

Ethnographic Approaches and the Study of the Core Executive¹

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and

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Introduction

The paper answers five questions.

What is ethnography?

Why does it matter?

Who does ethnography?

What is the research agenda?

What are the limits to an ethnographic approach?

In answering these questions, there are few ethnographic studies of the political executive that we can draw on. Our preferred approach is to treat the executive as synonymous with ‘court politics’ and focus on the intentions and actions of a political leadership network that consists of ‘fifty or sixty politicians in conscious tension with one another whose accepted authority constituted political leadership’ (Cowling 1971: 3–4). For us, the main value of an ethnographic approach is the ability to study the *Realpolitik* of the governing elite.² This position differs from an institutional approach, which focuses on the offices of the political executive, namely president, prime minister, cabinet and central

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² This paper draws on the authors’ previous work. See; Boswell, Corbett, Rhodes et al. 2018; Corbett 2015; Rhodes 2007; 2011; 2014, 2017; and Rhodes and Tiernan 2014.

agencies but not parliaments and the courts. It differs also from a functional approach, which focuses on ‘all those organizations and procedures which coordinate central government policies, and act as final arbiters between different parts of the government machine’ (Rhodes 1995: 12).

What is ethnography?

What do ethnographers do? For Hammersley and Atkinson (2007: 2), ‘ethnography does not have a standard, well-defined meaning’. Nonetheless, 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 deep immersion, whether looking at a Congressional district, a government department or a tribe in Africa. 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 organization had been selected. For the novice, it was the only way to become a cultural anthropologist; you can’t teach fieldwork, you have to do it. For Wood (2006: 123), it is ‘research based on personal interaction with research subjects in their own setting’, not in the laboratory, the library or one’s office. It is deep hanging out or intensive immersion in the everyday lives of other people in their local environment normally for many months if not years.

Ethnographers employ two core methods – participant observation and open-ended, or ethnographic interviewing.

Participant Observation

The extended case study based on observation and interviews is the historic heart of interpretive political ethnography. The researcher both observes and participates in everyday life. He or she needs to get to know the people being studied. Commonly observations are recorded in a fieldwork notebook. Involvement can vary from being a bystander with little rapport, through a balance between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider,’ roles, to full involvement and the risk of ‘going native (see DeWalt et al. 1998). The most striking fieldwork practice of ethnographers for a political scientist is the document known as the ‘fieldwork notebook’ (see: Bryman 2001, Volume 2, Part 7; Emerson et al. 2011; Sanjek 1990). It is simultaneously invisible and ever present, part of the tacit knowledge of ethnographers. Ethnographers learn about the fieldwork notes in the field. There is no agreed definition of a fieldwork notebook. For some it includes note taking from documents. For others, it is mainly notes about what they have observed. Even then, ‘observation’ is a broad category, covering everyday activities, conversations, pen portraits of individuals, new ideas about how to do the research, the diary of the ethnographer recording personal impressions and feelings. Jackson (1990: 33-34) suggests field notes are a key symbol of professional identity and they ‘represent an individualistic, pioneering, approach to acquiring knowledge, at times even a maverick and rebellious one’. They symbolize the ‘ordeal by fire’ that is journeying to the field and the ‘uncertainty, mystique and ... ambivalence’ of that journey.

Interviewing

The common format for an elite interview is a recorded, one-hour conversation around a semi-structured questionnaire (see for example: Dexter 2006 [1970]). Of course, it can be revealing in the hands of a skilled interviewer but when studying political elites it can become a

confining ritual. All elite interviewers know the politician who can negotiate such an encounter with ease and ‘talk for an hour without saying anything too interesting’ (Rawnsley 2001: xvii-xviii citing Robin Cooke, former British Foreign Secretary). There is another choice besides this format – intensive repeat interviews. Elites will be more open in a more extended encounter because, as Rawnsley (2001: xi) observes ‘they have to tell an outsider because they are so worried about whether it makes sense or, indeed, whether they make sense’. Such interviews are still a negotiation. Their success depends on intangibles like trust and rapport. With trust and rapport comes far more information than can be obtained from working through a semi-structured questionnaire. The conventional elite interview is a poor substitute for the repeat, two-hour long conversation. Such open-ended interviews are an essential complements to observation, enabling the observer to compare what is said with what is done.

Such fieldwork has various pen names such as the ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz 1973: chapter 1) and ‘the extended case study’ (Aronoff and Kubik (2013: 56-7). There would seem to be affinities with the case studies common in political science which are detailed studies of a single unit or event. The method was criticized often for being idiographic and not fostering generalizations. Latterly, political scientists have devoted much effort to assimilating the case method to naturalism and its language of variables and hypothesis testing (for example, Gerring 2004). For example, Wood analysed five case studies of peasant support for insurgent groups explicitly ‘sacrificing ethnographic depth of analysis for analytical traction through comparison of cases that vary in the extent of mobilization observed’. It was her way of overcoming ‘the obstacles to making valid causal inferences based on field data’ (Wood 2007: 132 and 142). So, case studies can be simply descriptions of specific subjects but political scientists are enjoined to use them to build theory, to test the validity of specific hypotheses,

and to test theories by treating them as the equivalent of decisive experiments (see Eckstein 1975: 92-123; see also Yin 2008).

An interpretive approach to fieldwork is markedly different because it goes for ethnographic depth; for deep hanging out. Anthropologists would not refer to their fieldwork site as a 'case study' because it is not a 'case' of anything until they withdraw from the field to analyse and write up their field notes. Indeed, interpretive ethnography is less concerned with generalizations than with raising new questions and 'shaking the bag'. The aim is edification; to find 'new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking about' everyday life (Rorty 1980: 360). So, fieldwork provides detailed studies of social and political dramas. As Burawoy (1998: 5) suggests, it 'extracts the general from the unique, to move from the 'micro' to the 'macro''. For example, Crewe's (2005: 240) study of the British House of Lords focuses on rituals, rules, symbols and hierarchies, especially 'the meaning of its rituals and symbols and how people use them to make sense of the past, present and future'. Her 'anthropological perspective' draws on the analysis of political ritual; of 'ritual as the process of politics itself, rather than as a servant to it' (Kertzner 1988). She was a participant observer for two years between 1998 and 2001. She had a staff pass and 'was able to take part actively in House of Lords' working life'. It was deep hanging out. She shows how the everyday rituals of an institution seen only as a dignified part of the constitution 'give the backbenchers the feeling that they are transcending their individual powerlessness to become important components of an influential whole.' As a result, the rituals ensure acquiescence executive dominance. What is the large issue that springs from small events? Political rituals are not 'trivial and backward looking' but 'key elements in the symbolism of which nations are made' (paraphrased from Crewe 2005: 229-35).

Why does ethnography matter?

It matters because it reaches the parts of government that other research methods do not reach. Table 1 lists the main advantages of the approach.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 1: **Advantages of an ethnographic approach**

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It provides data not available elsewhere. 2. It identifies key individuals and core processes. 3. It identifies ‘voices’ all too often ignored. 4. By disaggregating organisations, it opens ‘the black box’ of internal processes. 5. It recovers the beliefs and practices of actors. 6. It gets behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth, and nuance, so our stories have richness as well as context. 7. It lets interviewees explain the meaning of their actions, providing an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story. 8. It allows us to frame (and reframe, and reframe) questions in a way that recognises that our understandings about how things work around here evolves during the fieldwork. 9. It admits of surprises - of moments of epiphany, serendipity and happenstance - that can open new research agendas. 10. It helps us to see and analyse the symbolic, performative aspects of political action. |
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Source: Modified from Rhodes 2017: 209

Who does ethnography?

Kaposzewski et al. (2015: 234) conclude that ‘political science has yet to embrace ethnography and participant observation wholeheartedly’. Auyer and Joseph (2007: 2) examined 1,000 articles published in the *American Journal of Political Science* and the *American Political Science Review* between 1996 and 2005. They found that ‘only one article relies on ethnography as a data-production technique’. *They conclude* there is a ‘double absence: of politics in ethnographic literature and of ethnography in the study of politics’.

What’s more, the little political ethnography that exists largely ignores elites. As Shore and Nugent (2002: 11) comment, ‘Anthropology, by definition, is the study of powerless “Others”’. It focuses on everyday practices of citizen in villages, factories, schools and local communities. Nader (1972: 289) was an early voice calling for anthropologists to ‘study up,’ recognising that ‘there is comparatively little field research on the middle class and very little-first hand work on the upper class’. Indeed, most of the studies using ethnography in political science ‘study down’ with street level bureaucrats a favoured topic (see for example Maynard-Moody and Musheno. 2003). Whether talking about political elites in general or the political executive in particular, little has changed in the intervening years, although we note some distinguished exceptions below.

Broadly, the field divides into naturalist and anti-naturalist ethnography. Naturalist ethnography strives to develop predictions and causal explanations as in the natural sciences (Werner and Schoepfle 1987). Anti-naturalist ethnography emphasise the importance of meanings in the study of human life (see Bevir and Rhodes 2003). It shifts analysis away

from institutions, functions and roles to understanding the beliefs, actions, and practices of actors; to court politics. We cannot answer the question of who does ethnography solely by reviewing the existing ethnographic literature on political executives. Whenever possible, we discuss ethnographic work that focuses on the political executive but we draw also on studies that could serve as models of ethnographies of executive studies. The latter group encompasses a rich smorgasbord of studies that are not ordinarily part of executive studies but are germane to the more general subject of elite ethnography.

We begin with a brief excursion into naturalist ethnography and consider three pioneering examples in political science: Fenno 1978 and 1990; Kaufman (2011 [1981]), and Heclo and Wildavsky (1981 [1974]).

For nearly eight years, Fenno (1978 and 1990) shadowed 18 US members of Congress in their Districts. He made 36 separate visits to the districts and, spent 110 working days with them. His visits varied from three to eleven days. In eleven cases, he supplemented the visits with ‘a lengthy interview’ in Washington. He seeks to answer two questions. What does an elected representative see when he or she sees a constituency? What are the consequences of these perceptions for his or her behaviour? What his fieldwork revealed was how each member of Congress developed their own ‘home style’ - a way of presenting themselves to their constituency – that helped them to achieve the three goals of re-election, power in Congress, and good public policy (Fenno 1990: 137). The presentation of self by members of Congress in their everyday constituency life was the surprise finding.

In his analysis of central bureaux chiefs, Kaufman (1981) studied six federal bureaux for fourteen months, including thirty-one full days when he observed the bureaux chiefs

sitting in their offices and at meetings. The conventional wisdom is that bureaux chiefs have much power and independence. Kaufman (1981: chapter 3) highlights the ‘confines of leadership’. He compares it to ‘stepping into a large fast-flowing river’ and contending with ‘an array of forces not of his own making that carried him and his organization along – sometimes at an unwanted rate and in an unwanted direction’ (Kaufman 1981: 134). So, ‘they make their marks in inches, not miles’. He suggests that, ‘for all the power and influence attributed to their office and for all their striving, [bureau chiefs] *could not make a big difference in what their organizations did* during the period in which they served’ (Kaufman 1981: 174 and 139, emphasis added). Getting up close and personal changes the angle of vision and leads, as Kaufman freely admits, to surprises, especially about the confines of administrative leadership (see also Kaufman 2006 [1960]).

In the UK, there was little political ethnography before the 2000s, and the little that existed was not called 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 when the operating assumption of most British political scientists 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 work exemplifies the value of intensive interviews and observation (and see Weller 2014).

There is a great deal more interpretive ethnography but few study the political executive. Notable exceptions include Rhodes' (2011) study of three British government central departments. It is not a classic intensive fieldwork study but a hit-and-run ethnography; that is, repeat visits to multiple sites. He observed the office of two British ministers and three permanent secretaries for two days each, totalling some 120 hours. He also shadowed two ministers and three permanent secretaries for five working days each, totalling some 300 hours. He conducted lengthy repeat interviews with: ten permanent, five secretaries of state and three ministers; and 20 other officials, totalling some 67 hours of interviews. He also had copies of speeches and public lectures; committee and other papers relevant to the meetings observed; newspaper reports; and published memoirs and diaries. Shadowing produced several surprises; for example, he found that a key task of civil servants and ministers was to steer other actors using storytelling. Storytelling organises dialogues, foster meanings, beliefs, and identities among the relevant actor. It seeks to influence what actors think and do, and foster shared narratives of continuity and change. It is about 'willed ordinariness' or continuities. It is about preserving the departmental philosophy and its everyday (or folk) theories. It is about shared languages that enable a retelling of yesterday to make sense of today. This portrait of a storytelling political-administrative elite, with beliefs and practices rooted in the nineteenth century Westminster constitution, that uses protocols and rituals to domesticate rude surprises and recurrent dilemmas, overturns the conventional portrait.

In the same vein, Corbett (2015) studied the working life of politicians in the Pacific Islands. He undertook more than 100 interviews across 14 countries; read around 50 published auto/biographies; and spent time watching politicians on the campaign trail, in their constituency, in parliament, at international meetings and in their offices, businesses and homes. Corbett's account details the depth of concern about the corruption and incompetence of contemporary politicians in this region. Unflattering comparisons were made with the so-called Golden Generation who had led most Pacific states to independence in the 1970s and 1980s. But, contrary to the common perception, Corbett (2015) found marked similarities in the dilemmas that politicians in the Pacific Islands confront – for example, how to appear 'of' and 'apart' from voters; the need to over-promise to win elections in full knowledge that public expectations could not be met; and being powerful and yet feeling powerless. These dilemmas reoccurred across countries, and eras. Also, they bore a family resemblance to the findings of studies like Rhodes (2011) and others across the world. In doing so, Corbett made a context typically characterised as exotic familiar to readers beyond the region.

While not specifically focused on the executives of nation-states, there is a body of work on other types of executives that further demonstrates the potential of this method. Given the popular disaffection with the EU, for example, Shore's (2000) account of the inner workings of the European Commission foreshadows Rhodes' portrayal of a cocooned civil service. Affinities are also clear in studies of the elite of global governance. Weaver's (2008) ethnographic study of the World Bank shows how organised hypocrisy is central to the Bank's work while, like Corbett's account of powerless politicians, Ouroussof's (2010) ethnography of Wall Street elites reveals how these supposedly omnipotent kingpins of the global economy remain enthralled to limiting beliefs and entrenched practices.

The other notable exception is biography. Few biographers would call themselves ethnographers but many adopt an ethnographic sensibility and employ similar data collection techniques. For example, Weller's (1989) research on Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, conducted soon after he lost power in 1983, combined cabinet documents with in-depth interviews to probe how Fraser exercised power. Weller may not have been in the room but combining the written record and the fresh memoirs of key participants meant that he got as close as a researcher is likely to get to describing how these meetings operate. Weller's (2014: chapter 14) biography of Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, included sitting for more than a month in the Prime Minister's office. His 'a week in the office' account adds depth and richness to the reflections of his interviewees.

What is the research agenda?

What would 'chugging ahead' (Wedeen 2010: 264) to an ethnography of the political executive in the 21st century involve? It involves dissolving the distinction between quantitative and qualitative methods; bricolage and an 'ethnographic sensibility'; and the network analysis of court politics.

Quantitative and qualitative

The distinction between 'qualitative' and 'quantitative' methods is unhelpful (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2002). It suggests, for example, that researchers do not interpret their quantitative data (on which see Stone 2001: chapter 10). Rather, an interpretive approach does not necessarily favour particular methods. It 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. So, it is a mistake to equate an interpretive approach with only certain techniques of data generation such as reading texts and participant observation. It is wrong to exclude survey research and quantitative studies from the reach of interpretive analysis. Shore (2000: 7-11) is a true *bricoleur* because his cultural analysis of the beliefs and practices of European Union elites uses participant observation, historical archives, textual analysis of official documents, biographies, oral histories, recorded interviews, and informal conversations as well as statistical and survey techniques.

Bricolage

Ethnographic methods are analogous to *bricolage*. We piece together sets of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation (Levi-Strauss 1966) using whatever tools are available. Both qualitative and quantitative methods are used as appropriate.

When studying the political executive, the classic practices of the ethnographic craft, participant observation and ethnographic interviewing, encounter some obvious practical problems 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 a secret

is. We are playing a game with a stacked deck of cards, and we are the punters. Of course, there are many circumstances in which these difficulties do not arise. For example, Rhodes (2011) was allowed to shadow ministers and their top public servants. But the brute fact is that when problems do arise, the executive win. In practice, it means the researcher is involved in continuous negotiations over access and who can and cannot be seen. Elites are different (and see Rhodes 2017 and Gains 2011 for a more detailed discussion.) To deal with these problems, the ethnographer needs more tools than just observation and interviewing. We have to find other ways of ‘being there’; of sidestepping the problems of access and secrecy (see Rhodes and Tiernan 2014). Table 2 identifies several such ways.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 **Bricolage**

Ethnographic methods	Definition	Potential data sources	Model
Hit-and-run fieldwork	Repeated, short bursts of intensive observation as researchers move in-and-out of the field	Legislatures, constituency offices, campaign events, government departments	Crewe 2015; Rhodes 2011.
Ethnographic interviewing	Repeated, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the same participant	Recently retired politicians and public officials	Corbett 2015; Reeher 2006.
Memoirs	First-person reflections on governing	Auto-biographies and authorized biographies; radio and television interviews	Blunkett 2006; Rhodes 2017
Elite focus groups	Group reflections that encourage elites to flesh out and challenge each other's claims	Recently retired politicians and public officials	Rhodes and Tiernan 2014
Para-ethnography	Ethnographic interviews with a decision maker to explain a specific decision or event (see Holmes and Markus 2005)	Focused on particular legislative documents, departmental files	Novel in political science but see Holmes and Marcus 2005.
Visual ethnography	Using video recordings as a form of remote observation (see Pink 2013)	C-SPAN (and similar footage elsewhere); press conferences, parliament live	Novel in political science but see Pink 2013

Source: Boswell et al. 2018.

We do not have the space to expand on every method. So, we limit ourselves to one example. Focus groups are widely used in electoral studies but they are not seen as a tool for political 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. Thus, Rhodes and Tiernan (2014) ran two focus groups comprising the former Chiefs of Staff (CoS) of Australian prime ministers to discuss such questions as, how each CoS approached the task of working with the prime minister. They conclude focus groups are a useful tool for recovering the beliefs and practices of governing elites. However, they are not a stand-alone tool. They are part of a larger toolkit that encompasses intensive interviewing, official documents, biographies, memoirs and diaries, informal conversations, as well as observation. Finally, as Agar and MacDonald (1995: 85) also conclude, focus groups can take the ethnographic researcher into new territory when the conversation is located in broader folk theories, such as, in the example given here, the governmental traditions in which the participants work.

This last point applies to the several ways of ‘being there’. None are stand-alone methods. Ideally, we would supplement each method with shadowing. Most important, the data generated by focus groups and other methods require an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ for interpreting the conversations (Agar and McDonald 1995; Schatz 2009). The various ethnographic methods suggested in Table 2 are still about recovering meaning and locating

that meaning in its broader context. So, focus groups are an ethnographic method because ethnography is now a diverse set of practices linked not by a shared method - participant observation - but by a shared focus on the recovery of meaning – the ethnographic sensibility.

So, ‘bricolage’ will be an important feature of ethnographic approaches to the study of the political executive in the future. As well as observation and interviews, we will construct research from diverse methods and materials (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 4; and Table 1.3) - and bring an ‘ethnographic sensibility’ to bear on the data, however collected (and for a more detailed account see Rhodes 2017: chapters 3-5).

The network analysis of court politics

It is commonplace to talk of an inner circle surrounding the prime minister or president. Around this core we also talk of circles of influence (Hennessy 2000: 493-500); usage that accords with political folklore. In the more formal language of political science, the core executive is a set of interlocking, interdependent networks. The chief executive, be it prime minister or president, is at the core of these networks supported by courtiers who constitute his or her supporting central capacity (see for example, Burch and Holliday 1996; 2004; Savoie 1999; 2008).

The court is a key part of the organisational glue holding the centre together. It coordinates the policy process by filtering and packaging proposals. It contains and manages conflicts between ministerial barons. It acts as the keeper of the government’s narrative. It acts as the gatekeeper and broker for internal and external networks. And its power ebbs and flows with that of the prime minister.

Court politics focuses on the games politicians and their support players play in these networks. Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard are all familiar with blasts of wild treachery, as were the Manchu Court, Imperial Rome, and the English court during the Wars of the Roses. It is the stock of fiction, whether the faction of *The White Queen* or the fantasy of *The Game of Thrones*. It is our business to report and analyse who does what to whom, when, where, how and why.

Court politics exists as journalists' reportage and in the auto/biographies, diaries and memoirs of politicians but is rarely at the heart of academic analyses of present-day government. Of course, the study of the court politics poses many challenges around access, secrecy and publication. The obvious objection is that the secrecy surrounding court politics limits access. The point has force, but we must not succumb to the rule of anticipated reactions and just assume access will be denied. There are examples of outsiders gaining good access, whether biographers (Moore 2015; Seldon 2004; Seldon et al. 2007; Seldon and Lodge 2010; Seldon and Snowden 2015), journalists (Peston 2005, Rawnsley 2001 and 2010), or academics (Rhodes 2011; Shore 2000).³ Biographers probe the reasons. Journalists with their exposé tradition probe actions to show 'all is not as it seems'. Each has their explanations of the changes in the court politics of executive government. Both observe people in action; they are tacit ethnographers. All gained access, observed, interviewed and published. If we want to know this world, then we must follow their example, tell our stories, and strive to help readers see executive governance afresh. The volume of 'private

³ In addition to the examples cited in the text, recent examples for Britain include: Beckett and Hencke 2004; Blunkett 2006; Mandelson 2010; Richards 2010; and Shipman 2016. Recent examples for Australia include: Blewett 1999; and Watson 2002. Recent examples for Canada include Savoie 2003 and 2008; and Wells 2013.

information' reported in the work of biographers like Anthony Seldon and journalists like Andrew Rawnsley is impressive, and will bear such secondary analysis as mapping the membership of prime ministers' courts. We need to mine all publicly available information, irrespective of discipline or profession. Perhaps we are too concerned to comment on the present-day. We may have to wait for documentary material to become available from families and friends as well as official sources but for most countries some 85 years of the twentieth century are available to consult. Perhaps we underestimate just how much is out there. There is much that political scientists could use in exploring the webs of beliefs, practices and traditions in the shape shifting core executive networks. A political ethnography of the executive's court politics may be a daunting prospect but it behoves us to try because court politics matter for effective and accountable government.

What are the limits of ethnography?

Every method has limits. In this section, we discuss briefly the most common dilemmas confronting ethnographers, namely: representation, objectivity, explanation, and generalisation (Rhodes 2017: chapters 3).

Representation

The claim to ethnographic authority when representing other cultures, whether of a tribe or of an organization, is a prime target for critics. They argue that it produces gendered and racist texts with a specious claim to objectivity that ignores power relations between observers and observed and fails to link the local to the global (see for example Clifford, 1986). Ethnographers grapple with the question of for whom they are doing the research. For example, van Willigen (2002: 150, and chapter 10) claims that fieldwork provides

information for policymakers so they can make rational decisions while 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’. The practices of ethnography have become so diverse that Marcus (2007a) describes them as ‘baroque’.

The common response to questions about representation is to call for ethnographers to be reflexive about their position, not only in their field research but also about the field of study in which their findings are situated, and the influence each has on what they saw, heard and read, and how they have represented it (see for example Corbett 2014). As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983: 14-15) point out ‘the reflexive character of social research ... is not a matter of methodological commitment, it is an existential fact’. So, ‘rather than engaging in futile attempts to eliminate the effects of the researcher [on the research], we should set about understanding them’. Critical self-awareness is essential but we have much sympathy with Watson’s (1987) prayer, ‘make me reflexive - but not yet’ because the goal of remaining a ‘professional stranger’ balancing engagement, detachment and critical self-awareness is equivalent to searching for the Holy Grail – always out of reach. Yet, there is no alternative to trying – it’s life as we know it (for discussion see Boswell and Corbett 2015a & b and published responses).

Generalization

The idiographic character of ethnographic fieldwork is invariably seen as a weakness by political scientists. Critics claim that, it is not possible to deduce laws and predict outcomes from fieldwork; that is, it is not possible generalize. Of course, researchers can and

do make general statements from a case. What they cannot do is make statistical generalizations and propound laws. For Lincoln and Guba (1985: 110), ‘the only generalization is: there is no generalization. However, 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). We can derive plausible conjectures from intensive fieldwork. As Geertz 1993: 23) suggests, ‘small facts speak to large issues’. In which case, ethnographic studies should be held to a different set of standards than are commonly accepted by the mainstream of the discipline (see Boswell and Corbett 2015; Rhodes 2017: 30-33, 50-51, 100-102).

Objectivity

For the naturalist political scientist, ethnographic research fails to meet the standards posed by the logic of refutation. For the interpretive ethnographer, there are only partial truths. For all qualitative researchers, there is the question of how do we evaluate the quality of research. We must start by accepting that the knowledge criteria of the naturalist ethnography - the logic of vindication and of refutation – are inappropriate. Such notions as reliability, validity and generalization are not seen as relevant when the aim of research is ‘complex specificness’ (Geertz 1973: 23; Wolcott 1995: 174). A way forward can be found in Bevir and Rhodes (2003: 38-40) who argue objectivity arises from criticizing and comparing rival webs of interpretation; from the forensic interrogation of rival stories (Boswell and Corbett 2015). Such debates are subject to the provisional rules of intellectual honesty such as established standards of evidence and reason. We prefer webs of interpretation that are accurate, comprehensive, and consistent. There is no point in trying to pretend the ethnographic approach and its

distinctive research methods are just a ‘soft’ version of the naturalist approach with its penchant for ‘hard’ quantitative data. They are simply different in both the aims and the knowledge criteria they employ. But there are criteria. It is not a case of anything goes.

Explanation

A common misconception about interpretive ethnography is that it aims only to understand actions and practices, not explain them. A distinction is drawn between the nomothetic search for explanatory laws of the social sciences and idiographic understanding of the interpretive sciences. Interpretive ethnography describes actions and practices, but it does not explain them. It need not be so. The philosophical analysis of meaning in action that informs an interpretive approach suggests a distinctive form of explanation, which Bevir (1999: 304-306) refers to as narrative. For Bevir 1999 (chapters 4 and 7), narratives are the form theories take in the human sciences. They explain actions by specifying the beliefs and desires that caused the actions. People act for reasons, conscious and unconscious. A memoir or a story or a life history is a narrative if it explains actions by explicating beliefs. So, interpretive ethnography is about explanation, not just understanding.

Our brief review does not exhaust the limits to ethnography. For example, with hit-and-run ethnography, the question arises of how short can a fieldwork trip be and still count as ethnography (Hammersley 2006; Marcus 2007b)? If we seek to locate (say) focus groups in their broader traditions or folk theories, how do we identify those traditions? If we employ a broad toolkit, how do we reconcile the different findings that can arise? However, ethnography is not unique in having limits. It is a fact of life for every method.

Conclusion

This paper has defined the ethnographic approach and surveyed the state of the art of the, admittedly scanty, literature on the political executive. We have suggested that the way forward is to abandon any essentially arbitrary distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods and resort to bricolage. The analysis of the court politics of the core networks of the executive is a prime setting for such hit-and-run ethnography. Like all research methods, ethnography has its limits and we discuss them. We do not consider these problems insurmountable. We would argue that we need to be explicit about the limits to the approach so readers can assess the value of the findings. The limits associated with ethnography are not specific to studying the political executive. They are common problems for anyone practicing the art and such a discussion raises a further problem - it can discourage newcomers. So, our final task is to refer the reader to the key question of whether ethnography brings anything new to the study of executive government. Table 1 makes it clear that ethnography is an edifying approach because it enables us to see beyond institutions and functions by opening the daily life of executive courts, replete with drama, conspiracy, prejudice and intrigue, that are central to any political story worth telling.

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