
24 Critical policy ethnography

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Although policy is not commonly a central concern of ethnographers and ethnography is not an approach common among conventional policy analysts, ethnography and policy do share a deep common history. Ethnographers have been collaborating with policy makers for decades, as ancillaries of government agents. They also have publicly engaged in policy debates, accounting for situations and problems from the point of view of people who experience them, and sometimes advocating on this basis for grass-roots alternatives to government programs. Policy ethnography, however, must not be reduced to the ethnographic study of people subjected to policy. It consists more specifically in the ethnography of policy settings, agents, practices, organizations and processes. The number of studies that meet this definition has increased in recent years, along with qualitative and interpretive approaches to policy studies. These various encounters between ethnography and policy raise issues about ethnography itself and about the social and political role of the ethnographer. Policy ethnography is indeed at the intersection of a series of tensions: applied vs. fundamental ethnography, application for policy makers vs. application for people subjected to policies, ethnography for policy vs. ethnography of policy, people-centered vs. policy-centered ethnography. Here we may pose the question of when and how policy ethnography can be critical.

To address this question and illustrate critical epistemology, I will undertake the preliminary task of critical social scientists – reflexivity – which makes scholarship itself a focus of research (Bourdieu 2004). This is why this chapter includes a reflection on the history and current tensions in the positions, practices and orientations of scholars at the intersection between policy and ethnography. We will see that a critical approach is only one among numerous possible uses of ethnography related to policy matters. Therefore the question is to specify the features defining critical policy ethnography as such. I will single out four of them. First, from a methodological and analytic point of view, the critical potential of ethnography lies in its capacity to challenge mainstream positivist approaches to public policy. Second, ethnography is critical insofar as it effectively confronts the commonsense views at work in policy making, and the commonsense views of policy making itself. Third, whereas ethnography

is most often associated with micro-level approaches, critical policy ethnography endeavors at setting its observations in the broader context of macro-structures of power and inequality. Lastly, thanks to this wider perspective, policy ethnography is critical as it serves to unveil social, economic, symbolic and political domination at work in policy processes.

I will first examine how ethnography and policy meet. This will be the occasion to address the question of the political role of policy ethnographers, from instrumentalization and manipulation by government agencies to protest activism, together with the question of the various theoretical orientations policy ethnographers adopt as scholars. After exploring these various positions and the conditions under which policy ethnography can be 'critical', I will consider the diverse research objects on which policy ethnographers focus their attention: from social groups targeted by policy programs to the multiple sites of policy processes and policy making. This will provide an opportunity to reflect on how to conduct critical policy ethnography. Lastly, I will synthesize the main contributions of this approach, contrasting them with the dominant views on public policies and underlining how policy ethnography can be 'critical'.

HOW DO ETHNOGRAPHY AND POLICY MEET?

Although policy ethnography can hardly claim the status of a clearly identified, distinct research domain, ethnography and policy do share a long history of exchanges. In my effort to show how policy ethnography can be 'critical', I will start by considering this shared history and the contemporary relationship between policy and ethnography. Inspired by Bourdieu's notion of reflexivity as a necessary step for critical knowledge (Bourdieu 2004), this reflection will consist of raising the questions about the position of policy ethnographers, their relation to their subject matter, the possible social and political uses of their work, and, more generally, the political implications of ethnographic research (on critical reflexivity, see also in a complementary way Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, pp. 101–103).

One could be tempted to address these questions both in terms of political neutrality and of 'policy relevance'. That, however, would be far too simple. As Katz writes, 'to characterize a piece of ethnographic research as apolitical is a political statement' (Katz 2004, p. 280). 'Neutrality' is all the more impossible to achieve in the case of policy ethnography as, in addition to being involved on the field, policy ethnographers deal with power relationships, public problems and political ideologies. Therefore "policy relevance" is an indirect way of demanding that political priority be given here and now to those with at least a foothold in institutions of power'

(Katz 2004, p. 281). ‘Policy relevance’ is indeed only the dominant official way of looking at the political implications and possible uses of policy ethnography. The fact that policy ethnography cannot escape its political implications does not mean that it inevitably serves as an ancillary to government agents. To paraphrase Howard Becker’s famous statement, the question is therefore not whether policy ethnographers should take sides, but rather whose side they are on (Becker 1967). Perspectives other than those focusing on ‘policy relevance’ exist – from activism in favor of the oppressed, to collaborative applied anthropology, and to participation in (re)framing the public debate. In the following sub-sections I explore these approaches, first by providing a retrospective account of the relationship between policy and ethnography, then by sketching the current tensions in this relationship.

From Colonialist Anthropology to Policy Ethnography

In his conceptual and ideological history of applied and action anthropology, John Bennett proposes an interesting overview of the varied and sometimes contradictory ways in which British and American anthropologists have considered policy issues (Bennett 1996). Although based on the history of anthropology as a discipline, his overview gives a broader introduction to the complex relationship between policy and ethnography, both theoretically and in practice. The introduction of applied anthropology in policy making was a first historical stage. In the British case, this gave birth to ‘colonialist anthropology’, which fulfilled ‘a humanitarian advisory function for colonial administration in Africa’ under the British empire (Bennett 1996, p. S24). Anthropologists provided ‘useful knowledge’ enabling administrators to better govern colonized people and even collaborated in colonial government. The ‘application of anthropology to current statecraft’ promoted during the 1920s was not, however, without difficulties and misunderstandings (Belshaw 1976).

In contrast to the British paternalist orientation, applied anthropology in the United States appeared as ‘a mixture of New Deal humanitarian liberalism and progressive industrial management ideology’ (Bennett 1996, p. S23). Bennett here identifies three main origins. First, anthropologists took part in the public programs aimed at Native American reservations. Second, they participated in the multidisciplinary management-oriented research programs on industrial organization during the 1940s and the 1950s, together with sociologists and psychologists – as in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard or in the American Association for Applied Anthropology and its journal *Human Organization*. While not specific to public policy and administration, this ‘anthropological engineering’ was

used in these domains. Lastly, anthropology was also directly employed in the New Deal agricultural community program for 'rural rehabilitation', as implemented by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics and Rural Welfare in the Roosevelt Administration's Department of Agriculture. Anthropologists analyzed the impact of socio-economic changes on rural communities and the conditions for development. This New Deal experience served as a milestone for the later involvement of anthropologists in policy programs.

In both the British and the American cases, 'the anthropologist was there to answer questions but not to pose them' (Bennett 1996, p. S28). The fieldwork researcher was mostly defined as a subordinate neutral adviser, 'leaving to statesmen (and journalists) the final decision of how to apply the results' (Malinowski 1929, p. 23; quoted in Bennett 1996, p. S29).

Despite national differences in orientation, the tradition of applied anthropology has three general characteristics that are directly opposed to what we could define as 'critical policy ethnography'. First, in applied anthropology, researchers depend on policy makers and administrators not only financially or for access in their fieldwork, but in the definition of the intellectual frame in which they conduct their research. Conversely, intellectual autonomy is a basic requirement for critical social science. Second, the intervention of applied anthropology is legitimized by its claim to neutrality. Conversely, critical scholars acknowledge their moral or political orientations, and at least reflect on the role of possible biases in the orientation of their work. Lastly, conventional applied anthropologists stood by the side of dominant policy makers and powerful administrations. Conversely, critical policy ethnographers generally strive against dominant ideas, to unveil power relationships or to propose alternative views.

Criticism of the applied tradition during the 1960s and 1970s can be regarded as a step toward a distinct critical policy ethnography. To name but one instance in the American case, Sol Tax criticized the employment of ethnographic practitioners by governments, arguing in favor of self-funded independent research in community-based development projects. In this perspective, scholars would directly intervene to help people solve their problems. This time, ethnographers would stand on the other side, the side of people facing social, economic or political domination. The populism of 'action anthropology' would replace the paternalism of traditional applied anthropology (Tax 1975).

Despite these strong oppositions, however, applied and action anthropology share a common problem-solving orientation in which the utility of ethnography is viewed in a direct and practical way. In both cases, ethnographic research focuses on problems and on the people who experience

them, and is conducted *for* policy and reform, even when action anthropology proposes grass-roots alternatives to government programs. This focus on problems contrasts with the definition of policy ethnography as ethnography *of* public policy, focused on policy processes and practices primarily in order to better understand them.

Remaining Tensions

The range of contemporary ways for ethnographers to deal with policy remains impressively diversified. As a review of the terrains of policy anthropology shows (Okongwu and Mencher 2000), ethnographers dealing with policy issues still mainly focus on populations and on problems more than they study public policy itself, as in the ethnography *of* policy. Wedel et al. acknowledge this discrepancy when they contrast the involvement of anthropologists in policy with what they call the ‘anthropology of public policy [. . .] devoted to research into policy issues and processes and the critical analysis of those processes’ (Wedel et al. 2005, p. 31).

Thus the difference between ethnography *for* and ethnography *of* public policy accompanies the opposition between ‘applied’ and ‘critical’ research in current debates on the relationship between policy and ethnography. This point is clear when it comes to the question of the utility of ethnographic research regarding policy issues. If the notion that ethnography is useful in this domain is widely shared, ethnographers have different views regarding whom they should be useful for and how. A first type of response to these questions is formulated in terms of efficiency in policy making by the promoters of new forms of applied anthropology from the 1970s onwards. Before political or ethical preferences, there are professional reasons for this orientation, such as the defense of anthropology as a (useful) discipline. This is clear when anthropologists urge their colleagues to turn to applied research for policy, redefining anthropology as a policy science (Kimball 1978), and positing policy at the center of the renewal of the discipline. As Erve Chambers expressed it, ‘the idea of policy is as central to the development of applied anthropology as the concept of culture has been to the anthropological profession as a whole’ (Chambers 1985, pp. 37–38, quoted in Shore and Wright 1997, p. 7). In turn, the purpose of anthropology as a policy science is ‘to provide information to decision makers in support of the rational formulation, implementation, and evaluation of policy’ (see also van Willigen and DeWalt 1985; Fetterman 1993; van Willigen 2002, p. 161). Belshaw has defined this approach to policy as ‘social engineering’, or one that does not challenge the rational frameworks of the idea of policy making (Belshaw 1976).

In this approach, anthropologists would contribute to public policy by isolating 'variables that can be manipulated by public policy and with the identification of the point at which the cost of changing inputs outweighs the expected benefits' (Sanday 1976, p. xvii, quoted in Wedel et al. 2005, p. 48). Government agencies share similar orientations when they call for ethnography to fill the gaps in information about target populations of their programs (United States General Accounting Office 2003).

Social engineering is not, however, the only response. Reflecting on applied anthropology, Shelton Davis and Robert Matthews ask: for whose benefit is anthropology being applied? Instead of providing data for decisions made by those in power, these authors propose to focus applied anthropology on the structures of power, in the interest of the powerless, and to communicate the results of their work to citizens (Shelton and Matthews 1999). In a similar way, Katherine Newman agrees on the usefulness of ethnography, but refuses to reduce usefulness to policy advisory (Becker et al. 2004, p. 271). In this perspective, the usefulness of ethnography comes from its contribution to general knowledge and to the public debate, and not only because its results provide information to help policy makers in doing their job. It is 'by bringing ethnographic data into the resources of public reasoning' that ethnographers may 'hope to shift the character of the policy debate' (Stack 1997, p. 191). Here, utility has more to do with social sciences as 'public' disciplines (Borofsky 1999; Burawoy 2005). This concern moves closer to what I call critical policy ethnography.

WHAT DO POLICY ETHNOGRAPHERS OBSERVE?

We now come to the problem of what policy ethnographers concretely observe and how they circumscribe their field of research. Even though the two can overlap, here, the question is not so much 'which side are policy ethnographers on' as 'which side are they looking at'. I will address this issue by contrasting people-centered approaches with policy-centered approaches, showing how both of them can contribute to critical analysis.

People-centered Policy Ethnography

The most common ethnographic method is the in-depth monograph, describing the living conditions, social organization, distinctive practices, values and beliefs of a social group. Ethnographers generally focus on the dominated classes, say, from the colonized peoples to the urban poor. Such a people-centered approach can prove an interesting, even if indirect, way

to do policy ethnography, oriented towards how people experience policies they are subjected to, and how these policies impact their lives. Again, this approach raises the questions of whom ethnography is intended for.

Somewhat provocatively, Herbert Gans states that 'ethnography has always studied the underdog and the victim, partly because of how sociologists think and partly because that is funded by government and the foundations' (Gans, in Becker et al. 2004, p.265). Beyond the (crucial) issue of funding, studying the underdog is what gives ethnography its social value and can make it useful (Gans, in Becker et al. 2004, pp.265, 271). While promoting this idea of 'usefulness' does not equal reducing ethnography to 'social engineering', it amounts to defining policy makers as the addressees of relevant ethnographic knowledge, ethnographers advising or trying to influence them in order to make better policies.

In this perspective, ethnography focusing on people proves helpful to demonstrate and criticize what policies do to them. It can provide 'an important corrective to decontextualized and universalizing approaches to public policy analysis' which 'too often is narrated in a top-down discourse that fails to account for how people affected by policy experience it' (Schram et al. 2013, p.255). Field research on welfare clients has revealed the often tragic consequences of welfare reforms in the United States, and shed light on the resulting deterioration of living standards, as in the case of isolated mothers (Edin and Lein 1997; Hays 2002). Even if they do not define their research as policy ethnography, American ethnographers specialized in poverty provide such a 'corrective' when they include welfare reform and its effects on people depending on welfare benefits in their research scope (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003). This is a major contribution to the debate on evaluating the social impacts of public policy (Lichter and Jayakody 2002), which possibly helps 'to create social policies that respect the variety of human experiences' (Stack 1997, p. 191).

In addition to providing a critical view on policies by assessing their actual consequences on human lives, people-centered ethnography goes a step further towards a critical approach when the claim of significance for this respectful account of human lives 'rests most firmly on the juxtaposition between the social realities documented by the ethnographer and those held to be true by people in power' (Katz 2004, p.287). The critical power of ethnography then consists in the accuracy of its empirical descriptions, which can be used to contradict representations of the social world based on dominant socio-political beliefs and ideologies. This is what Biehl and Petryna do when they envision global health problems from the point of view of the people who face them: 'these peopled accounts – stories that are so often hidden from view, obscured by more

abstract and bureaucratic considerations of public policy – are the very fabric of alternative social theorizing’ (Biehl and Petryna 2013, p. 2).

When they speak of people in relation to policy, ethnographers either do it for them, on their behalf, or alongside them. Exploring these various postures is a new occasion to address the question of how policy ethnography can be critical. Jim Thomas contrasts ‘conventional ethnographers’, who, according to him, speak *for* their subjects, with ‘critical ethnographers’, whom he describes as speaking *on behalf* of their subjects, as a means for empowering them (Thomas 1993). This is an important opposition, but, in my view, the main distinction is that between the posture of autonomy, in which ethnographers’ legitimacy rests on their ability to account for people’s lives in their own words, and the posture of populist activism, in which legitimacy rests in the ethnographer’s involvement as a political spokesperson. An ethnographer who adopts the first posture can, as we have seen, build on this basis alternative views and theories, or can ‘communicate for the victims in opposition to the perpetrators’, as Herbert Gans names the disenfranchised and those responsible for their disenfranchisement (Gans, in Becker et al. 2004, p. 265). Conversely, ethnographers who adopt the second posture are not necessarily ‘critical’, in the sense that their advocacy work may simply reflect commonsense views instead of challenging them.

A third posture deserves special attention. Instead of contrasting ethnographers detached from their subjects with those who depend on them, some authors have experienced and called for exchanges between researchers and the people they study or activists who mobilize for them, in an advocacy orientation which, in turn, serves scientific purposes. According to Schensul, a strong link between researchers and the activities of the group they study ‘would reduce the false dichotomy between applied and basic research’, to the benefit of both research and the concrete impact of its results (Schensul 1980, p. 312). Schram et al. recently followed a similar orientation, which they call Participatory Action-Research.¹ In PAR, researchers collaborate with the people being studied ‘to help frame, constitute, and interpret the facts that the research produces’. In addition to being ‘critical’ in the sense of being politically engaged in democratizing the policy process by including ‘the voices of those traditionally left out of that process’, PAR offers the accountability which can provide better scientific results ‘since researchers open their work to be checked against the understandings of the people on the bottom of the policy process’ (Schram et al. 2013, p. 258). Here the focus on people subjected to policy and the study of policy processes can be complementary.

Ethnographing Policy Makers and Policy Processes

By diverting the ethnographers' attention from the study of public policy itself, priority given to 'those at the bottom' is conducive to overlooking the elite, institutions and the political and bureaucratic mechanisms impacting the lives of ordinary people. As a consequence, people-centered ethnography runs the risk of limiting itself to a partial view of power and domination relationships, therefore losing the political implications that consist in giving the knowledge about domination processes to the dominated groups in order to help them cope with domination. In my view, policy ethnography needs to fully account for these processes in order to be really 'critical', in both the scientific and the political senses of the term.

Providing a comprehensive view of domination by including the dominants in the analysis echoes the call to 'study up' formulated by Laura Nader some four decades ago. Nader put an emphasis on the political aspect (empowering the powerless thanks to a better knowledge of power relationships), urging fieldworkers to 'study powerful institutions and bureaucratic organizations [. . .], for such institutions and their network systems affect our lives' and since 'most members of complex societies [. . .] do not know enough about, nor do they know how to cope with, the people, institutions, and organizations which most affect their lives' (Nader 1972, pp.292–293). Schensul argues more specifically that 'any good ethnography of a subordinated group must study, from the people's perspective, institutions which contribute to their subordination' (Schensul 1980, p.311).

Studying policies from the people's perspective is, however, only one possibility among others for conducting policy ethnography critically. A wide range of studies using in-depth qualitative research methods have opted for observation at the level of officials, bureaucrats or professionals working in institutions. Studies focused on 'entities charged with putting policy into practice' (Yanow et al. 2012, pp.340–341) give a critical view on policy, be it implicitly, shedding light on bureaucratic arbitrariness, power relationships or on the undesirable impacts policy organizations can have on the situations and populations they are supposed to take care of. They have powerfully accounted for their practices within institutional units such as mental hospitals (Goffman 1961), police squads (Fassin 2013) or bureaucracies dealing with the poor (Gupta 2012).

Since the implementation of public policies involves organizations, organization studies contribute more explicitly to policy ethnography. Some of the most classic analyses have used fieldwork methods and are therefore still major references for organization/policy ethnography even if their authors did not define themselves as ethnographers (see for

instance Blau 1955). By revealing the actual relationships, the bureaucratic routines, the dilemmas and contradictions of agents in public services, such ethnographically informed organization studies have long been contributing to the understanding of how policies are concretely made on a daily basis. Organization ethnography is at the crossroads between this qualitative fieldwork method used by organization theorists and the choice of organizations as a subject matter or as an observation unit by proper ethnographers (Yanow et al. 2012).

Ethnographers can observe policy being made concrete in organizations by focusing on various aspects. Documents are a crucial objectification of policies as well as a major aspect of bureaucratic work. Ethnographers trace their writing, circulation, interpretation and uses (Yanow 2009, p. 34). When the fieldworker can access them, meetings in organization are a fascinating occasion for direct observation, enabling researchers to look concretely at leadership issues, internal power relationships, negotiations, and, sometimes, decision making (Schwartzman 1993, p. 39).

Fieldwork research on organizations has contributed to critical policy studies by drawing on the ‘street-level bureaucracy’ (SLB) approach initiated by Lipsky, who argues that policy implementation comes down to low-ranking public employees (Lipsky 1980). He coined the phrase ‘street-level bureaucrats’ to designate those who actually make policy real through their everyday routines, decisions and discretion – such as teachers, the police, or caseworkers. The SLB approach focuses on ‘informal organizational routines that effectively constitute policy on the ground’ (Brodkin 2011, p.1199). Street-level-bureaucrats do not mechanically enforce pre-existing rules. They use discretion to decide to apply them or not, to interpret them and to orient their application. In that sense, street-level bureaucrats are also decision makers who are part of the policy community. This approach has obvious affinities with policy ethnography since it views policies from the field and rests on long and detailed mainly qualitative observations. SLB theory supports critical approaches to public policy, since it contradicts the official, hierarchical and rational presentation of policy programs by governments while challenging the common top-down approaches of policy analysis. The approach reveals the complex mechanisms of actual policy making and its frequently poor democratic control.

Although diverse, street-level bureaucrats have in common their direct interaction with the public of public policy, pupils and their parents, delinquents and victims, or welfare clients. Observation of these interactions is therefore central in the SLB approach, and connects it with ethnographic methods – what I propose, for instance, in my work on encounters between bureaucrats and their clients at the desks of welfare

agencies (Dubois 2010). My ethnographic approach reveals the asymmetric structure of these interactions, and the way they sometimes add bureaucratic alienation to the socio-economic domination of the poor. It also shows the various uses of these encounters by clients, including their resistance strategies, and the way these uses can in turn impact the routines of welfare bureaucracy.

Limiting the ethnography of policy making to the ethnography of organizations, generally at the bottom of bureaucratic hierarchy, would, however, be misleading. First, policy ethnographers can and should also observe the top level of policy making, since, from an ethnographic perspective, 'what happens in the executive boardroom, the cabinet meeting, or the shareholders' annual general meeting is no less important than that which occurs at the level of the factory floor or locality' (Wedel et al. 2005, p.34; Yanow 2009, p. 34). This is illustrated by Rhodes's observation of British ministers and permanent secretaries (Rhodes 2011). Observing the daily practices and beliefs of government elites and elected officials usefully contributes to the ethnography of policy making, as research at the national, local and European level has shown (on the European Parliament, see Abélès 1993; Rhodes et al. 2007).

Second, policy ethnography can comprehensively include various levels of policy making, incorporating 'the full realm of processes and relations involved in the production of policy' (Wedel et al. 2005, p.34). This is what Belorgey did in his multi-situated ethnography of public hospital reform in France. He was a participant observer of the production of expert knowledge in an audit agency which defined 'quality norms' and managerial indicators. For several months, he later conducted local ethnographies of hospitals, scrutinized the role of intermediate levels in the appropriation and in the implementation of reforms, and eventually analyzed their impact on clients in an emergency unit (Belorgey 2012). This example shows that taking various levels into account is not just about juxtaposing them, but is a matter of providing a comprehensive view of policy processes.

What we call 'the field' is, thus, no longer defined by an organization or by a group of actors, or even by a set of organizations and groups, but by the policy process itself which includes various levels and locations – 'from legislative chambers to legislators' offices, from the latter to implementers' offices, from there to the on-site locations where street-level bureaucrats meet "clients," and beyond' (Yanow 2009, p.34). In his study of local governance, van Hulst crossed the institutional borders in order to account for the experience of the various categories of people involved in local governance (van Hulst 2008). To a certain extent, we may think of a de-localized policy ethnography, in which the object delimits the field,

not the other way around. Feldman gives an example for this ‘non-local ethnography’. Located in an office concerned with EU migration management policy, he did not aim to study day-to-day organizational culture and practice, but at following the processes by which four policy domains (security, development, employment and human rights) are brought into alignment through various intergovernmental meetings (Feldman 2011).

HOW CAN POLICY ETHNOGRAPHY BE ‘CRITICAL’?

Up to now, I have examined how ethnographic fieldwork can contribute to critical policy studies. To do so, I explored a series of oppositions regarding the orientations of ethnography, the public it is intended for, and the objects of ethnographic study. In this concluding section, I will turn to the question of how policy ethnography can be critical, and will show how ethnography can provide a critical contribution (i.e. of decisive importance) to policy studies.

What Does ‘Critical’ Mean?

‘Critical’ is a generic term that can refer to various approaches. First, it can be used as a synonym for ‘politically engaged’, or at least politically conscious. This is what Jim Thomas proposes when he describes critical ethnography as ‘conventional ethnography with a political purpose’ (Thomas 1993, p.4). According to this notion, critical ethnographers ‘celebrate their normative and political position’ and take on ‘making value-laden judgments’ (Thomas 1993, p.4), as opposed to traditional scholars whose legitimacy rests on their claim to neutrality. This definition may appear too straightforward and narrow, as critical ethnography must not be viewed predominantly as a form of activism or partisanship to the detriment of its scientific contribution. This conception, however, draws our attention to the questioning of neutrality and to the political implications (even if indirect or implicit) at work in critical approaches in a broader sense. Second, the term ‘critical’ refers to non-positivist, interpretive and constructionist methodologies based on the idea that social reality is plural, and interpretively co-constructed (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, p.4). I would add to this defining feature of critical research, however, that the various ‘truths’ on the social world may be equally valuable from a methodological or ethical point of view, but that they are not equivalent in the real world. Some of these ‘truths’ are made more ‘true’ than others through power relationships that promote them as unquestionable truths, shared principles of visions of the social world. Third,

a critical approach could be defined by its ability to question the taken-for-grantedness of the social world as an outcome of social and symbolic domination. Policy and the state play a central part here, and ethnography proves an effective tool in revealing it. Unveiling their role in domination is what, in my view, delineates the political significance of critical policy ethnography.

Challenging Dominant Views

In various ways, ethnography provides a useful complement to the history and sociology of the construction of public problems and, more generally, to the critique of generally accepted views of the social world. This is what Katherine Newman means when she states that ‘the special mission of ethnography [. . .] lies in its capacity to redefine the social landscape, to explode received categories [. . .] to develop different ways of thinking about a social universe’ too often taken for granted (Becker et al. 2004, p.271). The special advantage of ethnography, Newman explains, is to explore the subjective experiences of people and, therefore, to expose views on the problems they experience that may differ from the accepted, official view of these problems. In other words, a critical use of ethnography in policy studies consists in not only understanding, but also accounting for subjective points of view – seeing like a citizen or a client of the state, or like any person exposed to its policy – as a means of deconstructing the official vision – what James Scott terms as ‘seeing like a state’ (Scott 1988). This change of perspective also enables us to identify issues that do not generally attract attention because they ‘[contradict] cultural expectations about what kind of society we live in’ (Becker et al. 2004, p.269).

Doing critical policy ethnography can also consist of juxtaposing the observation of the ethnographers to the beliefs of policy makers (Katz 2004). We can think here of how welfare ethnography, which gives an insight into the real situations of the poor, allowed for a break with government and media rhetoric. As Morgen and Maskovsky explain: ‘Ethnographers have deconstructed the hegemonic discourse on welfare restructuring, juxtaposing dominant ideologies with the so-called realities of impoverishment’ (Morgen and Maskovsky 2003, p.325). This critique went beyond the borders of academia, and enabled scholars to participate in the public discussions about welfare. Such analyses can be viewed as critical, not only because of their contents, but also because they are the occasion for ethnographers to intervene in the public debate, insofar as they lead researchers to study questions central to contemporary societies, which have furthermore been fiercely debated. Here again, critical ethnography meets public ethnography.

In his ethnographic research on 1960s colonial and rural Algeria, Bourdieu similarly showed that the concepts of work or income that are taken for granted in modern capitalist economies can prove unfamiliar and irrelevant to traditional forms of economy (Bourdieu 1979). He demonstrated that colonial domination partly consisted of imposing these ideas in order to reform and ‘modernize’ an economy described as archaic. Bourdieu’s ethnographic approach has shown how colonial and economic domination went hand in hand with symbolic domination – in the sense of the imposition of categories of thought upon dominated social agents.

In my research, I have drawn on Bourdieu’s framework to consider the enforcement of recent welfare program changes as the imposition of categories of perception and norms of behavior portrayed as universally legitimate, on people whose socio-economic attitudes have been delegitimized and corrected. I show that economic concepts that have set the tone of welfare reforms, such as the neo-classic theory of unemployment and the ‘inactivity trap’ model, for instance, fail to account for the actual attitudes of welfare clients as they are revealed by ethnographic fieldwork. This critical ethnography further consists in showing how, no matter whether true or false, these concepts are applied to the clients, thus eventually impacting their lives (Dubois 2014a).

How Does Policy Really Work?

Deconstructing taken-for-granted and dominant visions in policy processes breaks with the positivistic paradigm of policy as a reified entity and an unanalyzed given. We can go further in this critical reasoning by exploring what policy concretely is, and how it operates, in a way that may challenge the official image policy makers promote of their programs.

Ethnography accounts for the practical accomplishments of abstractions, such as ‘the state’ and ‘policy’. Here we can follow Bourdieu when he focuses on ‘state acts’ by which agents vested with the power of the state define situations, classify people, and control access to resources. It is through these acts that the state comes into being (Bourdieu 2014). By accounting for these relations and for these acts, ethnography provides a critical view of the state – i.e. a view of what the state concretely consists of, as opposed to an abstract and ideal image. The same reasoning can be applied to policy. Studying it as a concrete set of relationships and practices, critical ethnography can debunk the ideal, abstract vision produced by official discourse and mainstream rationalistic theory, particularly when dealing with problem solving and top-down programming. In my work on anti-welfare fraud policies, for instance, I show that control

practices aimed at ensuring ‘the right payment to the right persons’ and at identifying possible fraudsters, actually consist of a legal *bricolage* by investigators who apply ill-defined rules to complex and changing situations, thereby contradicting the appeal to legal rigor as the rationale for welfare control (Dubois 2014b). I argue that this arbitrariness is consistent with policy goals. It is a by-product of the individualization process of European welfare policies over the last decades. By making recipients ‘less comfortable’, it also serves policies aimed at making people prefer work to welfare. Conceived in this manner, the ethnographic observation of policy practices on the ground not only gives us a better understanding of the realities of public policy, it is also a powerful way of revealing the structural characteristics and current transformations of policy processes (Dubois 2009).

What Does a Policy Perform? Classification and Symbolic Power

By studying the meaning-making practices, relationships and concrete acts by which a policy comes into being, critical policy ethnography accounts for realization and performance of a policy and offers a path to escape the conventional way of viewing ‘policy implementation’ as the application of the pre-defined decisions of a program. Critical policy ethnography also accounts for what a policy realizes and performs, and avoids a restricted view of policy effects in terms of ‘evaluation’, understood as the final step of the policy process. Combining the two questions of how a policy is performed and of what it performs enables us to provide a consistent comprehensive view of policy, which invalidates the mainstream notion of a policy as a systematic process or cycle composed of well-organized stages. Since policy commonly operates by defining the categories through which people and problems are perceived and dealt with, the analysis of classification processes is an essential part of a comprehensive critical perspective.

As a first step, critical policy ethnographers question the conventional policy categories, showing their social and political roots and, by doing so, their non-natural, non-necessary character. This follows an anthropological tradition, initiated by Durkheim and Mauss in their seminal work on primitive classifications, that Douglas built on in her work on institutional thinking (Durkheim and Mauss 1963; Douglas 1986). Dvora Yanow beautifully illustrates the possible use of this research program in critical policy studies in her book on the construction of ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in the United States (Yanow 2003).

In a second step, studying policy categories is about observing how policy makers and administrations use them and concretely apply them to people and problems. This is what Yanow does in her chapter on

'Making race-ethnicity through administrative practices' (Yanow 2003, pp. 113–180). This is also what I do in my observations of the way welfare agents relate their definition of the situations of the poor they meet to standard criteria and categories, translating the lives of their clients into the language of bureaucratic files (Dubois 2010, 2014b).

In a third step, the ethnography of classification processes identifies impacts on classified problems and people. One of the most effective ways of addressing this question is to evaluate to what extent individuals categorized by policy in turn refer to these categories to define their situation or their identity. Ian Hacking – in his work on scientific categories – has coined the phrase 'looping effect' to designate how 'invented' or constructed categories become 'real', in the sense that they create new groups – a process he terms 'making up people' (Hacking 2006).²

These three steps form a critical policy ethnography research program on categorization and classification processes: first, unveiling the construction of official categories; second, analyzing their mobilization in unequal power relationships by policy agents who process people and handle public problems; and third, identifying the impact of official categories on people who come to internalize them. This is a way for ethnographic research to contribute to critical policy studies, understood as the analysis of social and symbolic domination exerted throughout the policy processes.

CONCLUSION

Policy ethnography includes a wide range of research practices, from applied anthropology in development programs to the use of qualitative fieldwork methods by political scientists studying policy processes. This work generally stands apart from mainstream positivist policy analysis, but not always. Policy ethnography includes explicit political purposes in defense of the disenfranchised, but also embraces so-called 'neutral' practice-driven research providing 'useful knowledge' to those in power – the collaboration of anthropologists with colonial administrators being the most obvious example. Consequently, policy ethnography can neither in the epistemological nor in the political sense of the term be identified as 'critical' per se.

A critical approach needs to reflect on the social and political contexts, practices and uses of social science research. Critical policy ethnography should thus be regarded in relation to tensions between applied and basic ethnography, as well as between ethnography for policy makers and ethnography for the disenfranchised. We have seen how these oppositions could combine in complex ways with distinctions regarding the research

objects, such as between people-centered vs. policy-centered ethnography. In this context, we can recognize four defining features of critical policy ethnography: challenging mainstream positivist approaches to public policy; confronting commonsense and official views on policy; setting individual experiences and micro-observations in the broader perspective of power and inequality structures; and unveiling social, economic, symbolic and political domination processes operating in and through policy processes. When policy ethnography succeeds in reaching these four objectives, and is thus fully ‘critical’, it marks a decisive advance in policy studies.

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NOTES

1. For an example of PAR in service of a critical policy ethnography that actually produced policy change, see Marianna Chilton’s ‘Witnesses to Hunger’ project and its impact on food stamps, available at: <http://www.centerforhungerfreecomunities.org/our-projects/witnesses-hunger>.
2. Whereas Hacking mainly focuses on scientific categories, a similar approach can be adopted in the case of policy categories, by analogy, or because scientific constructions of populations and problems often inform their apprehension in policy programs.

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