

ELITE ETHNOGRAPHIES: POTENTIAL, PITFALLS AND PROSPECTS FOR GETTING 'UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL'

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This article celebrates Rod Rhodes' use of ethnography to study political elites 'up close and personal'. Initially Rhodes' work is contextualized within the development of political ethnography more generally, before his ethnographies of 'Everyday life in a Ministry' are reviewed, illustrating the potential of ethnography to research policy-making elites. This review highlights epistemological and ontological questions which link to criticism of Rhodes' work as taking an anti-foundational stance. In looking at future prospects for ethnography in governance settings, this article argues that researchers building on Rhodes' scholarship can choose whether to use ethnography as a 'method' or an 'interpretive methodology'. In concluding, the case is made for a 'constructivist modern empiricism' which utilizes the ethnographic method alongside other research methods as being most useful for public policy and administration scholarship aiming to be practically useful for understanding either the processes of public policy-making or its impact.

ADVOCATING ETHNOGRAPHY: AN ENCOUNTER WITH ROD

Walking through the grounds of Sunningdale, the (then) Civil Service Training College, during a conference convened as part of the ESRC Whitehall Programme in 1997, this researcher plucked up courage to ask Rod Rhodes about her doctoral research design. These plans owed much to some of Rhodes' earlier writing about power dependency and the development of trusting networks in government. It was one of those conversations that most academics have just a few times in their careers; helpful, crystallizing, creative, and sometimes taking an unexpected turn. One of the surprising aspects of this conversation was Rhodes' suggestion of moving beyond elite interviewing to garner the information needed. 'Spend time there', Rod advocated, 'look at the diaries', and 'follow people around as they go about their work'. These were ways of researching the informal 'rules of the game' in Whitehall which were not common in the analysis of public policy and administration at this time in a sub discipline more wedded to the traditional tools of the historian or constitutional scholar.

This period, at the end of the 1990s, coincided for Rod with the beginnings of the most productive of partnerships with Mark Bevir at the University of Newcastle and a growing engagement with interpretivism. Rod went on to establish a specialist group of the British Political Studies Association on 'Interpretivist Political Science' to encourage 'research deploying interpretive approaches especially historical and ethnographic studies of political beliefs, traditions, and practices'. Rhodes' advocacy of closer participant observation of the key actors and interactions in the core executive demonstrated a rare political science interest in ethnography at the time. This interest in ethnographic methods reflected Rod's growing desire to 'put the people back in' to his analysis of policy-making in networks. It led to an engagement with the epistemological value of anthropological insights and approaches well before these were routinely taught as part of advanced social science research skill training across UK politics departments.

Subsequently Rhodes was able to put into practice his exhortations above, gaining access to undertake an ethnography of the workings of three ministerial offices in the

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second term of the New Labour administration. This research led to a string of publications detailing 'Everyday life in a Ministry' (Rhodes 2005; Rhodes *et al.* 2007; Bevir and Rhodes 2006). These accounts provide an exemplary account of what Pader calls an 'ethnographic sensibility' (2006, p. 161), offering a clear and reflexive commitment to the key tenets of ethnographical research. As Evans (2010) notes in a review of 'Observing Elites: Up Close and Personal' (Rhodes *et al.* 2008), this work has led, and will continue to lead to a flourishing agenda of elite ethnography in governance research. For the uninitiated, the sections that follow set out the core features of political and elite ethnographic research which are then illustrated by Rod's use of elite ethnography to get 'up close and personal'.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF POLITICAL AND ELITE ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnography is one of a number of methods associated with interpretive and constructivist approaches to generating data and seeks, through deep immersion in a culture, group, or interpretive community, to ascertain the beliefs about, and meaning(s) of, that culture or community held by its members (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Generating ethnographic knowledge requires the researcher to be part of the community being researched, spending time interacting and observing the everyday life, unearthing what Geertz called a 'thick description' (1973). 'Thick description' of the 'sense-making' of participants illuminates meaningful social practices, the rules both formal and informal, how are they interpreted and operated, and why meanings may vary in otherwise similar circumstances (Tilly 2006, p. 411).

Anthropology is often talked of as the 'maternal' discipline for ethnography, with the method being the dominant mode of enquiry and synonymous with the core concerns of this discipline (Kubik 2009, p. 27). Particularly in relation to the UK anthropological tradition, described as social or 'institutional' anthropology, the link with colonial governance regimes and a concern for understanding the power and politics of groups and cultures under colonial rule is often made (Fielding 2003, p. 145). The work, for example, of the Manchester anthropologist Frederick Bailey (1969) provides a classic exemplar here of anthropologically informed political ethnography (1969). Aronoff highlights the contemporary dominance of anthropological contributions to the *Journal of Political and Legal Anthropological Research* (Aronoff 2009, p. x); the obvious influence of anthropologically informed political ethnography on comparative international relations, conflict studies and development studies research is outlined by Schatz (2009, p. 3).

Ethnography or participant observation from the sociological tradition has also been influential in the development of political ethnography and is seen as one of a range of qualitative methods that may be used on their own or sometimes in conjunction with other methods of enquiry. Here the exhortation to 'get the seat of your pants dirty' by one of the founding fathers of urban sociology Robert Park has influenced contemporary political scientists with interests in urban studies and urban policy and the study of subcultures and groups. Also influential, for public administration scholars particularly, has been the subfield of the sociology of organizations, particularly Human Relations scholarship (Berger and Luckman 1967; Schwartzman 1993; Weick 1995).

Ethnographically informed empirical work drawing from both anthropological and sociological traditions has uncovered thick descriptions of the work of street-level bureaucrats and other public officials (Kaufman 1960; Lipsky 1979; Durose 2009; Wilkinson forthcoming); and of decision making amongst senior civil servants involved in the UK budgeting process (Hecllo and Wildavsky 1979). And as well as the elite ethnographies

of political and bureaucratic actors in national governments and in the European Union, published in the collection edited by Rhodes *et al.* (2007), ethnography has also been used to research local political actors and decision making (van Hulst 2008) and actors who sit between political and bureaucratic worlds (Niemi 2010).

For Rhodes, taking an ethnographic approach to understanding the behaviour of political elites opens up the 'black boxes of elite behaviour' (Rhodes *et al.* 2007, pp. 2–3) and provides an important corrective to research methods where political scientists make assumptions about the beliefs and interests of these key political actors. Rhodes points out the lack of such studies of the apex of power in the core executive and his account of studying elites 'up close and personal' in Whitehall provides an exemplary account of the use of ethnography and its key considerations, skills and techniques required to rectify this gap. The insights from this body of work into accessing, researching and interpreting elite decision making are now reviewed.

EVERYDAY LIFE IN A MINISTRY: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF POLITICAL ELITES IN WHITEHALL

The argument in *Governance Stories* is that ethnography unveils the beliefs and actions of key actors and their sense-making narratives which have developed over time and which explain why and how these webs of belief inform elite action (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, p. 109). In capturing the mundane, the routine, the taken for granted, and the non verbal, ethnography can provide depth and nuance to official accounts of policy-making (Bevir and Rhodes 2006, p. 170). This kind of knowledge is essential in order to link what is known about elite traits and characteristics, studies of elite attitudes, and studies of elite decision making in context (Rhodes *et al.* 2007, p. 5).

A vital aspect of ethnographic work is that in order to gather/generate information about the beliefs and meanings of social interactions, ethnographers must negotiate and continually re-negotiate access to the arenas where interactions under study take place. As Evans points out in his review, Rhodes' access to Whitehall was facilitated by the development of a long-term trusting engagement throughout the years of heading the ESRC Whitehall Programme and may not be as readily available to others (Evans 2010). However, the reflexive account provided in the publications which flowed from Rhodes' Whitehall ethnography offers invaluable tips for researchers seeking elite interviews and ethnographic proximity, of how to approach the question of access and ethics, especially in circumstances of high sensitivity to media attention (2005, p. 21).

Engagement in the 'field' is time consuming; the classic anthropological ethnography was assumed to take a year in order for a full calendar of events to take place. Procedures used by political ethnographers to generate data include in-depth interviews, conversations, participant and non participant observation, covert observation and the study of documents and artefacts (Fielding 2003, p. 148; Tilly 2006, p. 410). In 'Everyday Life in a Ministry', Rod provides a detailed account of the documents, interviews and observations undertaken including an analysis of permanent secretaries' diary appointments over a period of a year (2005, p. 6). This analysis robustly triangulates the extent to which elites in Whitehall network to conduct their business and how this networking serves to create the 'departmental memory' which guides decision making (Rhodes 2005, p. 9).

Immersion within a group or culture creates challenges for the researcher in how to develop and maintain an understanding, and yet deliver a critical or neutral analysis. The aim is to capture observations in field notes, initially a detailed record of impressions

written as soon as possible after the occasion, written without attempt to analyse. Subsequently, reflections on these field notes are used to seek patterning and themes turning 'the flow of experiences into descriptions of the actors, settings, events and practices' (van Hulst 2008, p. 147). One crucial difference between ethnographic approaches and other qualitative methodologies is that 'researcher bias' is not problematized (Crang and Cook 2007). Indeed, the subjectivity of the researcher is seen as intrinsic to the processing of data and a degree of reflexivity in making sense of the sense making of others is expected (van Hulst 2008, p. 148). Rod acknowledges 'I accept that the department's story is my construction of how my interviewees see their world' (2005, p. 20).

However, for most ethnographers, an acknowledgement of the subjectivity of the researcher, what Yanow calls the 'double hermeneutic' (2000), does not undermine the search for 'credibility' of the account (Fielding 2003, p. 155). Ethnographic researchers should provide openness in their accounts of their data generation, being explicit about how they formed their explanation; they can also draw on techniques such as triangulating data from different sources to establish the veracity and reliability of an account (Rhodes 2005, p. 22). Ultimately the researcher must seek to produce a narrative that is recognizable to others. For Rod and his co-authors, 'a fact is a statement, typically about a piece of evidence, which nearly everyone in a given community would accept as true' and whether an account can be considered 'objective' reflects the extent to which there is agreement about the sense made of agreed facts (Rhodes *et al.* 2007, p. 11). For Hay (2011, pp. 167–182 in this volume), the end-point of Rhodes' ethnography reflects an epistemologically confident search for 'inter-subjective consensus' on empirical matters.

Along with the other contributions in the Rhodes, 't Hart and Noordegraaf collection, Rhodes' account of everyday life in a ministry demonstrates the insights that studying elites, up close and personal can provide. The reflections paint a vivid and entertaining picture, in which Rod's voice is clear, albeit carefully presented to be reflexive about his interpretation of meaning. One comment portrays brilliantly the ambivalence the permanent secretary feels towards actioning an efficiency memo; 'he had done nothing so he tells the private office, "harrass me about it". But he is doing nothing about it because he doesn't like it, too complex, calls for too much information and will be a burden on the director generals' (2005, p. 11). Also captured is a very realistic demonstration of the 'bounded rationality' elites operate with in relation to competing pressures for their attention, Rod describes attending the permanent secretary's fifth meeting of the day at which the permanent secretary 'cannot remember why he is there', only taking over chairing the meeting 'after a few minutes when he remembers' (2005, p. 12–13). Rhodes' analysis is that most meetings are not for decision making but to 'get the story straight' as a way of creating and updating a collective memory (2005, p. 13). These insights flesh out how decision making, and indeed non decision making, take place at the apex of government.

The extent to which this ethnography contributes new information about the processes of elite interaction at the centre of government is questioned however (Smith 2008, pp. 150, 152). Some key insights on the informal rules of the game, such as the commitment to protecting the government minister and a shared sense of the political imperatives held by senior bureaucratic actors, are well documented in other less ethnographically oriented empirical work (Gains 2004; Richards and Smith 2004). However, acting as a non participant observer and becoming immersed in the day-to-day rhymes and rhythms of the private office, can and does yield detail otherwise not documented and the significance of which would otherwise be lost.

One such detail recently provided a crucial building block of relevance for work examining gender policy-making in the UK core executive. Despite the clear commitment of the Head of the Civil Service at the time, the cabinet secretary Sir Gus O'Donnell, and government equality targets for the number of women in the senior civil service to rise to 38 per cent, this target was not met at the time of the last spending review in 2008. In attempting to explain this policy failure, Rhodes' observations, on the time commitments and personal engagement required to operate in a ministerial private office (the main training ground for those heading for the top echelons of the civil service) and at the tensions involved in doing so, provided a telling insight. Describing the punishing schedule and pressures which face civil servants supporting ministers, he states 'join the private office and you lose your private life' (Rhodes 2005, p. 9). Although the gendered nature of the senior civil service and the executive members of the core executive is well documented both statistically (Civil Service Statistics 2008) and alluded to analytically (Marsh *et al.* 2003, pp. 309–10), it was this kind of detail of the processes of governing which allowed the assertion that the core executive has a 'gendered disposition' which undermines attempts to draw in those political and bureaucratic actors, predominantly still women, who have caring responsibilities (Annesley and Gains 2010).

In foregrounding elite ethnography, Rhodes has spearheaded this approach for public policy and administrative scholars. His influence is on a new generation of scholars keen to understand how the 'webs of belief' of government elites and other political actors inform the processes of governing. This body of work sits alongside a still small, but growing, interest in – and use of – political ethnographies more generally. Rhodes' work has been subject to criticism however (Smith 2008; see also Hay 2011, pp. 167–182 in this volume) and, as in debates around the use of ethnography in anthropology and sociology more widely, the use of elite ethnography in political and policy analysis raises questions about the purposes of getting 'up close and personal' for the next generation of scholars to grapple with. The section that follows discusses a central dilemma which political ethnographers will confront and examines how this is dealt with in Rhodes' writing.

ETHNOGRAPHY: METHOD OR METHODOLOGY?

The mapping above has deliberately sought to skirt a key problematic in anthropological, sociological and political science debates around ethnographic epistemology and ontology (van Hulst 2008, p. 146; Aronoff 2009, pp. ix, 12). Contemporary anthropology has moved on from its early 'realist' base. Kubik maps three contemporary approaches to ethnographic epistemologies: a 'realist perspective' concerned to capture generalizable insights; an interpretivist perspective which problematizes the meaning making of the researcher; and a post modern perspective which problematizes generalizability (Kubik 2009, p. 37). These different approaches reflect different ontological stances so that although all ethnographers are constructivists and believe actors' understandings influence behaviour, within and among ethnographers, there are different ontological stances about the degree to which it is then possible to think of and therefore research an external reality beyond that constructed by situated shared meanings (Schatz 2009, p. 4).

Sometimes these differing ontological beliefs and associated epistemological connotations are presented as distinct and oppositional, but should not be presented as clearly delineated. The thoughtful contributions from, for example, Schatz, Kubik and others in Schatz (2009), and Pader and Shehata in Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006), show the particular and individual path chosen by each scholar towards their own personal

philosophical accommodation and consequent methodological approach. It is more useful to see these approaches to ethnography as situated along a continuum where at one end ethnography is seen as a method, a technique for accessing and analysing observations and, further along, ethnography is seen as an interpretivist methodology with attendant ontological and epistemological underpinnings. Further along still are what Parsons (2010) calls 'aggressive constructivists', those ethnographers linked to post structural and post modernist approaches for whom there can be no external reality which is separate from the sense which is made of ever fluid meanings (for a further discussion of the ontological and epistemological differences between interpretive, postmodern and post structuralist approaches, see Hay 2011, pp. 167–182 in this volume).

At one end of the spectrum, ethnography can be used as a 'method', one of a range of qualitative methods particularly suited to research the beliefs informing actions of actors in a variety of social settings. As a method, ethnography offers a well recognized set of techniques and methodological considerations about ensuring credible, systematic and verifiable research (Fielding 2003, p. 155). As a method, ethnography can be conducted as a standalone approach, or combined sequentially with other qualitative and possibly quantitative techniques. Ethnography is described as having the potential to elicit predictive statements: for example, that actors holding similar beliefs will perform similar actions in different settings (Fielding 2003, pp. 155–9) and Schatz flags ethnographic voices calling for cross-site comparison, and research designs permitting the generation of causal theories (2009, p. 17).

Ethnographers operating towards this end of the spectrum are described by Schatz as 'neo-positivist' (2009, p. 12), and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea as 'positivist-qualitative' (2006, p. xviii); Rod calls it 'modern empiricism' (Rhodes 2005, p. 5). This kind of 'realist' ethnography goes along with an ontological acceptance of an external social reality and can be viewed as a technique of what Parsons describes as 'modern constructivism' where it is possible to 'posit social construction among actors but still manage to make some acceptable (if modestly tentative) claims about how the socially constructed world really works' (Parsons 2010). Thus Tilly suggests 'if you believe (as I do) that how things happen is why they happen, then ethnography has great advantages over most other conventional social scientific methods as a way of getting at cause-effect relations' (2006, p. 410).

Further along the spectrum, ethnography, or an 'ethnographic sensibility', can be elevated to an all encompassing 'methodology', more firmly linked to an epistemologically interpretive approach and a more ontologically bounded, ideationally constructivist approach to researching social life. Researchers whose interest in 'sense-making' in political settings reflects the 'interpretive turn' share an appreciation of 'the centrality of meaning in human life' (Yanow 2000), but problematize to a far greater extent the need for 'reflexivity on scientific practices related to meaning making and knowledge claims' (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea 2006, p. xii). Rod asserts most vigorously 'the constructed nature of our claims to knowledge' (2005, p. 5).

Rhodes operates with an ethnographic imagination somewhere between the two ends of the method-methodology spectrum, at times stressing the possibility for agreed facts (Rhodes *et al.* 2007, p. 8) and offering to 'essay some generalizations about the behaviour of officials and politicians' (2005, p. 7), even describing the processes by which new fast stream recruits are socialized into the norms and values of the higher civil service (2005, p. 16). However, elsewhere, Rhodes critiques 'modern empiricism' which treats civil servants and ministers as discrete objects which can be 'compared, measured and classified' (2005, p. 5) and in *Governance Stories*, Rhodes and Bevir argue that there can be

no 'practice or norm which fixes the way in which people act' (2006, p. 3) suggesting a far more committed ideationalist anti-foundational perspective. Rhodes addresses these apparent contradictions (and demonstrates a degree of ontological fluidity between the ends of the method-methodology spectrum in the process) by reflecting that 'we study organisations to identify both the *common* and *unique*' (emphasis added) in a nod to a modern empiricist perspective, before bolstering an interpretive subjectivity in arguing 'thick descriptions are . . . valuable in their own right and as a corrective to approaches that read off beliefs from social structure' (2005, p. 18). Thus it is possible to see some ambiguity in how Rhodes ontologically traverses his ethnographic approach. In looking ahead to how the next generation of elite ethnographers build upon Rhodes' work it is important to address this ambiguity.

Although there are huge differences between the epistemological position of Rhodes' interpretive ethnography and post modernist ethnography, the lesson from both interpretive and post modern approaches is the avoidance of determinism in relation to understanding the behaviour of political and policy actors and citizens. However, from a realist (constructivist modern empiricist) perspective, the danger of an anti-foundational approach is in ignoring the material realities and relatively fixed structural processes underpinning social and political life and consequently issues around the operation of power and power relations. As Hay points out elsewhere in this volume, although Rhodes' interpretivist ontological position can be understood as consistently acknowledging the ideational context of shared inter-subjective discourses and traditions, it lacks acknowledgement of the institutional context within which situated actors interpret their worlds (Hay 2011, pp. 167–182 this volume).

A related argument made in this article is that a (constructivist modern empiricist) elite ethnography which ontologically embraces the idea that actors interpret meaning in structured contexts, has the potential to examine how shared inter-subjective discourses about policy problems and how to address them become institutionalized and formalized into governing processes. Ethnography can reveal how these governing institutions are understood, navigated and sometimes changed by elite actors and the extent to which the relatively fixed institutions and practices of elite decision making inform how future political and policy decisions are processed. In short, although we sometimes might want to know 'what does a policy mean?', sometimes we also want to know 'who gets what, when, where and how', and what role such meanings play in this process.

It is not the intention here to only advocate a realist or 'constructivist modern empiricist' approach to ethnography: only that the choice to couple 'ethnography' with 'interpretivism' should be made and not assumed. Researchers wishing to research elites and other actors in governance settings can choose whether to treat ethnography as a 'method', or as an interpretivist 'methodology' in line with their ontological disposition in order to chart their research approach. So, for example, writing in this journal on the traditions and dilemmas of local bureaucratic elites following constitutional change in 10 local authorities, this author drew on ethnographic methods (interviews with all key stakeholders, observations of public and private meetings, policy tracking and documentary analysis (Gains 2009). Adopting a 'constructivist modern empiricism' the argument challenged (deterministic) academic assumptions about the impact these new rules would have on bureaucratic behaviour. However, in presenting the account, this author also sought to identify some patterning in the dilemmas voiced by these actors which related to the material realities of governance power relations, the distribution of resources and the mediation of rules of interaction. Although these material realities are themselves the

product of 'traditions', in this case the informal institutional rules of local governance in the UK, nevertheless they are the structured context within which these political actors made sense of the possibilities for their agency.

The case for an unbundling of ethnography as a method from ethnography as an interpretivist methodology is supported by the work of Green, a contemporary Manchester anthropologist who has worked in government as a policy-maker, reflecting on the difference between the knowledge practices of anthropology and of policy-making around development (Green 2007, 2010). She writes of the 'interpretive antagonism' set up by ethnographies of development practices and argues that the knowledge practices of anthropology and development policy are distinct and are 'essentially concerned with different rules about what kinds of knowledge can be brought in' (2010, pp. 3, 5). Green describes the contested nature of policy development, how ideas are brokered, in a 'network of actors, institutions and practices' which it is not possible to describe as 'a totality' and how managing spending, 'with the realisation of categorical forms through resource transfers' and 'the recognition of institutions and relationships' are 'the necessary techniques of government, of organising means and ends, things and people in certain ways to achieve certain objectives' (2007, 2010, p. 6). Conversely, 'the vagueness and fluidity of anthropological knowledge resists application to templates and grids' (2010, p. 17).

So in choosing how to approach ethnography, the next generation of public policy and administration researchers following Rod's invitation to embrace ethnographic research will need to reflect on the purpose of their research. The section that follows considers future prospects for elite, and other ethnographic work in governance settings and asks what these developments might mean for the purpose of ethnographic research.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND GOVERNANCE: FUTURE PROSPECTS

There are signs that the hitherto relatively small field of political ethnography is growing, partly because of the pull of ethnography for political scientists, but also due to the push from researchers in other disciplines (and those with a cross disciplinary focus) into the political arena. In anthropology, Westbrook ruefully acknowledges 'the islands have run out' and advocates the use of ethnography in terrain previously unexplored in 'navigating the contemporary' (2008, p. 9). Fielding notes the rise of the 'new urban anthropology' as social anthropologists turned their attention to urban tribes (2003, p. 146). In a special edition of *Qualitative Sociology* devoted to political ethnography, Auyero talks of a 'revival' in sociological ethnographic research and advocates more crossover between the ethnographers and the concerns of politics (2006, p. 257). In the midst of this flourishing field of political ethnography in general, it is possible to see that knowledge production of the kind ethnography can generate is of analytical interest or practical value to the narrower concerns of policy-making and public administration in three ways.

Firstly, as discussed above, ethnography is ideally suited to uncover the informal processes that accompany the formal rules of the game and serve to structure the processes of policy-making and policy delivery amongst elites and other policy actors. Crucially, ethnography can uncover how understandings of these formal and informal structuring processes change. As well as the elite ethnographies pioneered by Rhodes, it is in studies of the actors and networks involved in policy implementation that most work has been done to uncover Yanow's exhortation to consider 'How does a policy mean' (1996) where it is the understandings of those delivering and interpreting policy which

have been of interest (for a discussion of 'Delivery as an interpreted concept', see Clarke and Gains 2007). Westbrook suggests politics 'however and by whoever conducted, is done in accordance with some set of beliefs held by the powerful, an imagination of what can and should be done' (Westbrook 2008, p. 129). This imagination – the ideas of how it is possible to act – actually operates to structure politics and Westbrook suggests it is ethnography which can 'clarify and make explicit ways in which such social connections are formed, channels through which info flows and decisions are made' (2008, p. 135).

Secondly, ethnographic enquiry can prioritize the uncovering of meaning making in specific contexts, 'a refunctioned ethnography is to forge sophisticated understandings of how communal imaginaries are formed and therefore how new politics are authorised in our various cultures' (Westbrook 2008, p. 14). This kind of ethnography has strengths in uncovering meaning in previously un-researched, hard to reach or newly emerging areas of governance and policy-making, a 'method of discovery' to allow for grounded theorizing (Fielding 2003, p. 146). For example, an edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* was devoted to ethnographies of the far right (Blee 2007). A current innovative and fruitful field of scholarship is the application of ethnographic principles to researching online communities and the emergence of e-ethnographies (Howard 2002).

Thirdly, and finally, ethnography can provide a way of facilitating 'voice' to citizens with demands or subject to policy interventions – for example, Churchill's work on lone parents (2007). As Pader argues, 'a more profound understanding of the relation between everyday behaviour and the success of policies can have significant social and political implications' (2006, p. 170). There is a strong normative commitment from many ethnographers like Wagenaar and Cook (2003) and Yanow and Schwartz Shea (2006) for ethnographers to work to give voice to communities of interest who are not powerful.

This review of the prospects for future ethnographies of elites and other governance actors of particular relevance to public policy and administration scholars, demonstrates that the purposes of ethnography can be varied. For Tilly, good ethnography serves to illuminate how a 'given cause produces its effects' and why this might vary (2006, p. 411). Particularly when ethnography is giving voice to new or emerging interests and demands; or un-researched and unheard communities of interest, interpretive ethnography may be ideally suited to capture and describe the unique and situated meaning making in that community of interest. Tilly goes on to suggest that most 'political ethnographers stop short of intervening directly to cure the ills they observe' (2006, p. 411). However, many public policy and administration scholars are not so distant from policy-making interventions and processes, and operate more with an action imperative that is interested in and has an awareness of what can be done to improve both policy-making and policy-making outcomes. The purpose of much public policy and administration scholarship is to find ways to improve policy-making. With this however comes a methodological and normative commitment to identify credible, generalizable and transferrable insights.

Of course the danger of this kind of instrumental approach to ethnography is that it can be used, as in the colonial era, to support iniquitous governance regimes. But for researchers, with a normative concern to understand how power relations operate, 'constructivist modern empiricism' can serve to cast light on the interplay between meanings and material realities. The ability to make generalizations and seek patterns, subject of course to critical assessment particularly of those involved in the ethnographic encounter, is essential. Several good accounts of this kind of ethnography are described in contributions to *Political Ethnography* (Schatz 2009). Perhaps the best exemplar is by Shdaimah *et al.* in their examination of low income home ownership policy where they

advocate a move beyond representing 'the subjective experiences of people at the bottom of the policy process as pure ethnography might' and look to the benefits of a 'problem driven, participant informed, mixed methods' approach. This, they argue, allows the researcher, the participants and policy-makers to engage in a more productive and powerful policy dialogue (2009, p. 273).

CONCLUSION

Rhodes' elite ethnographies of Whitehall have been influential both in opening up the black box of Whitehall but also in bringing the art and craft of ethnography more centrally to the attention of public policy and administration researchers of governance. Uncovering the understandings, beliefs and practices of actors in a governance setting can provide an understanding of the meaning making of policy-makers, like the elites observed by Rod, involved in policy framing; of policy deliverers, re-framing policy intent as they operationalize policy; of those who have demands and those to whom policy is directed, to see if it has the desired effect. As the next generation of scholars embrace ethnography with the aim of getting 'up close and personal' in governance settings, the contribution here aims to celebrate the potential of ethnography in all its traditions, but to advocate the avoidance of the automatic bracketing of ethnography as an 'interpretivist methodology'.

Much research conducted by public policy and administration scholars undertaking ethnography will have a normative commitment to improving or analysing policy-making and therefore will have to move beyond the identification of shared inter-subjective meanings. The kind of ethnography which seeks to contribute to analytical and instrumental purposes will require in most cases a 'constructivist modern empiricism' allowing an ontological acknowledgement of the broader institutional as well as ideational contexts within which situated actors interpret their agency, and of the interplay between meaning and material realities in order to capture generalizable findings on the processes of public policy-making and its impact.

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