

Resources on Political Ethnography for Methods Clinic #3

Compiled by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea,
with input from David Forrest and Michelle Weitzel

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Other activities

Ethnographic Methods in Political Science (Thematic group in the German Political Science Association)

ethnografie@dvpw.de

<https://politicaethnography.com/> (under construction)

CfP: Ethnography: The World Fair—A Global Online Gathering (AGOG) 25-27 August, 2021

“... we hope to have sessions running through a 24 hour period so that all can access some of the symposium without having to set their alarm clock.

If you would like to present your work..., please submit an abstract (c150 words) for a 5-minute presentation to ethnog@liv.ac.uk by **Wednesday 30th June**. Please indicate in which Time Zone you would wish to present.

“Further details will be at: www.liverpool.ac.uk/ethnography.”

Background

1. A descriptive definition from political scientist Richard F. Fenno, often regarded as the dean of political ethnography, which he called “soaking and poking,” taken from his description of his US legislative studies method:

[We] cannot understand the representative-constituency relationship until we can see the constituency through the eyes of the representative. ...When we talk with our national legislators about their constituencies, we typically talk to them in Washington and, perforce, in the Washington context. But that is a context *far removed* from the one in which their constituency relationships are created, nurtured, and changed. ...Asking constituency-related questions on Capitol Hill...could well produce a distortion of perspective. ...“[B]ack home,”...the representative may picture himself or herself as a part of the constituency—me *in* the constituency, rather than me *and* the constituency. (883, Italics added)

He characterizes the method for generating such contextualized insights as “looking over their shoulders” to “figure out...what it is they see,” “[r]ather than assume that I already know what is interesting or what questions to ask”: “The research method has been largely one of soaking and poking—or, just hanging around” (884).

Richard F. Fenno, Jr. 1977. “U.S. House Members in Their Constituencies.” *American Political Science Review* 71/3: 883-917.

2. On why we should not see ethnography as the “property” or invention of anthropology:

- Many believe that “ethnography” originated in anthropology, with sociologists undertaking “participant-observation.”
- trace that idea to 1929 split in the US of method and terrain between sociology and anthropology at the University of Chicago: soc took “participant observation” and domestic US studies, esp. cities and urban neighborhoods; anthro took “ethnography” and anything overseas, plus American Indian reservations. (UK: no such split; the terms often appear together: “participant-observer ethnography”)
- But see anthropological historian Oscar Salemink (2003: 2, 9; added emphasis):

...[C]ontrary to the now common assumption that ethnography is the descriptive (or even the field research) part of anthropology, ...professional anthropology is a fairly recent manifestation of ethnographic practice.... Missionaries, military explorers, colonial administrators, plantation owners, development workers, counterinsurgency experts, government officials, politicians, indigenous leaders—male and female—construct[ed] ethnographic images of these indigenous groups...according to their experiences and in order to suit their interests. These ethnographic representations interacted with those by professional anthropologists, who created their representations in dialogue with, sometimes in opposition to, but always against the backdrop of those non-professional ethnographic representations. ...[I]t is better to regard academic anthropology as a specific instance of ethnographic practice than the other way around.

Salemink, Oscar. 2003. Ethnography, anthropology and colonial discourse. *The Ethnography of Vietnam's Central Highlanders*, 1-39. London: RoutledgeCurzon.

Selected political science sources: Methodological

Note 1: Ethnographies can be realist-objectivist or interpretive, depending on the ontological and epistemological presuppositions adopted by the researcher.

Note 2: Ethnographers often begin with descriptive statistics or graphics relevant to their field settings (e.g., #s of people, #s of organizations/agencies and/or departments, sizes of their staff; sizes of neighborhoods, # of residents; demographic data, such as sex, ages, race-ethnic backgrounds, religions, ...; organizational charts, maps, ...)

Cheesman, Nick. 2018. “[Rule-of-Law Ethnography](#).” *Annual Review of Law and Social Science* 14: 167-84.

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2015. Five stories of accidental ethnography: Turning unplanned moments in the field into data. *Qualitative Research* 15/4: 525-39.

Hayward, Clarissa Rile. 2000. *De-Facing Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Herzog, Lisa and Zacka, Bernardo. 2019. “Fieldwork in Political Theory: Five Arguments for an Ethnographic Sensibility.” *British Journal of Political Science* 49/2: 763-84.

Longo, Matthew and Bernardo Zacka. 2019. “Political Theory in an Ethnographic Key.” *American Political Science Review* 113/4: 1066–1070.

Lynch, Cecelia. 2008. Reflexivity in research on civil society: Constructivist perspectives. *International Studies Review* 10: 708–21.

Pachirat, Timothy. 2009. "Shouts and Murmurs: The Ethnographer's Potion." *Qualitative and Multi-Method Research* 7/2: 41-44.
www.maxwell.syr.edu/uploadedFiles/moynihan/cqrm/Newsletter7.2.pdf

Pachirat, Timothy. 2018. *Among Wolves: Ethnography and the Immersive Study of Power*. New York: Routledge.

Schatz, Edward, ed. 2009. *Political Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine and Majic, Samantha, eds. 2017. Symposium: "Ethnography and Participant Observation." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 50/1: 97–102.

Wilkinson, Cai. 2012. "Ethnographic Methods." In *Critical Approaches to Security: An Introduction to Theory and Methods*, ed. Laura J. Shepherd. London: Routledge.

Selected sources on field research with special attention to sense data [participant listening]

Al-Masri, Muzna. 2017. "Sensory Reverberations: Rethinking the temporal and the experiential boundaries of war ethnography." *Contemporary Levant* 2, 1: 37-48.

Weitzel, Michelle D. 2020. "Common Sense Politics: Religion and Belonging in French Public Space." *French Politics* 18: 380-404.

Selected political science sources: Ethics

Fujii, Lee Ann. 2012. Research ethics 101: Dilemmas and responsibilities. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45/4: 717-23.

Knott, Eleanor. 2019. Beyond the Field: Ethics after Fieldwork in Politically Dynamic Contexts. *Perspectives on Politics* 17/1: 140-53. doi:10.1017/S1537592718002116

Wood, Elisabeth Jean. 2006. The ethical challenges of field research in conflict zones. *Qualitative Sociology* 29: 373-86.

Selected political science sources: Examples of use, x subfield

American politics

Cramer, Katherine J. 2016. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Curry, James M. 2015. *Legislating in the Dark: Information and Power in the House of Representatives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fenno, Richard. 1978. *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. New York: Harper Collins.

Forrest, David. 2019. "Legitimacy without Mobilization? How Social Justice Organizations

Defend their Democratic Credentials.” *Qualitative Sociology* 42: 71–92.

comparative politics

Behl, Natasha. 2019. *Gendered Citizenship: Understanding Gendered Violence in Democratic India*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Parkinson, Sarah E. 2013. “Organizing Rebellion: Rethinking High-Risk Mobilization and Social Networks in War.” *American Political Science Review* 107/3: 418-32.

Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Shehata, Samer. 2010. *Shop Floor Culture and Politics in Egypt*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Shesterinina, Anastasia. 2021. *Mobilizing in Uncertainty: Collective Identities and War in Abkhazia*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Smith, Nicholas Rush. 2019. *Contradictions of Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

IR

Cohn, Carol. 1987. “Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals.” *Signs* 12/4: 687–718.

Cohn, Carol. 2006. “Motives and methods: Using multi-sited ethnography to study US national security discourses.” In Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True, eds., *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, 91–107. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kurowska, Xymena. 2014. “Practicality by Judgement: Transnational Interpreters of Local Ownership in the Polish-Ukrainian Border Reform Encounter.” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 17: 545–65.

Nair, Deepak. 2021. “Hanging Out” while Studying “Up”: Doing Ethnographic Fieldwork in International Relations. *International Studies Review*, online first: 1–28. doi: 10.1093/isr/viab001

Stepputat, Finn. 2012. “Knowledge Production in the Security–Development Nexus.” *Security Dialogue* 43/5: 439–455.

political theory

Longo, Matthew. 2018. *The Politics of Borders: Sovereignty, Security, and the Citizen after 9/11*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pachirat, Timothy. 2011. *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Zacka, Bernardo. 2017. *When the state meets the street: Public service and moral agency*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

public administration

Among the classics in this field are several participant-observer case studies:

Blau, Peter. 1963 [1953]. *The Dynamics of Bureaucracy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Crozier, Michel. 1964. *The Bureaucratic Phenomenon*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kaufman, Herbert. 2006 [1960]. *The Forest Ranger: A Study in Administrative Behavior*. Washington, DC: Resources for the Future.

Dubois, Vincent. 2010. *The Bureaucrat and the Poor: Encounters in French Welfare Offices*. Aldershot: Ashgate. orig. *La Vie au Guichet: Relation Administrative et Traitement de la Misère*. Paris: Économica, coll. Études politiques, 3rd ed., 2010 [1999].

public law

Cramer, Renee Ann. 2021. *Birthing a Movement: Midwives, Law, and the Politics of Reproductive*. Stanford University Press.

public policy

Majic, Samantha. 2014. *Sex Work Politics: From Protest to Service Provision*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Soss, Joe. 2000. *Unwanted Claims: The Politics of Participation in the U.S. Welfare System*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Yanow, Dvora. 1996. *How Does a Policy Mean?* Georgetown University Press.

Also, the American Association of Anthropology has an anthropology of policy section, and Stanford University Press has a book series: <https://www.anthofpolicy.org/stanford-university-press-series>

References mentioned during the session and not included in the chat:

Blee, Kathleen M. 2002. *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press. [in connection with Sybille's and Vishnu's questions]

Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine. 2014. Judging quality: Evaluative criteria and epistemic communities. In Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds., 2nd edition, *Interpretation and Method*, 120-46. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe. [from the discussion on Sara's question]

Wilkinson, Cai. 2014. Not Just Finding What You (Thought You) Were Looking For: Reflections on Fieldwork Data and Theory. In Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, eds., 2nd edition, *Interpretation and Method*, 387-405. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe. [from the discussion of the relationship between theory and writing, sparked by Sara's question; see also the chapter by Zirakzadeh, listed in the chat transcript]

Related to Sara's question concerning how one deals with all of the evidence and the range of

sources—a question that a few others asked, too, in different ways: ethnographers and other researchers drawing on mounds of observational, interview, and/or archival notes often feel swamped by it all. A common response is self-doubt, a “crisis of confidence.” This article helps us (a) recognize how common doubt is—they are not alone, and (b) that it can be generative rather than destructive:

Locke, Karen, Golden-Biddle, Karen, and Feldman, Martha. 2008. Making doubt generative: Rethinking the role of doubt in the research process. *Organization Science* 19/6: 907-18. DOI: [10.1287/orsc.1080.0398](https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1080.0398).

Doubt, like puzzlement, can be a diagnostic: why am I puzzled? What/why am I doubting? Articulating these emotional responses can help in treating them analytically – which itself can help deal with panic mode/data paralysis.

Some additional thoughts on writing

It can be useful to think of writing as part of the research and learning process, rather than “just” as a recording (or a ‘writing up’) of fieldnotes. To quote E.M. Forster (1927), *Aspects of the Novel*: “How do I know what I think until I hear what I have to say.” (At least, that how Dvora learned the aphorism; for more, see <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2019/12/11/know-say/#:~:text=In%201990%20Charles%20Handy%20who,saying%20to%20an%20anonymous%20Irishman%3A&text=I%20am%20a%20great%20believer,I%20hear%20what%20I%20say%3F%E2%80%9D>)

See also, for example:

Curzan, Anne. 2017. Why I don’t ask students to write the thesis statement first. *Lingua Franca Blogs*, *Chronicle of Higher Education* (July 25). www.chronicle.com/blogs/linguafranca/2017/07/25/why-i-dont-ask-students-to-write-the-thesis-statement-first/?cid=at&utm_medium=medi%25E2%2580%25A6&utm_source=at

From that perspective, and from the perspective that we are writing about what we learned in the field, it seems to us that the “problem” of drawing on a variety of methods sources melts away. That is, the precise source/s of what you learned is a less relevant organizing point of the manuscript than the communication of what it is that you’ve learned (which is just another way of putting the point that David spoke to).

Related to this: Laurel Richardson has written about seeing writing as a method

Richardson, Laurel. 1994. Writing: A method of inquiry. In *Handbook of qualitative research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 516–29. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- or the version in the 2nd edition, 2000;
- or in the 3rd ed.: Richardson, Laurel and St. Pierre, Elizabeth Adams. 2005. Writing: A method of inquiry. In Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The Sage handbook of qualitative research*, 3rd ed., 959-78. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Here are a couple of chapters Peri and Dvora have written about writing as method, adding the reader as the 3rd interpreter in field research (think, e.g., of the reviewer of your ms.):

Yanow, Dvora. 2009. Dear author, dear reader: The third hermeneutic in writing and reviewing ethnography. In Edward Schatz, ed., *Political ethnography: What immersion brings to the study of power*, 275-302. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Schwartz-Shea, Peregrine and Yanow, Dvora. 2009. Reading and writing as method: In search of trustworthy texts. In Sierk Ybema, Dvora Yanow, Harry Wels, Frans Kamsteeg, eds., *Organizational ethnography: Studying the complexities of everyday life*, 56-82. London: Sage.

Final comment

Lastly, there was one topic, raised in one way or another by several people in the initial set of questions, to which we wanted to offer a few thoughts before breaking, but we ran out of time:

How can we make ethnography less marginal within political science?

1. Make its history and presence more visible

- Organize conference panels, workshops, seminars, courses, sessions (like today's clinic)
- Publish books, articles, chapters, symposia

2. Articulate its contributions!

- Political ethnography is not something new! Early roots – Fenno, 1970s
- Ethnography is used across the subfields of political science from IR to Political Theory
- Notes its comparative advantages vis-à-vis other methods:
 - Observation *in situ* of ongoing events and processes and actor conduct
 - Enables comparison of what people say they do (“espoused values”) with their conduct (“enacted values”)
 - E.g., compare policy goals with implementation
- Nominate ethnographic work for political science awards