

‘GENRE BLURRING’ AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ETHNOGRAPHY?*

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Abstract

This article seeks to broaden the craft of public administration by ‘blurring genres’. First, I explain the phrase ‘blurring genres’. Second, I provide some examples of early work in administrative ethnography. Third, I compare this early, modernist- empiricist ethnography with interpretive ethnography, suggesting researchers confront three choices: naturalism vs. anti-naturalism; intensive vs. hit-and-run fieldworks; and generalisation vs. local knowledge. After this general discussion, and fourth, I discuss the more prosaic issues that confront anyone seeking to use ethnography to study public administration and look at fieldworks roles, relevance, time, evidence and fieldwork relationships. Fifth, I describe and illustrate the several tools students of public administration can use as well as observation and interviews; namely, focus groups, para-ethnography, visual ethnography, and storytelling. Finally, I conclude that ethnographic fieldwork provides texture, depth and nuance, and lets interviewees explain the meaning of their actions. It is an indispensable tool and a graphic example of how to enrich public administration by drawing on the theories and methods of the humanities.

Introduction

Public administration strives to be an applied discipline that deals with practical problems. Its characteristics are said to include hierarchy; professional dominance; and instrumental-technical rationality (Jun 2006: 4). The challenge to bureaucracy in the guise of the New Public Management caused a change in labels from public administration to public management, but much remained the same. The theory and practice of public administration still aspires to provide a technology - a toolkit for engineering policy and its implementation. The way is instrumental-technical rationality. The current guise is evidence-based policymaking.¹ Other fields may have been persuaded by 'the interpretive turn', but not public administration.²

Public administration's 'identity' is a matter of long-standing debate. It is not only seen as an applied social science but also as an art, and a craft (see for example: Goodsell 1992; Waldo 1968a). In this article, I seek to broaden the craft of public administration by 'blurring genres'. In the next, brief section, I explain the phrase 'blurring genres' before providing some examples of early work in administrative ethnography. I compare this modernist- empiricist ethnography with interpretive ethnography, suggesting the researcher confronts three choices: naturalism vs. anti-naturalism; intensive vs. hit-and-run fieldworks; and generalisation vs. local knowledge. After this general discussion, I discuss the more prosaic issues that confront anyone seeking to use ethnography to study public administration by looking at fieldworks roles, relevance, time, evidence and fieldwork relationships. If observation and interviewing are the core methods of ethnography, they are not the only tools available. Students of public administration can also use focus groups, para-ethnography, visual ethnography, and storytelling. I conclude that ethnography is an indispensable tool and

a graphic example of how public administration can be enriched by drawing on the theories and methods of the humanities.

Blurring genres

As Geertz (1983: 21) points out ‘there has been an enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life’. ‘Social scientists have turned away from a laws and instances ideal of explanation towards a cases and interpretations one’. Instead, they draw on ‘analogies drawn from the humanities’. So, ‘society is less and less represented as an elaborate machine or quasi-organism and more as a serious game, a sidewalk drama, or a behavioural text’. This shift poses a problem for public administration. As we shift from laws to analogies, ‘the social technologist notion’ of a social scientist is ‘brought into question’ (Geertz 1983: 35). Rather, the task becomes to recover the meaning of games, dramas and texts and to tease out their consequences, not to provide evidence for policy. This article asks ‘what are the implications of blurring genres for the study of public administration?’ I ask not only what can we learn from the humanities but also if there is a different, even new, ‘social technology’ we can use?

The humanities encompass the disciplines of architecture, literature, history, anthropology, classics, languages, music, philosophy, religion, and the visual and performing arts? Clearly, not all of these fields are equally relevant to public administration. This article focuses on the contribution of cultural anthropology. I answer the question of what we can learn from the humanities by providing examples from cultural anthropology and encouraging the reader to explore the other disciplines.³

Modernist-empiricist ethnography

For Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 2), ‘ethnography does not have a standard, well-defined meaning’. The usual answer is a puzzle – ‘ethnography is what cultural anthropologists do’. Some words and phrases recur. The ethnographer studies people’s everyday lives. Such fieldwork is unstructured. The aim is to recover the meaning of their actions. By long association, meaning is captured by participant observation; the defining method of ethnography. So, what is participant observation? The answer will commonly involve reference to fieldwork or deep immersion, whether looking at a Congressional district, a government department or a tribe in Africa. What is fieldwork? Historically, it meant going to another country, learning the language and studying the everyday lives of the inhabitants of a village, tribe, or whatever unit of social organisation judged relevant. For the novice, it was the only way to become a cultural anthropologist; ‘you can’t teach fieldwork, you have to do it’ (and see Barley 1986 for a humorous account of learning to do it). However, ethnography has evolved into a diverse and disparate set of practices (and see, Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 12-13 for a map of this diversity).

There is little administrative ethnography. To transplant Auyero and Joseph (2007: 2) from political science to public administration, there is a ‘double absence’. There is little public administration in the ethnographic literature and even less ethnography in the study of public administration. As ever, there are exceptions to this generalisation, including some ‘classics’ from the 1960s and 1970s.⁴

Although the term ‘street-level bureaucrat’ was not in common currency, Kaufman’s *The Forest Ranger* (1960) pioneered the topic. He studied forest rangers and their supervisors in five districts. He visited the first district for seven weeks and the other districts for one week

each; all the rangers' time was set aside for his 'conversations' and observations. There were also social visits to their families in the evening. He diagnoses a tendency to fragmentation created by hierarchy and specialisation in which, for example, forest supervisors and district rangers in the field apply policies to concrete situations. Anyone who tries 'to direct activities on a Ranger district without going through the Ranger can be sure of swift and vehement objection by the field officer' (Kaufman 1960: 210). He calls them 'switchboards', adapting general directives to specific conditions and areas. It is a pivotal position. It is a classic example of the street level bureaucrat, only they patrol trails, not streets. However, local discretion did not fuel conflict with the centre because they used their discretion to further the agency's goals (see also Kaufman 1981).

In the UK, there was little administrative ethnography before the 2000s, and the little that existed was not described as ethnography. An important and still cited book on British politics is a 'tacit' ethnography: Heclo and Wildavsky's (1981 [1974]) study of budgeting in British central government. They show the value and feasibility of intensive interviews at the top of British government. Then, the working assumption of most British students of public administration was 'there's no point in asking because they'll say no'. Their fieldwork demonstrates the value of getting out there. Unfortunately, they are less than informative about their methods. They conducted two rounds of interviews totalling 'two hundred or so'. They were 'intensive' interviews with ministers and civil servants but they do not say anything about their structured or semi-structured interview schedule. There is no breakdown of interviews by rank. They refer to their interviewees as co-authors, to 'seeing the world through their eyes', and describe themselves as 'observers' ... 'watching how people work together' (Heclo and Wildavsky 1981: lvii, lxvii–iii, lxxi). Hugh Heclo recalls 'we did nothing *but* observational fieldwork' (personal correspondence 9 May 2012). No matter they fail to report their methods in

detail. Their book exemplifies the value of intensive interviews and observation which, in this example, gives us a clearer understanding of civil servants beliefs and practices about the budgetary process (see also Weller, in this issue).

Australia continues the Anglophone tradition of ignoring ethnography in the study of public administration. Corbett and Boswell (2013 and this issue) survey the Australian literature on an interpretive approach to political research, finding examples by historians, and anthropologists, but cite no examples of administrative ethnography. There are a few cases of ‘tacit’ ethnography. Thus, Weller’s (2001) analysis of Australia’s mandarins is based on 43 interviews with top public servants. The former Head of the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, Peter Shergold, suggests the resulting book employs ‘a methodological approach more usually associated with ethnography’ (Shergold 2014). Given that Heclo and Wildavsky are an admitted inspiration for Weller’s work (Weller 2014), the similarities in approach are to be expected. In both cases, interviews, not observation, were the dominant feature of the research design.

All these studies broke new ground but they adopt a naturalist epistemology (see, for example: Kaufman 1960: 18-21). They treat ethnography as a method for collecting data. The emphasis falls on systematic data collection, validating that data, avoiding observer bias, and writing up in the third-person (and see Werner and Schoeple 1987 for a detailed account of how to achieve rigour in ‘ethno-science’). They also seek to test mainstream theories. For example, Kaufman explores the ideas of control and coordination from the public administration literature. Heclo and Wildavsky explore the incremental theory of budgeting. For all of them, the researcher’s role is that of detached observer. However, ethnography is a broad church and it is not confined to modernist-empiricism.

The interpretive turn in ethnography

The would-be practitioners of ethnography confront many choices. There are several varieties of cultural anthropology or ethnography to choose between (and for a compendious survey see Bryman 2001). Which variety you prefer will depend on where you stand on naturalism, intensive fieldwork, and generalisations.

Naturalism vs. anti-naturalism

Naturalism refers to the idea that ‘The human sciences should strive to develop predictive and causal explanations akin to those found in the natural sciences’ (Bevir and Kedar 2008: 503). It is known variously as positivism, behaviouralism and modernist empiricism in the social sciences. It holds two central beliefs. First, it believes that knowledge refers ‘in an immediate way to some reality, or aspects of reality that can be apprehended through the senses’; and, second, that the ‘methods and logical form of science ... can be applied to the study of social phenomena’ (Giddens 1993: 136).

Anti-naturalism, on the other hand, argues that human life differs from the rest of nature because ‘human action ... is meaningful and historically contingent’ and the task of the human sciences is an interpretive one in search of meaning. Moreover, the epistemology of the social sciences assumes the knower and the known are independent. The humanities consider the two inseparable, interacting and influencing one another, leading to shared interpretations (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 28, 36-8 and Table 1.1). The interpretive turn and the humanities share this anti-naturalism⁵

An interpretive approach shifts analysis away from institutions, functions and roles of mainstream public administration to the actions and practices of interdependent actors. To

understand actions and practices, we need to grasp the relevant meanings, the beliefs and preferences of the people involved (on which see Bevir and Rhodes 2003 and 2006). An interpretive approach seeks to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves. It provides a ‘thick description’ in which the researcher writes his or her construction of the subject’s constructions of what the subject is up to (adapted from Geertz 1993: 9). So, the task is to unpack the disparate and contingent beliefs and practices of individuals through which they construct their world; to identify the recurrent patterns of actions and related beliefs. The resulting narrative is not just a chronological story. Rather, narrative refers to the form of explanation that disentangles beliefs and actions to explain human life. Narratives are the form theories take in the human sciences, and they explain actions by reference to the beliefs and desires of actors. People act for reasons, conscious and unconscious (Bevir 1999: chapters 4 and 7).

In short, the ontology of an interpretive approach assumes a multiple, constructed, holistic ‘reality’. The craft is to recover meaning by telling administrative tales about this reality. For interpretive ethnography the enterprise is ‘the understanding of understanding’ (Geertz 1973: 5). Interpretation involves clarifying ‘what on earth is going on among various people at various times and draw some conclusions about constraints, causes, hopes and possibilities – the practicalities of life’ (Geertz 2001: 138-9).

Intensive fieldwork vs. hit-and-run ethnography

The second choice is about how to practice cultural ethnography – intensive fieldwork or hit-and run-ethnography. Of course, the case study is an established method in public administration (Yin 2008). An interpretive approach to case studies is markedly different. Aronoff and Kubik (2013: 56-7 drawing on Burawoy 1998) suggest that intensive fieldwork

or the extended case study is characterised by (1) ‘situational analysis’ that (2) takes ‘actors’ own cultural perspective seriously’ and is (3) ‘reflexive’. The key differences with the case studies of public administration are the use of observation, reflexivity about the role of the researcher, and the focus on both meaning and social dramas.

Intensive fieldwork is the classic tool of the cultural anthropologist and it persists to this day but its ‘thick descriptions’ were much criticised in the culture wars in anthropology during the 1980s. The claim to ethnographic authority in representing other cultures was challenged. Intensive fieldwork was said to produce colonial, gendered and racist texts with a specious claim to objectivity that ignored power relations between observers and observed and failed to relate the local to the global. I simplify. There was much else (see for example Marcus and Clifford 1984). For this article, the key point is that ethnographic practice became more varied, even baroque. The classic intensive fieldwork study was challenged. So, we ‘study-up’, and ‘follow through’ by conducting ‘yo-yo-research’ in ‘contact zones’ and multi-local sites. Practice is no longer limited to participant observation. There are also recognised shortcuts to that rite of passage known as fieldwork. Now fieldwork is done by teams, often in collaboration with a client and involves taking ‘ethnographic snapshots’ at a particular time in several locations. In a phrase, we have ‘hit-and-run’ ethnography.

These several shorthand expressions can be explained easily. ‘Studying-up’ refers to the study of elites not police officers, social workers, and teachers. ‘Studying through’ refers to following events such as making a policy through the ‘webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space’ (Shore and Wright 1997: 14). ‘Yo-Yo research’ refers to both regular movement in and out of the field and to participant observation in many local sites (Wulff 2002). A ‘contact zone’ is the ‘space’, such as a museum, in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with

each other and establish ongoing relations', usually characterised by inequality and conflict (Clifford 1997: 6-7). For example, Clifford's (1997: chapter 5) describes four Northwest Coast Museums where tribes and curators come together with their different conceptions of how to collect and display tribal art.

In sum, there is a clash between 'deep hanging out' and 'hit-and-run' ethnography. For Geertz (2001: 110 and 141), 'if fieldwork goes ... the discipline goes with it'. He sees Clifford's work as 'stalled, unsteady, fumbling for direction' and a poor substitute for deep hanging out. The debate rumbles on (see for example Bunzl 2008). I incline to Fox's (2004: 4) practical and pragmatic assessment of the extended case study; it is a 'rather uneasy combination of involvement and detachment' but it 'is still the best method we have for exploring the complexities of human cultures, so it will have to do'. In short, what works is best, and we are Jacks and Jills-of-all-trades, gathering material when, where and how we can.

Generalisation vs. local knowledge

The third choice is between generalisations and local knowledge. The idiographic character of ethnographic fieldwork is invariably seen as a weakness because, it is claimed, it is not possible to generalise. The statement is so palpably misleading it is hard to know where to start; of course, you can make general statements from a case. The extended case study 'extract(s) the general from the unique, to move from the "micro" to the "macro"' (Burawoy 1988: 5). What we cannot do is make statistical generalisation or propound laws, and why would we want to because, as Gertz (2001: 134) observes, 'It is hard to produce an example (of a law) ... in cultural anthropology, or indeed anywhere in the human sciences, that is not laughable or outmoded'.

Such considerations lead Lincoln and Guba (1985: 110) to conclude that ‘the only generalisation is: there is no generalisation’. Social scientists have a poor track record of prediction but we can aspire to ‘plausible conjectures’; that is, to making general statements which are plausible because they rest on good reasons and the reasons are good because they are inferred from relevant information (paraphrased from Bourdon 1993). So, we can derive plausible conjectures from intensive fieldwork. ‘Small facts speak to large issues’ and local knowledge ‘is substantive, somebody’s, and will do for the moment’ (Geertz 1973: 3 and 2001: 140).⁶

In sum, we must recognise the limits to ethnographic generalisations but still act as if ‘small facts speak to large issues’. There may be no laws as in the natural sciences, but we can still aspire to ‘plausible conjecture’. The extended case study may uncover only partial truths but ‘it will have to do’ as the best tool we have. Our knowledge may be provisional but it can be subjected to forensic debate guided by explicit, agreed criteria of merit.⁷ As ‘professional strangers’ (Agar 1996), we need to ‘be aware’ of how we are shaping the research both in the field and as we write (and see Rhodes 2015 for a more detailed discussion). The ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s resonate in this prospectus. We have not resolved the issues in the intervening years, but our answers are more nuanced. As Geertz (1973: 16) observes ethnography is a science ‘marked less by a perfection of consensus than by a refinement of debate’ – ‘what gets better is the precision with which we vex each other’.

So far, I have outlined issues that anyone doing ethnographic fieldwork must grapple with. Public administration has dropped out of sight. It is time to explore the implications of this general discussion for studying police officers on patrol, school teachers in the classroom, nurses on the hospital ward, or departmental secretaries advising ministers. I do so by exploring some of the challenges that have to be confronted in such fieldwork.

Some challenges for observational fieldwork

The several challenges of doing observational fieldwork in public administration, and in developing administrative ethnography as a ‘social technology’, concern roles, relevance, time, evidence, and fieldwork relationships.

Roles

There is no agreement on the role of the ethnographer let alone on whether ethnography should be ‘relevant’ and how that could be achieved. Van Maanen (1978, 345-6) describes his relationship with the police he was observing as: ‘a cop buff, a writer of books, an intruder, a student, a survey researcher, a management specialist, a friend, an ally, an asshole, a historian, a recruit and so on’. He was ‘part spy, part voyeur, part fan and part member’. Similarly, Kedia and Van Willigen (2005: 11) distinguish between ‘policy researcher or research analyst; evaluator; impact assessor, or needs assessor; cultural broker; public participation specialist; and administrator or manager’. Applied ethnography can serve many masters, and a key question is for whom is the research being done.

Relevance

For Van Willigen (2002: 150 and chapter 10), applied anthropology is about providing information for decision makers so they can make rational decisions. It is a ‘complex of related, research-based, instrumental methods which produce change or stability in specific cultural systems through the provision of data, initiation of direct action, and/or the formulation of policy’. Not everyone would agree that the task is to help decision makers. For Agar (1996: 27), ‘no understanding of a world is valid without representation of those members’ voices’. For him, ‘ethnography is *populist* to the core’ and the task is to be

‘sceptical of the distant institutions that control local people’s lives’. Managers are scarcely sympathetic to such aims. They see anthropologists as ‘coming forward with awkward observations’ and ‘as wishing to preserve “traditional” ways’ (Sillitoe 2006: 10). Managers criticise anthropologists because their findings often failed to conform to expectations held by employers about the causes of problems and their solutions’. They were dismissed as ‘irrelevant or disruptive’ (Sillitoe 2006: 14).

Time

The claim to relevance is further compounded by the problem of time. Observation in the field takes time and fits uncomfortably with the demands of politicians and administrators alike. The brutal fact is that if you want to understand everyday life you have to stick around, go where you are led, and take what you are given. The minister or departmental secretary will not wait on the results from such unstructured soaking. Of course, fieldwork does not have to be the decade long immersion of the lone researcher. There are other tools and shortcuts (see the discussion of hit-and-run-ethnography above). Nonetheless, getting below and behind the surface of official accounts to provide texture, depth and nuance cannot be done overnight.

Evidence

There is the problem of what counts as evidence. It might seem obvious that ‘not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts’ (sign hanging in Albert Einstein’s office at Princeton). It is not obvious when it comes to the world of public administration with its given facts, positive theory and hypothesis testing. The popularity of evidence-based policy making with its preference for randomised control trials simply makes matters worse. Qualitative data simply does not meet such expectations and

does not count as generalizable evidence (and see section on ‘Generalizations vs. Local Knowledge’ above).

Fieldwork relationships

As Shore and Nugent (2002: 11) observe ‘Anthropology, by definition, is the study of the powerless “Others”’. Public administration studies administrative elites. We are ‘studying-up’, and there are some obvious difficulties in ‘being there’. The most obvious game changer is that ‘the research participants are more powerful than the researchers’ (Shore and Nugent 2002: 11). They control access and exit. They end interviews, refuse permission to quote interviews, and deny us documents. They can control what we see and hear. The researcher’s role varies, at times with bewildering speed. One day you are the professional stranger walking the tightrope between insider and outsider. Next day you are the complete bystander, left behind in the office to twiddle your thumbs. They not only enforce the laws on secrecy but also decide what is a secret (and see Rhodes et al. 2007). The powerful are different. They can shape your research and change everyday life even as you look at it.

New ways (for public administration) to do ethnography

Public administration faces two issues. First, not enough students of public administration engage in observation. So, when we train future generations, ethnography should be one of the skills learnt, irrespective of whether we favour naturalism or anti-naturalism, intensive fieldwork or hit-and-run ethnography, generalisations or local knowledge. Second, we face the problems posed by observational fieldwork and one of the ways to deal with these problems is to enlarge our conception of ethnography. The craft of

public administration would benefit from having a more varied ethnographic toolkit than observation and interviewing.

Many would object to my using the toolkit metaphor. It would be seen as irredeemably modernist-empiricist. They would argue, and I agree, that an interpretive approach does not prescribe a particular toolkit for producing data but prescribes a particular way of treating data of any type. It should treat data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions. Ethnographic methods are seen as analogous to *bricolage*, quilt making, or montage (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 4). However, the *bricoleur* also has a set of tools, so the question stands: how do we collect the data? I sketch briefly the possible contribution of focus groups, para-ethnography, visual ethnography, and storytelling. In so doing, I seek to show that not only can we address the problems identified in the previous section but also develop administrative ethnography as a social technology?

Focus groups

Focus groups are widely used in electoral studies but they are not seen as a tool for administrative ethnographers. They involve getting a group of people together to discuss their beliefs and practices. The groups are interactive and group members are encouraged by a facilitator to talk to one another. For Morgan (1997: 2), the ‘hallmark’ of focus groups is ‘the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights’. Focus groups have some singular advantages. They provide a detailed understanding of the participants’ beliefs and experiences, and embrace a diversity of views. The method produces context-specific qualitative data on complex issues. Of course, there are disadvantages with every method. The qualitative data can be hard to analyse and analysis hinges on the research question and the organizing concepts of the researcher.

There are a few examples of such work in public administration. Anne Tiernan and Patrick Weller ran two workshops comprising the former Chiefs of Staff (CoS) of Australian prime ministers to discuss how different individuals approached the task of working with the prime minister (written up in Rhodes and Tiernan 2014). These workshops were focus groups in all but name. They were run by facilitators, not interviewers. Participants received a list of possible topics for discussion and one CoS was invited to take the lead on each topic.

Deliberately, they used group interaction to produce data and insights. Despite being political enemies and factional rivals, they settled into a free and frank exchange of views. As Agar and MacDonald (1995: 85) conclude, focus groups can take the ethnographic researcher into new territory, especially when the conversation is located in broader folk theories, such as, in the example given here, the governmental traditions in which the participants work.

Para-ethnography

Para-ethnography involves a critical reading of technical documents to reconstruct a decision. The reading is by both the ethnographer and the key informant as intellectual partners. The partners are experts working in technical, professional institutional settings such as a public bureaucracy. The product is a thick description of the tacit and symbolic knowledge in the documents (Aronoff and Kubik 2013: 46-48; Holmes and Marcus 2005). For example, Rhodes (2011) describes storytelling by elite public servants in Britain. He notes they use such terms as ‘clever’, ‘sound’, and ‘judgement’ to compare the merits of stories such as policy briefings. These terms encapsulate tacit knowledge. They encode complex meanings that are not obvious to the professional stranger. For example, ‘clever’ does not just mean that a document is insightful. It implies that its author is unsound, as in ‘too clever by half’. This tacit knowledge could be unpacked by working through various

policy documents with (say) a retired senior public servant who would be experienced in reading and comparing such stories.

Para-ethnography is a specific example of a broader argument for collaborative ethnography (see for example Lincoln and Guba 1985: 98-108). Given that observer and observed both interact and are inseparable, a full understanding needs a reciprocal, dialogical relationship. These ideas are directly relevant to both applied ethnography and to the evaluation of public policies. A formal or 'objective' evaluation of a policy is commonly top-down and takes the government's policy aims as given. Fourth-generation or interactive evaluations involve both the evaluator and the several participants in the policy in a dialogue in which they learn from one another about the effects of the policy (and see for example Guba and Lincoln 1989). How do the several stakeholders understand the policymakers' practices? What do the effects of the policy mean for the several stakeholders? Is there a shared understanding that will enable responsibility for the evaluation to be shared?

Visual ethnography

There is a long history of filmmaking in anthropology. Here, I am interested in the opportunities opened by new technology: for example, the lightweight digital camcorder with wide-angle lens, lowlight capacity, and 68 gigabyte memory. There is no longer any need for elaborate lighting, conspicuous camera installations, specialist film teams, reams of film, and a heap of money (cf. Schaeffer 1995: 272-8).

The camcorder has many specific uses for the administrative ethnographer besides recording an interview. For example, Thedvall (2007: 172-7) notes the challenge of observing committee meetings and trying to write everything down. You do not always understand the discussion, especially if they talk in acronyms. You can miss the opening comments of a

speaker because you are busy writing what had been said before. You have to divide your time between what is spoken, how it is spoken, body language and the interaction between committee members, some of which will be taking place as someone speaks. And if your research site is the European Union (EU), there is the further complication of language. Translations by interpreters are far from theoretically neutral and you end up interpreting their interpretation. The camcorder provides a visual transcript of the committee meeting and field notes can be compared with the visual record to resolve many of the problems identified by Thredvall. The participants can also watch the video of what happened at the meeting and discuss events and interactions with the researchers; the interpretation of meetings can be a dialogue.

Of course, any new technology brings new problems in its wake. As Schaeffer (1995: 256-7) notes there are issues of privacy and confidentiality: for example, who will be responsible for storing or destroying the chip. But whether we are studying local, regional or central governments, meetings are ubiquitous and the visual ethnography is, potentially, an invaluable tool in the analysis of these multifarious committees (and for a more detailed discussion of prospective uses, see: Pink 2013: chapters 4 and 7).

Storytelling

Institutional memory is the source of stories; the department's folk psychology, providing the everyday theory and shared languages for storytelling. These stories involve a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today. Storytelling substitutes plausible conjecture for prediction. It does not exclude evidence-based policy making. It treats it as another way of telling a story alongside all the other stories in a department. Storytelling is an everyday practice. At the heart of the storytelling approach is collecting the several voices in the

department stories, in effect increasing the voices heard. The second step is to make the tacit criteria for evaluating and comparing stories transparent.

There are four main approaches to collecting stories: observation, questionnaires, self-reported written stories, and storytelling circles. I describe each method briefly (and see Czarniawska 2004 for further discussion).

Rhodes (2011: chapter 1) observed the office of two ministers and three permanent secretaries for two days each. He shadowed two ministers and three permanent secretaries for five working days each. He had repeat interviews with: ten permanent secretaries, five secretaries of state, three ministers, and twenty other officials. He recorded the stories that the public servants told one another in his fieldwork notebook and then cross-checked them in interviews.

Gabriel (2000: chapter 6) used questionnaires to collect stories. The first round asked straightforward questions such as ‘If a new member of staff asks you ‘how do things work around here’, what do you tell them?’; and ‘can you think of an incident or a policy that you discussed outside the workplace with your partner or friends? Then, depending on the answers to these questions, he had a series of follow-up questions, including: ‘were different stories told about the policy and by whom?’ and ‘how do you compare competing stories?’

Rhodes (2002: 402) compiled ‘factions’ are based on the files of a local authority in Northern England. Initially, he discussed cases that the social worker considered interesting or a problem. After selecting a case, the social workers involved wrote the first draft, which was then discussed before editing. Each edited version was discussed again until there was an agreed version. All names were changed to protect the anonymity of both customers and local authority employees.

For Snowden (2000: 151) storytelling circles are composed of ‘groups with some degree of coherence and identity in the organisation’. So they may have worked together on a project or job. The key point is that ‘the community has some common history or reference from which they can draw anecdotes’. The circle lasts a day and is recorded on video so there is both an aural and visual transcript for analysis later. As with a focus group, there is a facilitator who is ‘highly tolerant of ambiguity and prepared not to be liked in order to succeed’.

There is a recurring argument in all of these ‘new’ ways of doing administrative ethnography. There is no objective, detached social scientist providing an authoritative representation of what happened. Collaborative ethnography has a part to play in each method. Collaborative ethnography rests on the argument that observer and observed interact and cannot be separated. So, a full understanding needs a reciprocal, dialogical relationship. The researcher is a narrator searching for ‘a fusion of horizons’; that is, for an understanding arising from ‘negotiation between oneself and one's partner in the hermeneutical dialogue’ in which an agreement ‘means establishing a common framework or “horizon”’. In short, understanding is ‘a process of the “fusion of horizons”’ (Malpass 2013). In this process, the issues surrounding the researcher’s role, the relevance of research and relationships in the field can be confronted and resolved. So, the administrative ethnographers’ key skills are facilitating the dialogue and the forensic interrogation of the stories. Our contribution is to recover and recount the public administrators’ stories to find a common horizon. Recovering stories can be a source of lessons for the would-be reformer. It is a distinctive social technology that employs the twin strategies of ‘drawing out’ or ‘recovering’ their stories and ‘recounting back’ our version of their stories.

Conclusions: an intellectual poaching license

Ethnographers as *bricoleurs* are not just participant observers but employ a ragbag of tools. Whatever the tools, interpretive administrative ethnographers are united by their quest to recover meaning. Ethnography exists in many forms and there are many ways to recover the beliefs and practices of everyday life. For anthropologists and sociologists, there is little that is new in my discussion of ‘new’ ways to do administrative ethnography. However, students of public administration can now explore the pros and cons of ‘being there’ in many more ways than they have used before.

Observational fieldwork has two long-established virtues. It gets below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth and nuance, so our stories have richness as well as context. Also, it lets interviewees explain the meaning of their actions, providing an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story. Face-to-face, in-depth elite interviews and participant observation are central to producing thick descriptions or narratives of beliefs and practices in context. These tools lead us into the office, the engine room of public administration, where the state is continuously enacted and reshaped. They enable us to explore the contending beliefs and practices of elites. They seek out the silent voices in the bureaucracy. Above all, they lead to surprises, to moments of epiphany, so we look at the world through different spectacles.

Observation has its problems: the ethnographers’ role, the relevance of the research, the time it takes to do, the standing of the evidence and the relationships in the field. All these problems can be managed if we accept that ethnographic practice is diverse and no longer limited to participant observation at a single site for a long period. Now teams conduct yo-yo-research on multiple sites. Fieldwork can be done in teams that take snapshots across

locations. Ethnography has become a collaborative practice. Hit-and-run ethnography is here to stay. There is also a more varied toolkit encompassing focus groups, para-ethnography, visual ethnography and storytelling. A more flexible approach to fieldwork coupled with a more varied toolkit adds up to a distinctive social technology rooted in recovering and interrogating the stories of those we study, and recounting them back to find a shared understanding that can be a source of lessons.

I began by asking what we can learn from blurring genres. The example of ethnography suggests that we can learn from different theories; expand our toolkit; and explore new topics. It also provides a ‘social technology’ we can use in the search for applied, practical solutions. Drawing on other disciplines could deliver similar benefits. In other words, I am claiming an ‘intellectual poaching license’ for students of public administration to hunt among the humanities (Geertz 1983: 21). We do not need to wait for the cover of the night before we explore the remaining humanities.⁸ The task of blurring genres is an exciting challenge for students of public administration. It takes us out of our comfort zone by asking us what we want to know and providing new ways of finding out. It is not about replacing but adding to public administration’s toolkit. It is about opening a conversation with the humanities that enlarges our horizons and broadens our craft.

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Notes

¹ On evidence-based policymaking generally see Pawson (2006) and Cartwright and Hardie (2012). On evidence-based policy making in Australian and British government, see: Argyrous 2009; Banks 2009; Davies et al., 2000 and Sanderson 2002.

² I must note two important exceptions. First, the Public Administration Theory Network (PAT-Net) has an annual conference and its own journal, *Administrative Theory & Practice*. It is associated with postmodernism and critical theory. Second, the Interpretive Policy Analysis network also has its own annual international conference and associated journal, *Critical Policy Studies*. Both are examples of ‘patterned isolationism’; that is marginalized areas of inquiry which do not ‘fit’ the disciplinary mainstream. At best, these alternative theories and methods sit alongside, and at worst outside, established disciplines and departments (Collini 2001: 299).

³ For other examples of genre blurring in public administration, see: on architecture, Goodsell 1988; on film and the visual arts Borins 2011; and on literature Waldo 1968b.

⁴ Other examples of administrative ethnography include: Boll 2013; Boll and Rhodes 2015; Durose 2009; Glennerster et al. 1983; Hall et al. 2000; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003; Rhodes 2011; and Van Hulst 2010. At a recent workshop on Administrative Ethnography held at the Copenhagen Business School, 10-12 April 2014, each participant was asked to provide five examples of administrative ethnography. The overwhelming majority of the references were specific to policy sectors such as the police, education and health, written by

colleagues who would not self-identify as students of public administration, and published everywhere but public administration journals.

⁵ Inglis (2000, 112) argues the philosophical critique of naturalism is lethal, although not all would go so far as to claim that using the methods of the natural sciences in the human sciences is ‘comically improper’. For thorough-going philosophical critiques of naturalism see: Bevir 1999; Rorty 1980; Taylor 1985; Winch 2002; and Wittgenstein 1972.

⁶ For those who want an antidote to Geertz, see Gellner 1988; Hammersley 2008; and Martin 1993. For a full exposition of Geertz’s thought see Inglis 2000.

⁷ On objectivity in interpretive research see Bevir 1999: chapter 3; and Rhodes 1997: chapter 9.

⁸ The ‘new political history’ invites students of public administration to treat history less as a body of knowledge providing the context for public administration and more as a set of tools we can use to study the High Politics of the governing political and administrative elite. We can tease out their beliefs and practices by studying their letters, diaries and speeches. On High Politics and the new political history, see: Cowling 1971: 1-12; Craig 2010; Pederson 2002; and Rhodes 2013.