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The research traineeship: Conducting
participant observation in state organisations



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Abstract

State organisations have long been regarded as an impossible field for ethnographers. It was difficult to get access and preconceived notions of the state kept critical scholars from taking a closer and empathic look at its workings. As anthropologists take a reinvigorated interest in state organisations, new questions emerge as to how to set up participant observation in state organisations and what opportunities and challenges arise for the ethnographer in their relationships with state officials. Drawing on my own fieldwork notes from participant observations conducted in municipal organisations in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Leeds in 2009-10, this paper introduces the method of the 'research traineeship'. The research traineeship entails being open to playing multiple roles as an ethnographer, and allows for new forms of relationships emerge during the fieldwork. Research traineeships involve analyzing the evolving relationships and moments of collaboration between researcher and researched and using this analysis as an important element of the epistemic knowledge production. While collaboration with research subjects who share similar intellectual or analytical capabilities is often depicted in idealised ways, I will focus in this paper on some of the opportunities and challenges of collaboration in state organisations.

Keywords: Fieldwork, participant observation, collaboration, anthropology of the state, organizational anthropology

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Introduction

State organisations have long been regarded as an impossible field for ethnographers. It was difficult to get access and preconceived notions of the state kept critical scholars from taking a closer and empathic look at its workings. As anthropologists take a reinvigorated interest in state organisations, new questions emerge as to how to set up participant observation in state organisations and what opportunities and challenges arise for the ethnographer in their relationships with state officials.

Drawing on my own fieldwork notes from participant observations conducted in municipal organisations in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Leeds in 2009-10, this paper introduces the method of the 'research traineeship'. The research traineeship entails being open to playing multiple roles as an ethnographer, and allows for new forms of relationships emerge during the fieldwork. Research traineeships involve analysing the evolving relationships and moments of collaboration between researcher and researched and using this analysis as an important element of the epistemic knowledge production. While collaboration with research subjects who share similar intellectual or analytical capabilities is often depicted in idealised ways, I will focus in this paper on some of the opportunities and challenges of collaboration in state organisations.

Siting ethnography in state organizations

Organisations have been studied ethnographically for many years. A foundational ethnographic study of organisations was the so-called Hawthorne Study. Being carried out in the Western Electric Hawthorne Plant in Chicago from 1927 to 1932, it explored the gap between the formal organisational management principles at the time and workers' informal system of social organisation (Wright 2002, 5). The study reflected some of the concerns of mainstream anthropology. It conceived of organisations as an important site of cultural production, where systems of meaning are created and where individuals position themselves with specific social roles and positions (ibid. Garsten and Nyqvist 2013, 5). In the 1950s and 1960s, a sub-field of 'organisation studies' developed within social anthropology, which later became a discipline on its own (Bate 1997, 1148). While organisation studies tend to take organisational boundaries for granted, anthropologists typically question these very

boundaries (Garsten and Nyqvist 2013, 12). In this article I draw on both the ethnographic literature on organisations and the social anthropological literature on organisations.

Working ethnographically in organisations has much to offer. Ethnography allows accessing the mundane everyday knowledge and provides a sense of the polyphony in and a rich description of the field (ibid. 1166), and it is meant to offer ‘a new sort of truth’ (ibid. 1168). It allows communicating an impression of truly having ‘been there’ and the intense familiarity with the subjects and their ways of knowing (ibid. 1163). Ethnography implies being intensely involved in the field (Watson 2011, 206) over a period of time (ibid. 207). It is self-immersed, longitudinal, and reflexive (Bate 1997, 1151). Some scholars refer to ethnography as a social practice concerned with the study and representation of culture – with a distinctly small c these days. (Van Maanen 2011, 219). It includes doing fieldwork, in which one tries to ‘penetrate another form of life’ and ‘grasp the native’s point of view’, involving a variety of methods, such as participant observation, interviews, attending meetings, document research, etc. (ibid. 1152). The advantage of not only conducting interviews but also participant observation is evident, as Watson (2011, 211) argued. Participant observation is a research practice in which the investigator joins the group, community or organisations being studied, as either a full or partial member, and participates in and observes activities, asks questions, takes part in conversations, and reads relevant documents (ibid. 206). It is about getting close to human action and social interactions in order to allow the making of more general statements about organisations and identities (ibid. 205). Overall, this delineation very much reflects mainstream definitions of the method, which also informed my own study. I conducted participant observation of local diversity officers’ practices of implementing so-called ‘diversity policies’. I chose to conduct ethnographic research because I see it as having an advantage over formal interviews with state officials and content analyses of official policy documents, which we find in much of the research conducted in political science and in the immigrant incorporation literature. By providing in-depth insights into organisational structures and practices and comparing them with official policy statements (Schiller 2017), I could reveal the gaps between what is being said and what is being done. As Zahle (2012, 51) pointed out, practical knowledge is mostly tacit and if asked about, cannot simply be stated. By only conducting interviews, one misses the more tacit knowledge and practices of local officials and the meanings that local policies acquire when they are being implemented (Schiller 2015). There is a substantial difference in quality between just meeting with officers once for an

interview and participating and engaging with their everyday work and the structures within which they are positioned over an extended period of time. Indeed, some of the most fascinating insights I collected during my fieldwork stemmed from informal conversations and from observing the interaction of team members. For instance, taking the elevator to a meeting with some team members or chatting after lunch in the canteen provided some of the moments where I collected important information that allowed me to sort and interpret some of my impressions and insights. I could use these observations to analyse these tacit practices of making sense of a policy.

The development of the anthropological study of organisations has also been paralleled by a reconsideration of classic conceptions of ethnography. As some have argued, the context of a globalised and interconnected world, and of professionalised, expertise-based groups provide a different context that calls for new ethnographic practices. Laura Nader (1974) for instance suggested to ‘study up’ in order to engage with people in power, with resources and privileges. Nader’s approach was targeted at understanding social stratification and the linkages between different layers of society. The method of ‘studying sideways’ was suggested by Ulf Hannerz (1992) to bring into view the peers of anthropologists, who work in related areas of expertise, and to discuss their professional networks. ‘Shadowing’ can then be a useful anthropological technique, as it allows to closely follow individuals as they move within and outside of their organisations (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992). And Shore & Wright’s (1997) proposition of ‘studying through’ is aimed at following policy processes in order to analyse the ways in which problems are defined and policies decided upon. The importance of reflexivity has been emphasized as an increasing number of anthropologists elected to not study only exotic others of faraway lands, but turn to oddly familiar domestic others who might be cohorts at work, our neighbours, etc. (Hirsch and Gellner 2002, 3). Reflexivity is important as

all researchers are to some degree connected to, or part of, the object of their research. And, depending on the extent and nature of these connections, questions arise as to whether the results of research are artefacts of the researcher’s presence and inevitable influence on the research process. (ibid.3).

Reflexivity was defined as the ‘need of self-searching as researcher, of reflecting one’s own position’ (Gjessing 1968, 400). This process would require the researcher to continuously think about the impact that one has on the field and the individuals with which one interacts when in the field, and how this informs their interpretations of reality. It means ‘turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference’ and it ‘overlaps

with concerns about subjectivity and objectivity in social research' (Aull Davies 2008, 4). The position of the ethnographer is 'ambiguous': 'on the one hand one tries to empathetically get at the points of view of numerous people – and at the same time one attempts to put these together into some kind of overall pattern' (Hirsch and Gellner 2002, 9). It is this ambiguity that a reflexive ethnographer grapples with. Some scholars also have theorized the different kinds of relationships with 'research subjects', whose practices of epistemic knowledge production are similar to those of the ethnographer (Holmes and Marcus 2008). Holmes and Marcus called such ethnographies 'para-ethnography'. In their view, these ethnographies entail an element of collaboration. This idea of collaboration was recently further developed by Estalella & Sánchez-Criado, who suggest that ethnography can be a collaborative endeavour of ethnographers and research subjects who together define the problems and outcomes of the research (Estalella and Sanchez-Criado 2015). Experimental collaboration is defined as 'a set of epistemic practices and forms of social engagement that deploy conditions for a collaboratively experimental form of knowledge production in the field' (Estalella and Sanchez-Criado 2015, 1). It aims to refine ethnography in two ways: 'a) from a merely observational to an experimental epistemic practice and b) from individualistic or engaged conceptions of research to the collective exploration of problems unknown' (Estalella and Sanchez-Criado 2015, 11).

Within ethnographic accounts of organisations, state organisations have long received scant attention. Only recently, have a small number of studies focussed on Western political organisations and processes as a field site for anthropological research (Shore and Wright 1997, Abeles 2005, Abeles 2007, Dubois 2010). In my own study, I investigated whether the ideas reflected in diversity officers' practices in three European cities reflect the purported shift of multiculturalism, a discourse that was quite dominant in the European political and public sphere in the first decade of the Millennium. I was interested in how this new concept of diversity became appropriated in local state organisations and how the notion of diversity was picked up and negotiated within teams of diversity officers in European cities.

In this paper, I assess the use of ethnography and the ways in which the concept of studying sideways and of experimental collaboration became relevant in my study. I will particularly focus on some of the moments when it was unclear what my position was in relation to the research participants and whether I was observing or collaborating. I will argue that defining my role as a 'research trainee' allowed some openness with regards to the directionality and character of my relationships with local officials and entailed an interactive practice of defining what role I could play

in these organisations. Before I get into analysing some of the dynamics at play in my field, the following paragraph will introduce the ways in which I set up so-called research traineeships and which activities were entailed.

The research traineeship

Given the rather closed character of bureaucratic organisations, my first challenge was to get access as a researcher to local diversity units. Before starting the research, I had built up some links with international city networks (by way of a traineeship, participation in a network conference and network meetings, and interviews with the network managers) in each city. I then established personal contact with one official by way of an interview or an informal chat at a network meeting. At the end of this conversation, I inquired about the possibility of a research stay within the unit. Once the general possibility of such a research stay had been discussed, I submitted a written research proposal to the head of unit, including the length of my stay (4-8 weeks in each city, the research took place in 2010-2011), a short outline of my broad research interests and the purpose of the stay. The proposal announced my intended participation in the everyday work of the diversity unit, the carrying out of interviews with different team members, and the idea of accompanying them to meetings and other activities. We also agreed on the availability of one of the team members as a central intermediary with whom I had a scheduled meeting once a week (even though we then often met more often and more informally). In two of the cities, this was the officer I had initially interviewed, and with whom I had already established rapport. These weekly regular meetings turned out to be important moments of reflection on my observations, and allowed me to collect additional explanations and to ask for additional contacts within the organisation.

When discussing my possible research stay, one of my informants referred to it as ‘a sort of traineeship, but for doing research’. This is how the notion of research traineeship emerged. Framing my stay as a ‘kind of’ traineeship made it intelligible to the officials who needed to approve my stay. It allowed them to translate my presence into something which was not as unfamiliar an activity to the organisation as ‘doing research’. Giving my stay a label that made sense to the officials was important, and the addition of the notion of ‘research’ made it clear that my purpose was first and foremost that of conducting research.

A central element of the research traineeship was my offer to carry out a small project ‘in return’. I had mentioned this offer in the very first interview and asked the officials to think about some ideas that we could discuss once I arrived in the field. I also had emphasized that this project should address the needs and interests of the unit at the time. In the case of Antwerp, I carried out some research on how the diversity unit was perceived by other central units of the municipal organisation, which informed the reorientation of the unit’s work focus. This meant that I could interview managers at different levels of the organisation. In Amsterdam, I assessed the perception of the merger of two units into the diversity unit among unit’s members and discussed my reflections in a general team meeting at the end of the research traineeship. In Leeds, I evaluated the perception of the municipality’s reporting requirements by municipal NGOs and service providers. My report was meant to inform the future definition of relationships and requirements between municipality and local organisations. These projects were important, as they provided me with many insights into the position of the diversity unit within the municipal departmental structure, their relationships with local NGOs and the atmosphere and internal cleavages within the teams. Once in the field, I spent 36-40 hours a week with the officers and participated in their everyday rituals and routines, such as making tea in the Leeds office, walking to the coffee machine in Amsterdam and having collective canteen lunches in Antwerp. Just as outlined in the various handbooks on the ethnographic method, I took part in meetings, all kinds of interactions in the open plan office, the representational activities of officers at public events, and the coordination activities with political representatives in my role as a participant observer (Hauser-Schäublin 2003). I also followed some of the officers whenever they invited me to come along or agreed that I could come along. I was ‘shadowing’ (Czarniawska 2007) them not in the sense of following each of their steps, but I tried to be present and take all opportunities that came up for accompanying individual officers. Given that my desk was, in all three cities, in the open office space, it was easy to be around and ‘hang out’. They allowed me to access relevant documents through the computer system and shared folders, which I collected and analysed. I furthermore conducted problem-centred, semi-standardized interviews (Mayring 2002, Flick 2009) with nearly all team members, which provided the space and time for more in-depth initial conversations. They also allowed me to get to know each

of them more individually¹. Canteen lunches and staff outings provided the space to interact outside of ‘working hours’ in a more casual atmosphere. As I got to know individual team members a bit better, I was also invited to a birthday party, to after-work dinners, and to spend some leisure time on the weekend by individual officials.

This insider position and my conduct of projects ‘in return’ for the possibility of conducting research, raise numerous questions about my position vis-à-vis my research subjects and about possibilities of collaboration in an organisational ethnography. Two crucial issues can be identified, which I want to spend some time reflecting upon in this paper. The first issue is the way in which local officials positioned themselves vis-à-vis the researcher. The second issue is the way in which my role as a research trainee was interpreted in practice and what possibilities for studying sideways and for collaboration it entailed. Analysing some of the unexpected situations and my, often ad-hoc responses to them, may be relevant not only for making sense of my own experiences but can also provide some guidance to think through other ethnographies of state organisations.

When local officials shift their roles

Research subjects who have similar capacities than researchers provide different challenges as well as opportunities for relationships of the researcher and the researched, as Holmes and Marcus (2008) as well as Hannerz (1992) have argued. Ethnographers in small scale, rural, segmentary or peasant societies often started out from the idea that they have a sort of analytical capacity that their research subjects don’t have. The assumption was that research subjects have only limited means to abstract from the role and position they have been socialized into. By contrast, modern organisations have a highly educated, internationally connected and mobile workforce; staff members have a range of professional experiences and their ability to abstract, analyse and reflect is very similar to that of the anthropologist. They have ‘a pre-existing ethnographic consciousness or curiosity’ and their intellectual practices ‘assume real or figurative interlocutors’ (Holmes and Marcus 2008, 82). In other words, the research subjects themselves have the capacity to abstract from their situation and reflect on organisational pressures. In order to capture such contemporary fieldwork

1 All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed following a mix of classic and more recent Grounded Theory approaches.

situations, Holmes and Marcus recently developed the concept of collaboration in fieldwork (Holmes and Marcus 2008, 81). From their observations, ethnographers today engage with expert contexts of knowledge production, where individuals are engaged in practices very similar to those of anthropologists. Holmes and Marcus therefore suggest to 're-learn the method from our subjects as epistemic partners' (Holmes and Marcus 2008, 84). How exactly such a collaborative epistemic practice can be created and what different kind of ethnographic output it can lead to, has, however, thus far received limited attention.

In my own research, many of the local officials interviewed had a social science degree and/or had worked in research before. They therefore often had a good idea of what ethnography was about or what kind of questions they could expect in an interview. At the same time, these officials had a clearly defined role as implementers of diversity policies and state power. This differed from my freedom as a researcher, who can analyse the state and critically assess the ways in which the state develops its power through discourses, institutions and by entertaining strategic relationships with some societal actors. In the past, anthropologists have been criticised for having become instruments of the state. In one of the more extreme cases, anthropologists worked as spies for the American government (Boas 1919). Therefore, the ethnographic research in state organisations and with bureaucrats provides a particular case for discussing the remit of experimental collaborations. If state officials and ethnographers have similar capacities, than we can expect some potential for collaboration, but we can also expect some ethical issues, as collaborating with state officials also legitimizes and endorses state power.

The role my research subjects played in my research reflects some of these issues of collaboration in state organisations. When interviewing public officers, some of them took an active part in suggesting what the aim of my research should be. For instance, one interviewee from the very outset reacted to each of my questions by first questioning what I had asked and why I would ask it. This officer would then make suggestions on how I could rephrase my question in order for her to give me, what she thought would be a more interesting answer. Telling me later on in the interview about her own initial career as a sociologist, it became clear to me that she wanted to signal her own expertise. I was unsure whether to interpret this as an attempt of collaboration or as an attempt of avoiding to answer my questions. Another officer, who was pursuing an MA degree in organisation studies next to his job, was interested in similar academic debates than I was. He repeatedly tried to

entangle me in social science discussions, and asked me whether I would be willing to discuss his MA thesis ideas. My surprise about finding myself discussing sociological theories and methodological approaches with my research subjects, reveals some of my pre-conceptions about local officials and challenged some of my ideas about the capacities of my interlocutors. We ended up exchanging some academic literature, as he sent me some academic papers on organisational change that he found particularly interesting in thinking through the municipal organisation he worked for, and I shared some references that I thought might be useful for him.

In the case of another official, he asked me at the outset of our interview how my own research would improve the situation of ethnic minorities. It became clear, that he was strongly committed to challenging ethnic discrimination and that he was, as part of his role as local official, involved in many immigrant networks. When I answered by emphasizing possible indirect policy effects of social science research, but also conceding some of its limits, he challenged whether I had set the aim of this research high enough. He tried to convince me that my research should have more direct effects on the life chances of ethnic minorities in the cities studied. His attempt to inform the aims of my ethnography and encourage me to become more activist reflected his own self-perception as an activist for immigrant communities. I later came to know about his struggle to improve the situation of ethnic minorities from his position as a local official and the limited space he had for involving immigrant minorities in local decision-making. His attempt of making me an activist researcher reflected an attempt to find allies for his own struggle.

What we can learn from these examples is that my research subjects had similar capacities, as they shared a similar level of education. However, there was an element of nostalgia (in the case of the former sociologist), of hasty adaptation (with the part-time MA student), and of imposing their agenda (with the activist officer) in their interventions, which involved a shift from their role as official to the role of researcher or activist. By aligning their own role (from official to researcher) or aligning both our roles (from official to activist and from researcher to activist), officials tried to 'participate sideways', emphasising what we have in common rather than what differentiates us. Their limited scope to use some of the capacities they had earned in previous or ongoing training as researchers in their official function motivated these role shifts. As such, there were some moments for potential collaboration, however not as research subjects and researcher, but on the basis of our commonalities as researchers or activist minds.

Interpretations of the research trainee's role

Defining my fieldwork in terms of a 'research traineeship' facilitated my access to the field, as I have discussed earlier. In this section, I now want to turn to the question of how the method of research traineeship affects the researcher's role in the field and the relationship and potential collaboration with local officers.

My self-representation as a research trainee incorporated the idea of presenting myself as an acceptable incompetent, which some handbooks on conducting ethnography suggest:

when studying an unfamiliar setting, the ethnographer is necessarily a novice. Moreover, wherever possible they must put themselves into the position of being an 'acceptable incompetent', as Lofland (1971) neatly describes it. (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, 79)

I expected that the role I would be able to take on in the field would not only depend on the ways in which I presented myself, but was also dependant on the role that I would be allowed to play. The role of the researcher is often ascribed by his or her research subjects, as Hirsch and Gellner remind us, and they often are slotted into the role of a student.

It may be however, despite the ethnographers' attempts to explain to him- or herself, he or she continues to be slotted into the easily understood category of student, a role sufficiently close to the researcher's that it can conveniently be accepted; in many cases, of course, researchers actually are students. (Hirsch and Gellner 2002, 6)

The notion of research traineeship anticipates and integrates the ascription of a student category in the research. However, since it is also a broad and vague concept, it also allowed for some flexibility and open-endedness in terms of what role I would eventually acquire. Trainees sometimes can achieve a more constructive role in an organisation, while at other times they remain mere observers and/or may even become a nuisance. Rather than predefining whether I would study up, down, or sideways, the research traineeship left it up to the interaction with the diversity officers and how they would define my role.

The offer of carrying out a project in return and to define this project together with my main intermediaries entailed the hope of some sort of potential collaboration, but it was less than clear whether and to what degree a collaborative relationship would develop. As such, I was entering the field without knowing how I would be perceived and whether I would engage in any kind of collaborative endeavour.

After the first day in the field in Leeds, I wrote the following in my fieldwork journal:

The team head², which was clearly leading the meeting and did most of the talking, brought up my presence at the very start. She asked every team member to give a short introduction of him/her. Yet she did not provide a space for me to present myself. I felt unsecure whether I should take up the speech, which would have meant to interrupt her. Why didn't she provide that space? Did she think that I am not comfortable speaking in front of everyone? Should I have interrupted her? [Fieldwork journal extract, Leeds]

This situation reflects my experience of being slotted into the category of a student, which was how diversity officers in Leeds made sense of my presence. My impression of my role as a student in Leeds, was substantiated through the specific planning that had been done for me and my stay there. On my first day in Leeds, I was given a day-to-day plan that had been specifically compiled for me, which outlined what meetings and events I could participate in during my stay. When I realized that each team member had received that plan to know where I was potentially going, I was first amazed and very pleased by the amount of preparation that had been done for me; I thought this was a great service and very helpful. Also, there was still some leeway: I could organize the interviews with team members and my activities as I saw fit. Yet, I also realized that it was pre-defining where I was supposed to go and where I was not invited. This limitation became evident when one afternoon, everyone in the team seemed to leave for a meeting that was not on my itinerary, yet not inviting me to come along. In my field journal I noted:

In the afternoon suddenly everyone seemed to head to a meeting in the small meeting room. I was unsure if I can go there as well, as the meeting was not on my itinerary. When I approached the team head to ask if I could come along, she responded that they are talking about something that they would prefer me not to take part in. Of course, I accepted and I think that it is good that she was very clear about this preference. I am also glad I asked and didn't just walk along, which could have resulted in a very awkward situation. I guess I could have anticipated this answer, but still, being left behind in the now empty open plan office, I found it hard to deal with the feeling of exclusion that crept in. It made me reflect on the fact that my inclusion in the team is temporary and partial. These moments of exclusion, when the team protects some areas of knowledge and demarcates the boundary against me as an outsider, are intelligible but tricky to deal with. [Fieldwork excerpt, Leeds]

2 Name omitted for reasons of anonymity.

Being conceived as a student was an advantage, as it legitimized my presence in the team, but on the other hand, it felt limiting. It made it very difficult to create a situation where reciprocity was possible: I was given information because I was meant to learn, but I was not supposed to investigate too much into what was pre-conceived as non-relevant information for me. When the head of team introduced me without giving me the chance to speak for myself, I felt like this was undermining my agency and was creating a hierarchy. Excluding me from the meeting reflected a strategy of safeguarding a certain distance, making sure the researcher does not come too close or become too intrusive. As a result, I often felt that I was studying when in Leeds, and to getting access to information that was not already prepared for me, was difficult.

While this hierarchization between the officials and me, as the student, was very present in the Leeds fieldwork, I felt from the very beginning that I was accepted as a temporary colleague in Antwerp. My main intermediary was crucial in allowing me to attain this role, as she had recently completed her PhD and it was familiar to her, to engage with her own organisation from a researcher's perspective. She also was respected in the team and once she had introduced me to the team, it was easy to build up relationships with the other team members. The feeling of sharing a similar mind-set and of being met with some trust from the very outset clearly provided a very easy starting point for my research and gave me access to many insider stories in the field. In one of the team meetings, the head of the team initiated a group exercise in interviewing. As some of the team members would frequently have to interview people as part of their job and had reported some insecurity on how to do this, several working groups for the exercise were formed and I was assigned to one of these groups. It struck me that none of the team members mentioned my role as a researcher or the fact that I may have had some more experience with interviewing; instead they accepted me as one of them. And so, I gave feedback to the team members and received some feedback from the others, just as if I had been a member of the team. In the case of Antwerp my research was very much directed sideways, and the interviewing exercise demonstrated a window of opportunity for collaboration.

However, being accepted as a temporary colleague was not without challenges either. Towards the end of my stay, the head of team asked me whether I would be willing to present my findings from my project to a high-level manager of the city administration, as he was in the process of deciding over the unit's future reorganisation. I had interviewed many senior officials about their perception of the unit by then and had heard some positive and some not so positive accounts of the diversity unit and its importance for the local organisation. My project and its findings had

suddenly acquired central strategic value, as plans to re-organize the unit arose. The fact that the team asked me to present to their manager on such a sensitive question without having an idea what my findings were, demonstrated again that they saw me as a sort of insider and as someone to trust. I became very conscious of the weight my words. Would I be talking as a researcher, who presents whatever the findings were? Or would I be talking as someone from the team, taking the interests of my 'temporary colleagues' into account? I could resolve my conflict by first presenting my findings to some of the team members, to see whether or not they would concede, and only then deliver my presentation to the manager. While everything worked out well, it became clear to me that combining different roles can create some conflicts of loyalty, as my presentation could have potentially worked to the detriment of the unit.

In Amsterdam, my role was defined again very differently. In my first conversation with my main intermediary, he drew a clear boundary between the logic of being an official and that of a researcher. He repeatedly posited a fundamental difference in the aim of our work: while researchers could at all times question underlying paradigms, policy officials needed to decide on the nature of problems and then come up with some possible solutions. He also was very critical of initiatives in which research and policy link up. This boundary-making was a constant element in our interactions over the following weeks, and I sensed that slotting me into the category of a researcher was an important way for him to negotiate my presence. In his view, I was not of too much use to him in terms of getting work done, but I was pleasant to chat with and could bring in an outsider perspective. My chance of getting a role was thus limited to becoming a welcome addition to the social interactions he had at work. I was first somewhat puzzled by what I felt was a rather delimiting view on our respective roles, but as long as it didn't prevent him from interacting with me I was ok with this stark differentiation. So in Amsterdam from the very beginning there was very limited scope for a potential collaboration from the very beginning. However in one situation at the end of my research stay, my ascribed role became destabilised. I presented some of my initial findings from the project in return, for which I had interviewed different team members on their impression of the team dynamic after they had been merged out of two separate units. After the presentation, I wrote the following in my field journal:

He emphasized that my presentation had given him a lot of food for thought. He said he was impressed by the depth of my understanding of what is at play in the unit. Suddenly he seemed to understand what my research was about and he acknowledged that I

had been able to capture their reality in a way that, being ‘inside’, they often felt hard to capture. However, when responding that I was glad and thankful for his feedback, he was fast in emphasizing that of course this is not going to directly contribute to their work. It was only interesting from a broader perspective. So he immediately returned to his clear separation of the logics of policy work and research, a paradigm that I think has strongly informed the way he has perceived my role all along. It also can be seen as an exercise of power, that he wanted to keep in control of what he sees as his professional boundaries, which I guess is fair enough. [Excerpt from fieldwork, Amsterdam]

At the end of our conversation he also suggested that maybe we could together conceptualise a workshop at a conference they were organising. Even though this idea was never implemented, there was a short window of opportunity that had opened for a potential collaboration.

Three findings can be identified from these recollected experiences: As a ‘research trainee’ in the professionalized context of municipal organisations, it was not only me that was deciding which roles I wanted to play, but I was also ascribed a role. Furthermore, officials also adjusted their own roles when they saw fit. Thus, the concept of a research traineeship allowed the definition of my role and relationships to become an interactive and flexible process. It was a different category that was foregrounded in each of the cities: the ‘student’ facet that was emphasized in Leeds, the ‘temporary colleague’ facet was prominent in Antwerp and the ‘researcher’ facet was flagged in Amsterdam. There were a number of moments when the dominance of one category was destabilised, as I have demonstrated with the example in Amsterdam.

Through the research traineeship, I was able to make the ascription of different roles an element of what I observed. Indeed, the ways that my research subjects slotted me into one or the other category became an important aspect of my observations. The ways in which my main intermediaries made sense of my role and assigned me a role entailed important information about their self-conception as bureaucrats, their own power position and local organisational cultures. In Antwerp, where I acquired the role of a temporary colleague, my intermediary had a very similar background to my own, having recently completed a PhD at a British university, and also had a strong understanding of what I was doing and why I was asking certain questions. As such, she was very much a ‘peer’, allowing me to ‘study sideways’ (Hannerz 1992). It also reflected the very flat hierarchy of the diversity team in Antwerp. In Amsterdam, my intermediary was a more senior official, who had worked as a manager in the arts sector before joining the city a few years ago. He operated in a climate of

strong pressures from politicians on the department at the time of my research. He clearly emphasized the differences between us, highlighting the freedom of researchers to keep asking questions without needing to provide practical answers. With him, I was never sure if I was studying up, sideways, or down. Sometimes I had the feeling that he saw my role as a researcher as superior, as he voiced his frustrations with the limited freedom and the pressure of politicians. At other times, he seemed to emphasize his importance as a manager and the power he had in influencing policy, letting the work of researchers appear as a nice past-time activity without any effect in practice. In Leeds, the relationship with my intermediary was again different, and I had acquired the role of a student in the field. The case of Leeds stuck out with the clear hierarchies within the city council, which were reflected in their hierarchisation of our relationship into one of student and official.

Overall, the space for collaborating with my research subjects was limited and only in few moments could I sense a displacement from a participant observation to an experimental collaboration. This was the case for example when exercising interview techniques with my research subjects, when providing feedback on the position of the diversity units in Antwerp, and when being invited to conceive of a workshop in Amsterdam. Collaboration seemed to particularly become possible when I was able to study sideways, so when there was no hierarchical relationship between my role and the role of local officials.

Conclusion

I started out from the question what we could learn from contemporary organisational ethnographies for the methodology of ethnography. I noted that the abilities of research subjects that we found in large modern organisations to make abstractions, to analyse and reflect may require us to re-think the respective roles and relationships between researchers and researched in contemporary ethnographies. Based on my own experiences of conducting participant observation in local state organizations, I suggested that research traineeships have some potential for accessing and defining an experimental mode of ethnographic research in the field of modern organisations.

The research traineeship provides a rather open and flexible self-definition of the role of the researcher and leaves the interpretation of the researcher's role to the interactions in the field. While I was not able to determine whether I would study up,

down or sideways, the process of being ascribed a role in the field itself became an important element of my observations. I could analyse how I was being positioned by my research subjects and reflect on what this reveals about their own conception as state officials, their position within the organisational hierarchy and the organisational culture in each field site.

As I have illustrated with my own research experience in municipal organisations, research subjects in modern organisations conceive us as learners, as allies or keep us at distance – in short, they take part in shaping our role and position in the field. This argument contests much of the literature on ethnography in modern organisations, which emphasizes that it is the researcher who defines the role he or she wants to play in the field. By defining the field stay as a ‘research traineeship’ one can leave one’s own role sufficiently open, allowing the development of more or less collaborative relationships between the researcher and interlocutors. The research traineeships allowed me to access and study state bureaucracies, which rarely have been studied from within, and to tease out some moments when collaboration with local officials became possible.

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