethnography as a *sensibility*, supplying a *lens* through which to view the world and an orientation to exploring it (Ybema et al:2009:15, Yanow:2009). It means allowing the field-site and participants to reveal what is important and relevant, and should be the ethnographer’s first commitment (Cerwonka&Malkki:2007:181). This is done by documenting ‘how the people see and talk about their everyday social activities and groupings, and the wider worlds they live in. It is their normal scenes of activity, topics of conversation and standards of evaluation that are the objects of ethnographic fieldwork’ (Sanjek:2002:196).

Ethnographic immersion allows the researcher access to what Schatzberg calls the *subjacent realm*; the everyday cultural rules and practices and unarticulated notions, attitudes, ideas and perceptions which go unquestioned; the local knowledge which is *common sense* and taken for granted as *everybody knows* it, but which therefore has a real impact on the way politics is practised at the everyday level (2008:2). Ethnographic immersion, with its focus on everyday activities, permits us to grasp this realm as it ‘compels us to look at the banalities of daily life as they are lived by the people from whom we are trying to learn’ (2008:5) and enables understanding of what encourages people to behave politically ‘in the myriad of ways that they do’ (2008:2) which is essential to understanding complex institutions like the EP where decision-making is ‘subject to a multitude of interests and a myriad of rules’ (Noury:2002:34).

Whilst traditionally anthropologists immersed themselves in exotic societies, ethnography is increasingly being done in the west and powerful organisations, known as ‘studying up’ (Nader:1969 in Wright:1994:14). The aim of organisational ethnography is to uncover the ways in which people understand their work settings, behaviour within them and how they manage their day-to-day situation (in Rosen:1991:12). Detailed ethnographic accounts of organisational life exist peppered across the social sciences, providing rich insights about their site and making theoretical contributions to their field (Smith:1997:427) but *organisational ethnography* also has its own distinct history (Schwartzman:1993, Wright:1994). Contemporary studies have explored so many organisations that Levin says, ‘name the organisation and some ethnographer has written about it in some depth’ (2003:9). *Doing* organisational ethnography means taking the principals and tools of ethnography described above into an organisational setting to explore how people understand their behaviour within this particular context.

Organisational ethnographers experience many of the same ‘moments’³ as traditional ethnographers but have also documented some *particular* methodological issues

³ E.g. gaining access, building relationships, gathering evidence, becoming saturated, providing interpretation, using analogies, invoking authorities, examples and theories (Van Maanen:2001:235).

(Gellner&Hirsch:2001:1) such as gaining access and researcher roles. However problematic, it is this embeddedness in the context that allows ethnography to gain its distinctive depth (Fine et al:2007). Scholarship of the EU institutions, and political organisations more generally, could benefit from the insights this approach offers. Through close and sustained observation of everyday activities and seeking the emic perspective, ethnography could help us understand how institutions and processes might shape the behaviour of actors, what meanings they attribute to behaviour and how politics is practised at the everyday level. Currently there is some lack of methodological advice for would-be political ethnographers⁴, but potential researchers can turn to the wealth of advice and reflections available from organisational ethnographers and anthropology.

(3) Methodological Reflections

Having briefly reviewed the EP literature and position of ethnography in political science, the bulk of this paper will focus on discussing some of the methodological issues eluded to so far which ethnographers of elite political settings are likely to encounter. Addressing these issues is not only essential to the production of high quality ethnographic research, but discussion of these issues and resign designs in publications may help ethnographers counter some of the criticisms Shore says they commonly encounter from European Studies; ‘their accusation is that ethnography lacks rigour, is based on ‘hearsay’ and relies on unreliable ‘anecdotal evidence’ (in Mundell:2010). It may also encourage wider discussion within the discipline about the impact of positionality on the collection of data.

This paper draws on experiences gained during ethnographic fieldwork carried out inside the EP in 2010 for doctoral research exploring organisational culture. Between June and December 2010, I was an MEP’s stagiaire whilst carrying out participant observation in the institution. This position enabled deep and sustained observation of everyday behaviour of some of the institution’s “natives”. Whilst there, I carried out 45 elite interviews with MEPs, assistants and administrators. Methodological issues arose during research design, gaining access, throughout the internship, whilst organising and during interviews, and when leaving the field. These issues, of research design and execution, must be reflected upon as important aspects of the methodology as they shaped the data I was able and unable to collect and consequently interpret.

Elite settings

Ethnographers exploring political organisations are likely to be carrying out their fieldwork in an elite setting. Richards defines *elite* as ‘a group of individuals, who hold, or have held, a privileged position in a society’ (1996:199). Dexter says an elite interview is ‘for any interviewee who is given special, non-standardized treatment’ (1970:5) usually because they have specialist knowledge, (due to or about this privileged position) which researchers wish to gain. Non-standardized treatment is when the researcher is eager for the subject to teach them, stress their definition of the situation, structure the account and define what is relevant (Dexter:1970:5) – a scenario familiar to ethnographers and approach I took to my elite interviews from which I hoped to learn from specialists, their experiences of this institution’s working culture. However, elites’ possession of this specialist knowledge coupled with recognition of their privileged position in society, changes the traditional power dynamics of

⁴ There is currently only one ethnographic exploration of the EP, (Abélès:1992, Abélès:1993) but there has been other studies of the EU, (Shore:2000,2001, Zabusky:1995, Bellier:2000) and in political science more generally (Fenno:1978, Harper:1998, Faucher-King:2005, Crewe:2005, Matthews:1960, Weatherford:1985, Searing:1994).

ethnographic research, discussed further in the next section. This awareness by political elites of their position creates a sensitive context and complex constellation of power relationships which ethnographers must negotiate when carrying out their research; as elites will have control over what information you can and cannot access and when.

One manifestation of this may be awareness by informants of you, your institution and research. They may research you because they are conscious of the image they want to project to the outside world of themselves and the institution, so they are more likely to read accounts of themselves - not a problem early ethnographers worried about (Ybemba et al:2009:4). Concern about what I would write about them arose with some of my informants. Most notably one interviewee, an MEPs assistant, who began the interview by asking if I was one of the eurosceptic researchers from Sussex because he would not continue the interview if so (14/12/2010). One EP administrator told me that the publication of Abélès' ethnographic work had 'caused quite a stir here' so he was looking forward to seeing mine and the reaction to it (5/11/2010).

Having interviewed a number of MEPs, assistants and administrators, I noticed there were significant differences between these types of interviewees, (also described by Ripoll Servent:2010). Administrators were concerned to be kept completely anonymous, one even refusing to allow me to use the material at all afterwards, but were then prepared to go into sensitive and personal details once this assurance was given; whereas MEPs were often happy for their names to be used but avoided giving details, sticking closer to a party or institutional line. One MEP in particular discussed with me which bits of the interview he was and wasn't happy for me to attribute to him (8/12/2010) and 4/14 MEPs asked to see any quotations before they were attributed to them publicly, which relates to elites' consciousness of their public image.

However, I more commonly found that my informants were genuinely interested in my research, some asking what I had found so far and what I expected. This was particularly common among the assistants who had studied social science degrees, and also two MEPs were interested in academic research and referred to it in the interviews. In elite political settings, researchers may find informants who have done the same degree and read the same materials which can help you develop your ideas. I also found that some of my informants were curious or faintly amused by my researching them. This developed into a joke with my MEP and his assistants that they were my lab-rats and I their scientist. Whilst usually amusing, there were times when he would note his awareness that I was observing him, and advise me to pay attention to certain things he felt were important, or remind me that most MEPs worked very hard in their various ways, whilst musing on the psychology of what makes someone want to be a politician and an MEP in particular. At other moments they sometimes added; *you're not going to write about that are you?* – after saying or showing me something they would prefer not to be included in the study because of what it might suggest about themselves or the institution, or which they couldn't believe I would be interested in including as it seemed so irrelevant.

Elite political settings mean working with informants who are likely to have a privileged position and may want to protect it; whether politicians, their staff or institutional administrators. They are conscious of the image they portray to the outside world of themselves and their institution, and have the means and skills to control the release of information about themselves and their work to you. This means that ethnographers will have to build relationships and trust and negotiate this sensitive power terrain when gathering information, whilst being aware of the status of information given, the motivations for what is given and also what they

may not have been given access to and why. Close and sustained contact with the group will enable ethnographers to explore these issues and negotiate relationships.

Power relations

When working in an elite setting, constant attention must be paid to the power relationships and authority structures which you enter into, your informants are part of and which therefore shape your research process (Forsey:2004:69, Pierce:1995:95). Elite political research brings us to question orthodox ethnographic wisdom which has assumed ethnographers exercise textual and social authority. Critical literature has therefore often focused on giving power back to subjects, as the ethic prevails that academics are the experts and subjects are not (Pierce:1995:94). Elite research brings us to Pierce's question; 'how does ethnographic authority play out in a field-setting where the power relationships and authority aren't so clear cut?' (1995:95). In elite research, we are the supplicant 'requesting time and expertise from the powerful, with little to offer in return' (McDowell:1992 in Cochrane:1998:2123).

By their nature elites are difficult to penetrate and have legal and cultural means to deflect researchers, hide behind gatekeepers and are able to make you wait on the day and for the day and 'thus determine the organization and the pace of research' (Fitz&Halpin:1994:48,34). Researchers who have tried to observe or interview politicians may be aware of this feeling as emails are ignored, appointments changed and cancelled minutes beforehand. Even afterwards, you can be left with the feeling that you have actually learnt very little from an interview or observation as politicians can be obstructive and know how to control the release of information and manage their image as they are used to public events and giving media interviews. A common issue raised in the political science literature is how to know whether subjects are lying or feeding you a party-line (e.g. Berry:2002, Puwar:1997). However, Dean and Whyte remind us that all subjects' statements range between subjective and objective and evaluating this is part of analysis (1958:120) as analysing a party-line and the context in which it was given can tell us a lot about political life. Prolonged immersion can help ethnographers formulate better informed and more probing questions, to build important research relationships and also gain interviews through snowballing and recommendations, to then be able to triangulate long-term observation data with interviews and other material.

However, an obstructive situation is not always the case. Some people and organisations are interested in the public knowing more about their work. However their accounts remain selective narratives with their own motivations. Berry reminds us to pay attention to our informants' characteristics and evaluate the impact of passion and dispassion, exaggeration and self-effacing behaviour, probing and digression on our data collection (2002). Politicians are public figures and have a public and personal investment in taking part in research so may be careful about what information they reveal and how (Ball:1994:96). Ball says political research involving politicians is 'highly political' and the inherent power imbalances mean interviews and research can be 'game-like' (1994:97-99). For ethnographers, spending time in political settings means they can get a better grasp of the rules of these games and actors' motivations and relationships within them. Ethnographers have the opportunity to build relationships in the hope of moving beyond these initial games, often encountered by elite interviewers, as over time their presence ceases to be a disturbance (Malinowski:1922:1-25). However, sustained contact may mean ethnographers are drawn into these games and power relationships which will shape the data they are able and unable to gain exposure to; e.g. by becoming associated with certain informants in a hierarchy. They must be aware of the moving conditions of their access *inside* the institution and the potential for it to change whenever elites choose.

Access

However, the literature cites the first hurdle as gaining initial access to the site (Fitz&Halpin:1995). This again relates to elites' privileged position and ability to deflect researchers. Often this occurs via gatekeepers (secretaries) who may either ignore emails or send dismissive responses. "Tactics" for gaining access to MEPs, (which can become *game-like*) is a common discussion amongst EP researchers (Busby&Ripoll Servent:2009:6). These usually include multiple emails, follow-up phone-calls, targeting relevant MEPs, selling your expertise, making yourself available, timing, attending events and sheer persistence - to get observation opportunities and interviews.

Organising the internship for my participant observation meant negotiating permission with a key sponsor and arranging a working situation. I soon learnt issues included how much work I could do and whether I expected to be paid. The MEP and I agreed on 4 days interning and 1 day for interviews, but other access points were attempted beforehand where agreements were not possible. Having something to offer busy politicians, e.g. your [free] labour, seems to be one solution but as is discussed below, this has important methodological implications.

Initial access is just the first step. Once inside, this initial trust 'is a delicate gift, easily broken' (Barbour&Schostak:2005:42) and research relationship negotiation is a continuous process (Maxwell:2005, Bell:1999) particularly with your key sponsor and other informants you meet inside about further areas you can access (e.g. meetings). This can lead to ethical dilemmas about informed consent as you cannot walk around wearing a t-shirt saying "I am an anthropologist". Even when initial consent is given for access from a sponsor, ethnographers may find they need to seek further permission to access new areas once inside, or may feel they need to inform other staff around them of their status in more depth. Once inside the "fortress" walls of the EP with your access badge, a researcher is relatively free to roam and watch meetings and attend events. Every ethnographer will have to negotiate consent within their own context, often dependent upon its size and organisation.

Positionality: researcher role and presentation

The access point you choose, (or manage to acquire!) has wide and important methodological implications. It determines who you get to meet and what you get to observe, how people react to you, the relationships you form and hence the data you are (un)able to collect and thus the picture of the institution you build (O'Reilly:2009:6).

Political settings are likely to be a landscape rife with complex relationships. First, there is the formal institutional hierarchy to consider. Your key sponsor(s) may be somewhere near the top or bottom of this, but this association is likely to impact upon the way other participants view and interact with you and what they feel able to reveal to you; e.g. employees concerned you are reporting to their boss, or managers concerned employees are painting an unfavourable portrait of the organisation. Access points are not neutral and here ethnographers enter and may become part of complex institutional relationships. Secondly, there are the informal relationships between members of the institution to consider. Friendships, grudges and competition between insiders, particularly those relating to your key sponsor, may affect who else is prepared to be part of your project, to what extent and what information they give you. This may be because they don't want your sponsor to know certain information, or because they want to challenge the narrative they assume the sponsor will give. In a political environment there is an important

third factor to consider; the party political landscape. Where a researcher places themselves will firstly depend upon their research interest. If the focus is a particular party, this placement may be obvious. However, once entering one party, it may be harder for researchers to access others because of earlier association. Some researchers have carried out observation of different EP groups (Brack:2010) and this may be easier if they are all approached at the beginning. However, this may make groups less likely to want to be involved in a project if they are not certain of confidentiality or fear unfavourable comparisons.

Working cultures inside large institutions may vary widely; one EP official was keen to stress the differentiated nature of the EP working culture which he thought was thus difficult to describe (interview:26/11/2010). Interviewing 27 administrators from different EP departments suggests there are a number of working cultures and over-lapping norms operating inside the EP; e.g. among staff of the groups, committees, Secretary-General, translators, research departments and the MEP assistants. Ethnographers spending long periods with their key informant(s) must remember that the norms they find operating there may not be generalisable to the wider institution. I was introduced to the EP via one group and did not have access to the other groups' meetings. Over time, I began to assume the other groups made decisions in the same way as they followed similar formal meeting patterns. However, an interviewee who had worked for 3 groups reminded me that there are subtle but important differences between decision-making processes operating inside the groups; e.g. who speaks the most in meetings and why (interview:12/11/2010). This interviewee reminded me of the *partial* nature of my EP research, discussed further below.

On reflection, the position I held was extremely useful. My MEP had connections with some helpful administrators who became informants and was well respected among colleagues; one MEP said she only accepted the interview because I was from his office (interview:30/11/2010). The offices he held allowed me to attend a range of meetings and events and see many documents and communications, and his depth of knowledge of the institution and its characters, as well as his openness to the research, was invaluable. The overall positive experience aside, I must evaluate the consequences of this *positionality*. Although the position prevented me from observing other groups⁵, immersion made me aware of this and some gaps can be filled with elite interviews or acknowledged and reflected upon. However much I was able to see, there is still much that I was unable to observe despite an awareness of (some of?) this.

An advantage of the stagiaire position was that insiders could easily relate to it and to me (Bell:1999); hundreds of EP stagiaires come and go every year and they are expected to ask lots of questions and want to learn how the institution works. Being a stagiaire also means mucking in, working hard and carrying out a wide range of tasks. Although it may limit access to the top of some hierarchies and certain important meetings⁶, it does mean you learn a lot about how the EP works politically on the everyday level, and also that you form bonds with other insiders when working on projects together and therefore gain a deep understanding of some working practices. One important rite of passage amongst the assistants and interns is the first trip to Strasbourg, (or "Stressbourg") where other assistants are asked to look after "newbies" and which is hard work but a place where people work together on projects, bring all the Brussels preparatory work to fruition and spend time socialising more than in Brussels.

⁵ Research observing all the group meetings would be an exciting and revealing follow-up research project.

⁶ E.g. meetings of important bureaucratic bodies such as the Conference of Presidents, EP Bureau and administrator meetings, but also important political groups meetings such as Group Bureau.

As well as the *institutional* role a researcher positions themselves through, the way they present themselves personally in the field and what they *do* there is also important as it will influence the way informants react to them, the relationships they form and thus what they can observe and the information they can collect; ‘the personal characteristics of the fieldworker mediate the cultural scenes that unfold in their presence’ and they are ‘suffused’ throughout the research process and text (Bell:1999:23). This can include whether researchers choose to dress to fit-in or differentiate themselves as academics and Gurney discusses some particular issues female researchers might face in male-settings in (1985). Characteristics might also include how much rapport you try to build with informants and whether you challenge their responses; I felt one interview was ruined by an early disagreement with the informant, which may be particularly important with elites who are sensitive about your topic and angle. For participant observers, relationships have to be maintained over long periods and disagreements may have to be negotiated, particularly with elites who control further and future access. In a busy elite political setting, an important balance needs to be struck between ‘expert and ignoramus’ (McDowell:1998:2137); whilst politicians don’t suffer fools and expect prior knowledge from employees, researchers need to appear to want and need knowledge from them too, particularly to enable discussion of everyday and organizational processes. These relationships will have to be continually negotiated and reflected upon.

Whilst being an intern, I had to learn to perform this role competently to achieve the insider status needed to understand the emic perspective – but also to maintain my access and good research relationships! Doing this meant working with and forming bonds with insiders. Maintaining a dual identity in the field is fundamental in ethnographic research, a tension inherent in the oxymoronic term *participant observation* (O’Reilly:2009:158). Denzin argues meaningful interpretations of human experience come from those who have thoroughly immersed themselves in phenomena (in O’Reilly:2009:160). However, researchers must also retain distance so as not to *go native* and be able to analyse institutional processes. Some researchers differentiate themselves through dress or by carrying a notepad or might maintain distance by keeping a reflective diary about these kinds of issues. However, this can be more difficult for those carrying out *insider research*.

Insider Research

Being a member of the organisation being explored may enable a researcher to gain access more easily. However, access advantage has to be assessed alongside problems associated with insider research.

Insider ethnography has been deemed dangerous due to the enhanced possibility of *going native* (O’Reilly:2009:80) and methodological issues such as distorting personal relationships, wanting to champion colleagues and not being able to question your experiences enough, meaning you do not probe deeply enough and produce erroneous conclusions (Coghlan&Brannick:2005:65). Insider ethnographers have also been criticised for not experiencing the cultural detachment and shock which is traditionally said to assist analytical thinking. However, insider ethnographers claim initial cultural shock is actually bad for rapport and promote insider advantages such as themselves being informants, enhanced trust, rapport, access, empathy and ultimately understanding (O’Reilly:2009:114). Many seek to *de-familiarise the familiar* by looking for symbolic boundaries to make *the banal peculiar* (Inglis:2005:11) and keeping descriptive field-notes to help this process.

Over-involvement, distorting personal relationships and wanting to champion informants are risks in ethnographic research conducted anywhere. In elite political settings, immersion means working daily on projects, issues and for a cause you may become deeply involved with; perhaps more so for insiders. Forcing yourself to keep reflective field-notes focused on your *academic research question* and your puzzle can help alleviate some of these issues. Doctoral researchers may also find sending fieldwork “dispatches” to their supervisors can keep them focused and monitor these risks. Elite interviews with informants outside your immediate setting can help you see past personal relationships and the perspectives key informants regularly offer. Coghlan and Brannick note that our final project is assessed on the quality and rigour of the inquiry, not the success of the organisation or our role there. Differentiating our two identities and our research goals from those of the organisation and its members can also help (2005:47).

Research relationships

Making, maintaining and balancing research relationships in an elite political context is challenging for ethnographers who remain there for extended periods. Firstly, for all the reasons already raised relating to the elite context, complex power relationships and positionality issues of the way informants relate to you - and the effect of these on data collection. These issues may be further complicated for insiders who have to establish a dual identity.

Role duality becomes an issue for ethnographers if their performance in one affects the other. When working with, or for, elites, researchers may feel their institutional role performance affects their research relationship with their sponsor and thus the information and access opportunities they provide, or perhaps block. Establishing rules and expectations about your research early with the sponsor, and keeping them informed about your progress to highlight this priority may help. Maintenance of this relationship is unique to every project. I was fortunate that once inside the EP I had the freedom to establish other important research relationships as well as maintaining a good working and research relationship with my sponsor. However this did not come without some cost, as it meant long working hours for many months and working at performing both roles which at times became exhausting. In ethnographic research, where *you* are the research instrument, a huge onus is put on the individual for an extended period to carry out the data collection, reflect upon the process and also perform their institutional role and maintain personal and research relationships. This can be an emotional, as well as ultimately rewarding experience.

Fieldwork tends to go in fits and starts; some periods you are besieged with data and ideas and overwhelmed by new experiences and contacts, but these are punctuated with times of stagnation, frustration and confusion where you wonder if you will ever do enough to answer your question adequately (Busby:2010). In performing two roles, some find balancing involvement and detachment so overwhelming that it leads to feeling detached in both (Coghlan&Brannick:2005:68). This can particularly be a result of balancing relationships with people who are both informants and become friends. Using this data may require reflection upon these relationships and how they relate to your project. This can be an issue in settings such as Brussels where work and private lives blur because people come to Brussels to work and then establish many of their friendships through their work place, and therefore socialise with friends regularly in the nearby Places after work and at networking events, but do so in work clothes and discuss work issues and relationships with colleagues, so boundaries quickly become blurred.

Navigating these boundaries is a complex part of ethnographic research, and may become further complicated if informants add; *you're not going to write about that are you?* – which may signal a boundary has been crossed. As has been suggested, there were various motivations for the use of this phrase and varying degrees of jest and severity, which in turn shaped the responses given. The phrase would spark a discussion about the aims and interests of my research to show how their comment might (or might not) be insightful and useful. Sometimes people would say this after giving a remark about a colleague or their view on an event which had occurred; if this *was* of interest, reassurances of the anonymity of individuals beyond job titles (e.g. an assistant or an EP administrator) were given. If the phrase followed their view on a task or process which was more directly interesting for the research, a discussion would usually follow about the research question and how this might help answer it and a negotiation about use and anonymity. However, more often I tried to organise a time for a formal interview where the remark could be discussed further and a reference for the interview agreed with the individual. This phrase demonstrates how access and ethics are on-going processes which must be continuously negotiated during ethnographic fieldwork (Maxwell:2005, Piper&Simons:2005).

Research Ethics

Carrying out ethnographic research in elite settings leads to some particular ethical issues, highlighted in the title phrase of this paper, cited above and which have been eluded to throughout this paper. Elites' privileged position and possession of specialist knowledge may mean they want to control access, information release and the image of themselves and their organisation which is given to researchers, and their position means they often have the means to do this. Being conscious of what is written about them means they may want to influence what you write – and what you feel able to write - about them after immersion. You may observe things which they may ask you not to include, or you assume you cannot include; e.g. stories which the media could use to paint an unfavourable picture of the institution – a particular issue for MEPs who face a eurosceptic press. Ethnographers may feel a responsibility to their informants to withhold things in return for the privileged access they were granted, or because they want to maintain good relations so that they, and other academics, can return in the future. This again raises the political nature of elite political research (Ball:1994) because 'when statements are printed, they are taken out of the lived context and placed into another – the public domain' (Barbour&Schostak:2005:41) where they may be re-interpreted, or misinterpreted. These issues - and an ethical duty not to harm informants which may include their job or re-election prospects or the success of their particular campaign, issue or organisation - must be weighed against an ethical *academic* commitment to paint as full and accurate a picture of the field-site as possible and to produce valid, quality research. As has been suggested above, every ethnographer has to continuously negotiate these issues in their specific context with their informants and attempt to answer their research question as fully as possible whilst balancing these evolving issues (Piper&Simons:2005:56).

Ethnographers must also address some more commonly discussed ethical issues; voluntary and informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity (Robson:2000:28). Ethnographers will have to negotiate access to an elite, political site through a key sponsor and ensure they are informed about the research topic and process as fully as possible, and of any new interests which evolve. However, researchers are likely to find their sponsor is interested in the research, will become a key informant and may like to offer helpful direction. Although access and informed consent may be arranged with a key sponsor, ethnographers may find they need to re-evaluate whether this extends far enough once inside a large organisation, but again, consulting with the key

sponsor who knows the organisation can help. Confidentiality may be initially easier to address by keeping notes and transcripts secure and not discussing data with others. However this can become more complex when colleagues ask where you are going, who you are interviewing or what you are finding. I also noticed one interviewee became uncomfortable about being seen interviewed by colleagues in the EP Mickey Mouse bar, although this location had been her suggestion. Afterwards, I recommended offices as locations, although this did not work for those in shared offices. Anonymity has been the hardest element to address, particularly how to refer to my MEP. Ensuring informed consent in the field-site makes it impossible to keep him anonymous from other colleagues in the write-up. This is made harder by the case-study design which narrows the field of possible candidates. This can be addressed firstly with the use of a false name or “my MEP” reference. A *participant validation* process can also be arranged whereby writing is sent to the MEP (or key sponsor) so they have the chance to raise any issues about what material is included and therefore withdraw informed, voluntary consent – but this again contributes to the issue of elite control of research. For interviewees, anonymity is easier to address because you can ask them individually how they want to be cited, and this seemed to put many interviewees at ease, but as mentioned, some were keen to select what they were happy to be attributed to them with this opportunity. This was frustrating with some administrators who stressed their need for anonymity when attributing more specific titles for senior or specialist figures would have added credibility to my research.

(4) Reflexivity

Reflexivity means reflecting on and acknowledging these influences on the research process; ‘adequate anthropological accounts cannot be crafted without acknowledging the forces – epistemological or political – that condition their writing’ (Whitaker:2002:470). The methodological issues discussed mean it is crucial for ethnographers of elite political settings to be reflexive about their research design, process, positionality, research relationships, access, citations and other issues they face in the field and how these shape the data collected, its nature, how they analyse and write about it and also what they may *not* have observed.

These issues affect the quality and validity of research as they affect how well you, as *the research instrument*, are able to collect data. Keats says validity is ‘concerned with how well the research instrument measures what it is intended to measure’ (2000:77) which refers to the research design. Ethnographers must ask whether they are observing what they say they are, but also how *well* they are doing this – which will be affected by the issues discussed above in an elite context, particularly access issues and negotiation of relationships.

It is important that ethnographers are reflexive about, firstly, their predispositions and research design because our values and theoretical commitments shape what we seek because ‘the researcher approaches research from a specific position which affects the approach taken’ (Byrne:2004:184); and secondly, their research process because ‘the activity of the knower influences what is known since nothing can be known apart from these activities’ (in Dunne et al:2005:21). However reflexivity doesn’t stop after reflecting upon predispositions, the research design and process; it must be *continuously performed* at all stages (Haggerty:2003:158) from the initial meeting through design, execution and the interpretation and writing process as the researcher is ‘suffused’ throughout the text (see Bell:1999 and Mason:2002 for more on the writing phase and process). Ethnography has something to offer EP research, and political science more widely, by discussing these methodological issues and their impact upon research findings which is not so commonly done in the current literature.

(5) Concluding remarks: partial truths

These methodological issues mean that any ethnographic account of an elite political context is a *partial truth*; something acknowledged of ethnographic research more widely by Clifford (1986). Clifford says ethnographic writing is determined contextually, rhetorically, (by literary tradition) generically, (as a genre) institutionally, (by school of thought) politically and historically (1986:6). He evokes the Cree hunter who, when describing his society, said, 'I'm not sure I can tell the whole truth...I can only tell what I know' (in Clifford:1986:8). The methodological issues described mean ethnographers can only produce their account of their institution as they experienced it from their position at that moment – because ethnography *knows from a certain position*. Ethnographers appreciate, as has been described in this reflective paper, that research is an interactive process shaped by themselves, the setting and the participants at a moment (Denzin&Lincoln:1998:1-5). However, if reflexivity is performed throughout and these methodological issues are acknowledged, ethnography has much to offer those seeking to explore political life and particularly the way organisations work, because it offers a depth of understanding of processes, perspectives and motivations which other methods cannot so easily attain which is its *added value*.

As organisational ethnographers have found that they share many moments in common with traditional ethnographers, but have their own particular issues to negotiate – ethnographers of elite political settings share many moments but also face some particular methodological issues relating to the [elite, political] nature of their research context. These ethnographers may be faced with informants who ask; “*you're not going to write about that are you?*”. This phrase captures the sensitive field-site ethnographers who choose to *study up* in elite, political settings are likely to be faced with. The revival of NI in political science and renewed interest in institutions *as organisations* may mean more researchers encounter these issues as they investigate how institutions work and the influence they have on behaviour. Researchers of elite political settings are likely to find “natives” who have a privileged social position and want to protect it, and thus are conscious of the image they portray to the public. They will have control over what, how and when you access information and the means and resources to disable access at any moment, as research of political settings is itself highly political (Ball:1994). Ethnographers face a complex landscape of power relations and must continuously negotiate access which means thinking carefully about the way they position and present themselves in the field-site and evaluate the research relationships they form and how they conduct them, and the impact different kinds of relationships will have on the data they collect, as well as thinking about what they may not have observed. Reflection can help ethnographers navigate some difficult ethical choices they may face about the loyalty they have to informants and to academia when working among elite natives.

These methodological issues affect the data you are able to collect and thus the picture of the institution you paint as an ethnographer. Any ethnographic account is a *partial truth*, (Cerwonka&Malkki:2007:27) but an account of an elite political institution will be particularly conditioned by these factors which must therefore be acknowledged in order to produce high quality and valid ethnographic work. However, once produced, rich ethnographic accounts achieve a depth of understanding of institutional processes and perspectives which other research methods cannot achieve and can therefore contribute something important to add to the body of research covering an institution or phenomenon as well as political behaviour more broadly, when ethnography is added to the political science toolbox.

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