Chapter 2

PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, THE INTERPRETIVE TURN, AND STORYTELLING

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Abstract

This chapter considers the interpretive turn in British public administration. It provides a brief introduction to both interpretive theory and ethnographic methods. It illustrates the approach by summarising some of the (few) cases of the approach ‘in action’. It identifies the advantages of the approach. It discusses applications of the interpretive approach in public administration. It concludes that combining an interpretive approach with ethnographic methods (plural) is both edifying and relevant.

Keywords
Public administration, Naturalism, Interpretation, Ethnography, Relevance, Storytelling

Biography

Rod Rhodes is Professor of Government (Research) at the University of Southampton (UK); Visiting Professor, Utrecht School of Governance, University of Utrecht, The Netherlands; and Adjunct Professor, Centre for Governance and Public Policy, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. He is the author or editor of 42 books including, most recently Networks, Governance and the Differentiated Polity. Selected Essays. Volume I. (Oxford University Press, 2017), Interpretive Political Science. Selected Essays. Volume II (Oxford University Press, 2017), and the Routledge Handbook of Interpretive Political Science (with Mark Bevir, Routledge 2015). He is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, and a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences (UK). In 2015, the ECPR awarded him their biennial Lifetime Achievement Award for his ‘outstanding contribution to all areas of political science, and the exceptional impact of his work’.
**Introduction**

Public administration is a conservative discipline addicted to providing applied knowledge.\(^1\) Even so, it has its moments; its sporadic outburst of critical engagement with the rest of the social sciences. This chapter considers one of those sporadic outbursts – the interpretive turn.\(^2\) It provides a brief introduction to both interpretive theory and ethnographic methods. It illustrates the approach by summarising some of the (few) cases of the approach ‘in action’. It identifies the advantages of the approach. It discusses its relevance to public administration; the ways and means of applying the approach. It concludes that combining an interpretive approach with ethnographic methods (plural) is both edifying and relevant.

**The interpretive turn**\(^3\)

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). Known variously as positivism, behaviouralism and modernist-empiricism in the social sciences, it holds two central beliefs:

First, a conviction that all ‘knowledge’ … is capable of being expressed in terms which refer in an immediate way to some reality, or aspects of reality that can be apprehended through the senses. Second, a faith that the methods and logical form of science as epitomized in classical physics 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’. 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 a ‘fusion of horizons’; to shared interpretations (Lincoln and Guba 1985, 28, 36-8 and Table 1.1).

An interpretive approach in public administration shifts analysis away from institutions, functions and roles to the actions and practices of webs of actors. To understand actions and practices, we need to grasp the relevant meanings; the beliefs and preferences of the people involved. In other words,

We need to go beyond the bounds of a science based on verification to one which would study the inter-subjective and common meanings embedded in social reality … this science would be hermeneutical in the sense that … its most primitive data would be a reading of meanings (Taylor 1971: 45).

An interpretive approach seeks to understand the webs of significance that people spin for themselves. It focuses on the social construction of a practice through the ability of individuals to create, and act on, meanings. Individuals are situated in webs of beliefs handed down as traditions and these beliefs and associated practices are changed by the dilemmas people confront. The aim is to provide ‘thick description’ or narratives in which the researcher writes his or her interpretation of the subject’s interpretation of what the subject is up to (adapted from Geertz 1993: 9). To understand an institution and its processes, we must understand the beliefs and practices of its members and the traditions that inform those beliefs and practices. So, the tasks are to unpack the disparate and contingent beliefs and practices of individuals through which they construct their world; and to identify the recurrent patterns of actions and related beliefs. The resulting narrative provides an account of complex specificity in context. It 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.

Human action is also historically contingent. It is:

Characterized by ineluctable contingencies, temporal fluidity and contextual specificity. Hence we cannot explain social phenomena adequately if we fail fully to take into account both their inherent flux and their concrete links to specific contexts (Bevir and Kedar 2008: 506).

The notion of tradition is central to understanding the context of action. It explains why people come to believe what they do. People understand their experiences using theories they have inherited. This social heritage is the necessary background to the beliefs people adopt and the actions they perform. Tradition is a starting point, not a destination. Traditions do not determine the beliefs that people go on to adopt or the actions they go on to perform. It is our ability for agency that makes tradition a more satisfactory concept than rival terms such as structure, paradigm, and episteme. These latter ideas suggest the presence of a social force that determines or limits the beliefs and actions of individuals. Tradition, in contrast, suggests that a social heritage comes to individuals who, through their agency, can adjust and transform this heritage even as they pass it on to others. Individuals use local reasoning consciously and subconsciously to reflect on and modify their contingent heritage; they are situated agents (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 4-5 and 7-9).

An interpretive approach represents a shift of topos from institution to individual beliefs and practices and the traditions in which they are located.
Bevir and Rhodes (2003, 2006 and 2010) are among the leading exponents of this interpretive approach in Britain and regularly use examples drawn from public administration. Their approach is summarised in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1. The interpretive approach: concepts**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To decentre</td>
<td>To decentre is to unpack practices as the contingent beliefs and actions of individuals, challenging the idea that inexorable or impersonal forces drive politics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narratives</td>
<td>Narratives are a form of explanation that works by relating actions to individual beliefs and desires that produce them. This allows us to capture how events happened in the past or are happening today.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situated agency</td>
<td>Individuals are situated in wider webs of beliefs (traditions), which largely shape their beliefs. Yet they keep a capacity for agency in that they respond to traditions, beliefs and dilemmas in novel ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs</td>
<td>Beliefs are the basic unit of analysis, in that they are the interpretations of individuals of their world and their surroundings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditions</td>
<td>Traditions are ‘webs of belief’, and form the background of ideas in which agents find themselves. Agents will adopt beliefs from traditions as a starting point, but may amend them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dilemmas</td>
<td>A dilemma is an idea that stands in contradiction to other beliefs, posing a problem. Dilemmas are resolved by accommodating the new belief in the present web of beliefs or replacing old beliefs with new beliefs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices</td>
<td>A set of actions that often exhibits a stable pattern across time. Practices are the ways in which beliefs and traditions manifest themselves in everyday life.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Geddes and Rhodes 2018: 95.
Methods

An interpretive approach is said to be limited to textual readings and small-scale observations, excluding survey research and quantitative studies. However, a concern to offer interpretations of interpretations does not necessarily favour particular methods. On the contrary, proponents of an interpretive approach might construct their interpretations using data generated by various techniques. They can draw on participant observation, interviews, questionnaires, mass surveys, statistical analysis, and formal models as well as reading memoirs, newspapers, and official and unofficial documents. The philosophical analysis underpinning an interpretive approach does not prescribe a particular methodological toolkit for producing data. Instead, it prescribes a particular way of treating data of any type. Proponents of an interpretive approach argue that political scientists should treat data in ways consistent with the task of interpreting interpretations. They should treat data as evidence of the meanings or beliefs embedded in actions. Political scientists should not try to bypass meanings or beliefs by reducing them to principles of rationality, fixed norms, or social categories.

The interpretive view of how we should treat data does, of course, have some implications for methods of data collection. It leads, in particular, to greater emphasis on qualitative methods than is usual in public administration. We become:

The interpretive bricoleur [producing] a bricolage; that is a pieced together set of representations that are fitted to the specifics of a complex situation (Denzin and Lincoln 2011: 4).

The first point to note is that there is little or no ethnographic fieldwork in public administration. Kapiszewski et al. (2015: 234) concluded that ‘political science has yet to
embrace ethnography and participant observation wholeheartedly’ and their comment applies equally to public administration. Second, any account of fieldwork starts with the puzzle of 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. 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 a year or more. 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"’.

As the label suggests, ‘being there’ means that the researcher both observes and participates in everyday life. He or she needs to get to know the people being studied. You do not have to be friends. You do need to be accepted; to fit in. 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).

For some ethnographers, there is a clash between ‘deep hanging out’ and ‘hit-and-run’ ethnography (Geertz 2001: 110 and 141). It is a misleading dichotomy. Ethnographers have long practiced ‘partial immersion’ (Delamont 2004: 206). I find ‘hit-and-run’ ethnography a useful phase to capture short repeat visits to multiple locations. Of course, there is the question with hit-and-run ethnography of how short can a fieldwork trip be and still count as ethnography (Hammersley 2006; Marcus 2007b)? However, elite ethnography is difficult and poses many challenges. We attempt to enter a closed and secretive world, a hidden world,
occupied by people who are more powerful than the researcher. Observing governing elites at work is the preferred research method but I know from bitter experience that requests for such access can be denied. We have to find other ways of ‘being there’. Any period of observation, however short, should be grasped. The choice between deep hanging out’ and ‘hit-and-run’ ethnography is a matter of practicality; of going where you are led and taking what you can get. The *bricoleur* can employ many tools – see Table 2.2 – but must recognise that the several ways of ‘being there’ are not 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. The various ethnographic methods suggested in Table 2.2 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.

INSERT FIGURE 2.2 ABOUT HERE
Table 2.2: Bricolage

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnographic methods</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Potential data sources</th>
<th>Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hit-and-run fieldwork</td>
<td>Repeated, short bursts of intensive observation as researchers move in- and-out of the field</td>
<td>Legislatures, constituency offices, campaign events, government departments</td>
<td>Rhodes’s (2011a) <em>Everyday Life in British Government</em>;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnographic interviewing</td>
<td>Repeated, semi-structured and unstructured interviews with the same participant</td>
<td>Recently retired politicians and public officials</td>
<td>Corbett’s (2015) <em>Being Political</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memoirs</td>
<td>First-person reflections on governing</td>
<td>Autobiographies and authorized biographies; radio and television interviews</td>
<td>Rhodes (2017b) <em>Interpretive Political Science</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite focus groups</td>
<td>Group reflections that encourage elites to flesh out and challenge each other’s claims</td>
<td>Recently retired politicians and public officials</td>
<td>Rhodes and Tiernan’s (2014) <em>Lessons of Governing</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Para-ethnography</td>
<td>An ethnographic interview focused around explaining a particular document or artefact (see Holmes and Markus 2005)</td>
<td>Focused on particular legislative documents, departmental files</td>
<td>Novel in public administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual ethnography</td>
<td>Using video recordings as a form of remote observation (see Pink 2013)</td>
<td>Parliamentlive.tv, press conferences, speeches</td>
<td>Novel in public administration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Boswell, Rhodes et al. 2018; Rhodes 2014.
This interpretive philosophical argument encompasses the methods of the social sciences as well as those of the humanities. All kinds of methods are valuable ways of gathering and analysing data. But, when scholars seek to explain the data and patterns in it, they should allow for the intentionality of human action. The intentionality of human action implies there is no ‘method’ for reaching a correct explanation. Rather, public administration is a craft – the craft of recovering meaning by telling plausible tales about data and patterns within it.

**Cases**

The following, inevitably brief, summaries have two objectives. First, I illustrate the interpretive approach in action by describing the methods employed and summarising key findings. Second, I answer the question, ‘so what?’ What do we learn from this fieldwork that we do not learn from other methods. In a word, the answer is ‘surprises’.

*Case 1: US federal bureau chiefs*

In his analysis of central bureaux chiefs, Kaufman (1981) studied six US federal agencies 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 these officials 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 organisation 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 organisations 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]).

Case 2: British government departments

Rhodes (2011) 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. He provides a ‘thick description’ of life at the top of British government departments, which gets beneath the surface of official accounts and lets interviewees explain the meaning of their actions, providing an authenticity that can only come from the main characters involved in the story.

Shadowing ministers and top civil servants produced several surprises; for example, Rhodes (2011: 130-31, and 288-90) found that a key task of civil servants and ministers was to steer other actors using storytelling. Most accepted that the art of storytelling was an integral part of their work. Such phrases as ‘are we telling a consistent story?’ and ‘what is our story?’ abound. They do not necessarily use the term ‘storytelling’. They talk of ‘getting the story straight’; ‘getting it together’, ‘we’ve got the story’, ‘when you explain it, then you have the narrative’; and ‘we have reached agreement on some of the main storylines’. They use stories not only to gain and pass on information and to inspire involvement but also as the repository of the organization’s institutional memory. 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. Rhodes paints a portrait of a storytelling political-administrative elite, with beliefs and practices rooted in the nineteenth century Westminster constitution. This elite uses protocols and rituals to domesticate rude surprises and recurrent dilemmas, overturns the conventional portrait.

Case 3: Chiefs of Staff (CoS) to Australian Prime Ministers (PM)

The CoS to Australian PMs have long been recognised as key players in the Australian executive. They are appointed by the prime minister because they are known to be loyal and committed. They have a broad remit, but there is no job description. They support both the person who is prime minister and the position that they hold. They run the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO) of over 50 staff. It operates twenty-four hours a day every day of the year.

In late 2009, Rhodes and Tiernan (2014a) brought together eleven former PMs’ CoS spanning governments from 1975 to 2013. They took came together to take part in two closed, round-table focus group discussions (Morgan 1997). Each session aimed to elicit participants’ views on such topics as how different individuals approached the task of working with the Prime Minister, the key duties and responsibilities that they performed, and the challenges confronting the CoS. The participants agreed that we could record, transcribe and quote from proceedings. The two focus groups yielded some nine hours of qualitative data; 230 pages of transcripts in total. In addition, we conducted three off-the-record interviews with serving CoS.
There were surprises big and little. We knew the CoS looked after the person as well as the position of the PM. We did not realise the extent of their caring role. It covered the PM’s family, not just him or her, and not just accommodation and travel but also everyone’s health. The doctor to the Australian PM was ‘Dr Killer’, no joke intended. He accompanied the PM on overseas trips. One CoS reported:

He hasn’t lost a prime minister yet [laughs]. Anyway, Dr Killer went to inspect the kitchen before the state dinner… He came back ashen-faced and said ‘There’s a toilet in the middle of the kitchen. My advice is don’t eat anything’. So [the PM] spent the night with the menu in front of him and basically dodging, because he had a view that you could pick up hepatitis or something. That would be the end of your career.

It’s still the standard advice of Graham Killer now: anything that might have been near water, lettuce or anything, don’t eat it. Brush your teeth out of bottled water or whiskey. So, he’s still giving the same advice and he’s still keeping PMs alive (Rhodes and Tiernan 2014a: 128).

The PM’s heath is important but so is the institutional memory of his or her department. The PMO is a partisan department, staffed by political appointees mainly. It lacks ‘storage locations’ for institutional memory (Pollitt 2009: 202-03). At the change of government, each new PMO starts afresh. There is no existing staff with experience and knowledge in their heads. The various kinds of paper records are shredded. Electronic files and databases are wiped. The newcomers cannot rely on organisational routines and standard operating procedures developed and refined through experience. ‘Institutional amnesia’ is built into the design. The heart of Australian government has no memory (Rhodes and Tiernan 2014b: 31-35; 176-86; and 216-6)!
There were several advantages to using focus groups. First, group discussion provided more illuminating insights because participants opened more topics than would have occurred in an individual interview. Second, the interaction between people clarified the meaning of practices. Third, the focus groups made tacit knowledge explicit. Fourth, the focus groups produced ‘relevant’ knowledge. Our work was seen as relevant by the CoS and we wrote a guide to being a CoS based on the lessons the CoS identified (Rhodes and Tiernan 2014b). So, focus groups were a useful tool for recovering the beliefs and practices of governing elites but, second, they were not a stand-alone tool. They must be seen as part of a larger toolkit that encompasses in-depth interviewing, official documents, biographies, memoirs and diaries, informal conversations, as well as that gold standard of ethnographic methods, participant observation. Finally, the analysis must be located and interpreted in a broader framework, in our case the Australian Westminster tradition about executive government (and for further discussion of this method, see: Agar and MacDonald 1995; Rhodes and Tiernan 2015).

**Case 4: Forest rangers as street level bureaucrats**

Kaufman’s *The Forest Ranger* (1960) pioneered the topic of street level bureaucrats almost a decade before the phrase was coined by Lipsky (1969; see also Lipsky 1980). 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. There were also social visits to their families in the evening. He calls the rangers ‘switchboards’, adapting general directives to specific conditions and areas. It is a pivotal position. 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). For this reader, the surprise did not lie in the discretion of the forest rangers. It did not lie either in the, at the time, unfashionable
assertion that implementation matters. Nor did it lie in the analysis of managing unity when people are in remote places. In 1960, all three topics were original but they are commonplace today. Rather, my surprise lay in the sheer longevity of this ground level, bottom-up study of the shadow land of public administration. It was and remains a classic example of the street-level bureaucrat, only they patrol trails not streets. It is a good example of ‘how small facts speak to large issues’ (Geertz (1993) [1973]: 23).

Case 5: Cops, teachers and counsellors

In a more recent example of street-level bureaucrats in action, Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003: chapter 3 and 167-77) spent six to ten months in five research sites interviewing and observing cops, teachers and vocational counsellors. They collected 157 everyday work stories from 48 street-level workers. Their narrative analysis showed that street-level bureaucrats ‘make policy choices rather than simply implement the decisions of elected officials’. Their beliefs about clients fixed the clients’ identities, often stereotyping them; for example as trouble makers or personality disorder. These beliefs, in turn, fixed the beliefs of street-level bureaucrats about their occupational identity as, for example, bleeding heart or hard-nosed. Maynard-Moody and Musheno describe the practices of street-level bureaucrats in managing the irreconcilable dilemmas posed by the needs and potential of clients, and the demands of the state.

My surprise with this study lies in the diversity of beliefs and practices among the street-level bureaucrats. As social scientists, we look for patterns. We set out to describe the mess that is social life and reduce it to order. But what if social life is a mess? If so, by simplifying we risk distortion. We make a mess of the mess. Maynard-Moody and Musheno are good social scientists. They describe complex specificity in context. They find patterns using the notions of, for example, stereotyping and dilemmas. Then, there are the stories.
They preserve the mess in all its glory. I came away from the book marvelling at the robustness of the stories in evoking the everyday mess that is the lived experience of the street-level bureaucrats.

I am convinced that ethnography reaches the parts that other methods do not reach because it is in the field talking to the people who decide on and deliver public services. To drive this point home, for each case, I have provided an example of a surprise, big and little, unearthed by the fieldwork. Now, in Table 2.3, I summarise formally the specific gains.

**INSERT TABLE 2.3 ABOUT HERE**
Table 2.3 Advantages of an ethnographic approach

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.

Source: Modified from Rhodes 2017: 209
Relevance

As Geertz (1983: 21) points out, ‘there has been an enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life’. Instead of searching for laws and causal models, we look to the humanities and treat social life as analogous to a game, a drama, or a 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). So, can we apply the insights of an interpretive approach? How can it be relevant? The answer lies in applied ethnography and storytelling.

For Van Willigen (2002) applied anthropology is about providing information for decision makers so they can make rational decisions. Or, more formally, applied anthropology 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’ (Van Willigen 2002: 150 and chapter 10). Not everyone would agree that the task is to help decision makers. For Agar (1996: 27), ‘ethnography is populist to the core’ and the task is to give a voice to the silent and 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). As Kedia and Van Willigen (2005: 16-20) observe, applied anthropology confronts an acute and recurring moral dilemma ‘since the practitioner must negotiate an intricate balance between the interests of the clients who commission the work, and those of the community being studied’. Inevitably, there are
issues about whose aims are served by the research, who owns the research results, and individual privacy. Given that observational fieldwork is about decentring an established organisation to identify its several voices, its contending beliefs and practices, and its traditions and stories (Bevir and Rhodes 2006; 2017b: chapter 2), then the research is never about privileging any one voice. From the viewpoint of the managers, therefore, there is always the potential for disruption and irrelevance.

The question remains, how do we collect and use such qualitative data? In a phrase, the answer is ‘policy narratives’. So, storytelling is an addition to the modernist social science toolbox. There are at least four approaches to collecting stories to provide advice to policymakers: observation, questionnaires, focus groups, and Most Significant Change (MSC).

Observational fieldwork is the best way of collecting stories but involves deep hanging out. The problem is that such fieldwork is time consuming. So, ‘deep hanging out’ is supplemented with ‘hit-and-run ethnography’ – short repeat visits. In every organisation there are some excellent places for hanging out – the watercooler, the coffee machine, and the canteen. In my government departments, the microwave in the office kitchen was a great place because people from across the department hung out for coffee or lunch. There are many ways of ‘being there’.

An alternative way of collecting stories is to use a questionnaire (and for more suggested questions, see: Gabriel 2000: chapter 6). In the space available, I can give only a few examples of useful questions for finding out how things work around here. They are reassuringly obvious; for example: ‘if a new member of staff asks you “how do things work around here”, what do you tell them?’ On occasions, I have asked interviewees to write-up their story. I then ask questions based on that story to add more detail, more colour, more
analysis and I rewrite after discussing their answers. We stop going back and forth when the interviewee is too bored to continue revising or we agree about what happened. I can then ask other people whether this version is what happened.

My favoured strategy for collecting stories is the focus group, sometimes referred to as a storytelling circle (Snowden 2000a; and 2000b). 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. It is important that the focus group should be coherent, comprised of people from the same organisation and with shared experiences in that organisation. There has to be a shared history from which they can draw stories. The focus group is shaking the bag of organisational stories to identify its dramas.

MSC or Most significant Change collects stories of significant change ‘from those most directly involved, such as beneficiaries, clients and field staff’. Unapologetically, it is a management tool (the following is paraphrased from Dart and Davies 2003: 138-9). As before, the question is simple: for example, ‘During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place in the program’. The respondents decide not only what is significant, but also why it is significant. The stories are analysed and filtered as they moved through the hierarchy: ‘Each level in the hierarchy … reviews a series of stories sent to them by the level below and selects the single most significant account of change within each of the domains’. In effect, they select a ‘winning story’, which is used by programme funders in deciding which programme they wish to fund.

Such applied ethnography is now the stuff of management consultants, even specialised government units. The explicit aim may not be to collect stories, although they do, but it is always to provide advice for policymakers.
Conclusion

Interpretive theory urges the analysis of meaning through a focus on situated agents. It provides our interpretation of other people’s interpretations of what they think they are doing. These thick descriptions are social dramas characterised by complex specificity in context. Ethnographic fieldwork uses participant observation (and various other methods) to recover and recount the stories of situated agents. Such narrative analysis gives voice to the silent but it can also produce relevant evidence for decision makers. An interpretive approach is not just descriptive and it can provide relevant evidence through applied ethnography and storytelling.

Every theory and every method has its advantages and its limitations. Interpretive theory and ethnographic fieldwork are no exception. These problems are not insurmountable and are discussed in detail in Rhodes (2015 and 2017b). I see my main task here as persuading the reader that interpretive theory, allied with ethnography, brings something new to the study of public administration. So, in closing, I refer the reader to Table 2.3, which makes it clear that ethnography enables us to see beyond institutions and functions by opening the daily life of government. These dramas and stories are worth telling because they are replete with meaning.

I have discussed whether the interpretive approach is relevant because public administration is an applied discipline. But relevance is not the heart of the case for the approach. I do not want to end with a clarion call for relevance. Interpretive theory is also its own good because it challenges the naturalist mainstream by introducing new genres of thought and presentation to public administration. Specifically, it encourages:
Empathy – as a participant observer in other people’s lives, we stand in their shoes and gain a greater understanding of not only what it is like to be them but also of ourselves.

Enabling conversations – in fieldwork interviews and conversations we encounter people who differ in age, class, occupation, gender, political beliefs, power, and so on, yet we find ways to talk with them. We create an intelligible discourse with the other.

Edification - interpretive theory provides a different vocabulary and toolkit that unearth new and more interesting ways of talking about politics and government.

Empathy, enabling conversations and edification are worthy goals in any walk of life.
References


Notes

1 This chapter draws on previously published work. See: Bevir and Rhodes 2003 and 2015; Boswell et al. 2018; Geddes and Rhodes 2018; Rhodes 2007, 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017a and 2017b. I would like to thank Jenny Fleming, … for their help and comments on the first draft.

2 Rhodes (2011b) argues that the interpretive turn is largely a European phenomenon but as always with such sweeping generalisations there are exceptions. On postmodernism in American public administration see: Farmer 1995; Fox and Miller 1995; and Miller 2002. On interpretive policy studies see: Stone 2002; and Yanow 1999. On interpretive theory and narratives see: Jun 2006; and Ospina and Dodge 2005. The Public Administration Theory Network (PAT-Net) and its journal, Administrative Theory and Praxis; are a home for all these approaches. See http://www.patheory.org (last accessed 5 February 2018). For the most part, American work in this idiom attracts only cult attention.

3 I have space for only a brief summary. For a more detailed account of our interpretive approach see Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006 and 2010.


5 There are many fieldwork studies of street level bureaucrats. See for example: Durose 2009; Hupe, Hill and Buffat 2016; and Vinzant and Crothers 1998. There is also a long history of such studies of policing, see for example: Manning 1977; Manning and Van Maanen 1978; and Turner and Rowe 2017.
6 Storytelling, or narratives, as a tool of management is an established part of the business toolkit and there is a burgeoning literature. See, for example: Gabriel 2000; and Denning 2005. There is even a *Dummies* book (Dietz and Silverman 2014).