**POLICY ETHNOGRAPHY: AN INTRODUCTION**

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| **Introduction** |

Researchers often explore the policies of governments, agencies, and other bodies. They might, for example, examine the relationship between a specific policy and various consequences, such as changes in health or employment, as well as other patterns in the data. However, rather than examine patterns across many policies

* some researchers want to explore the implementation of one policy in detail—such as the banned drinks register, in which specific people are prohibited from purchasing alcohol in the NT
* they might, for example, examine the obstacles, procedures, dynamics, and networks that impeded or facilitated the implementation of this policy.

These case studies might unearth insights and lessons that can be utilised to improve the design and implementation of other policies. This detailed examination of a specific policy or set of policies is called policy ethnography. Policy ethnography emanated from a field called the anthropology of policy (Shore & Wright, 1997).

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| **Key features of policy ethnography** |

Policy ethnography entails many of the key features of traditional ethnography. The following table outlines these features.

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| Feature | Details |
| Collects and integrates many sources of data | * Researchers blend observation, interviews, and analysis of documents to explore one community, one setting, or some other social phenomenon (Travers, 2001) |
| Characterises one culture in detail | * Researchers conduct methods to explore the culture of these settings—such as the meaning individuals attach to specific activities or objects as well as how they achieve their goals (e.g., Willis & Trondman, 2000) |
| Consider how this culture shapes the behaviour | * Researchers strive to understand and to appreciate how specific behaviors are related to the broader culture or structure of a community, setting, or circumstance |
| Empower individuals whose voice is frequently overlooked | * Individuals whose beliefs or perspectives are seldom considered are granted an opportunity to share their insights and experiences (Willis & Trondman, 2000) * This approach is vital because many people and bodies contribute to the implementation of government policies—from ministers of parliament, ministerial advisors, and public servants to managers and employees involved in service delivery. * Yet, the perspectives and insights of people involved in service delivery are seldom integrated into decisions on how to implement policies most effectively. |

In short, policy ethnography explores one case around the implementation of a key policy—to uncover practical insights that could be applied to other policies in the future (Griffiths & Hughes, 2000). Yet, to achieve this goal, researchers have not developed a particular suite of methods that are specific to policy ethnography. Instead, they tend to borrow and assimilate tools and principles from other methodologies (see Griffiths & Hughes, 2000), such as

* case studies
* thematic analysis
* discourse analysis
* and so forth

Therefore, to learn about policy ethnography, you should read the documents on these techniques as well as on interviews and observations. To some extent, the methods they use depend on practical constraints as well as on the questions they want to explore. Researchers may want to explore a variety of dynamics and complications, such as

* how do various levels of government—such as federal government and local government—interact to coordinate some change?
* which behaviors or practices facilitate or interrupt collaboration between these levels?
* what are the main sources of disagreement or negotiation?

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| **Variants of policy ethnography** |

To some extent, the methods that researchers apply depends on the theoretical perspective they want to adopt. This theoretical perspective shapes the goals of policy ethnography. Dubois (2009) differentiated three goals that policy ethnographers might want to pursue, as delineated in the following table.

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| Possible goals of researchers | Details |
| To improve the management of policies. | * Researchers who adopt this perspective are inspired to unearth the complications and issues that individuals who need to implement a policy are experiencing or recognizing * They researchers want to relay these concerns to managers, such as public servants or government advisors, to improve the management of these policies * Ultimately, policy ethnography should help managers consider and accommodate the experience of individuals who implement the policy |
| To appreciate the meaning that people derive from policies, called an interpretative policy ethnography (Yanow, 1996) | * The researcher may be motivated to appreciate how some policy shapes beliefs, attitudes, values, and appraisals. * For example, changes to welfare policies could shape how people regard welfare recipients. If recipients must be subjected to drug tests before they receive welfare payments, they are more likely to be perceived with suspicion by the public * Conversely, researchers might also explore how the beliefs, attitudes, values, and culture of individuals can shape the interpretation and implementation of policies |
| To challenge the existing hierarchies and inequalities, called critical public ethnography (Dubois, 2009) | * These researchers may challenge the notion that specific bodies, such as governments, design the policies, and other bodies, such as local agencies, implement the policies. * After all, the individuals who implement policies can also apply some discretion on how to achieve this goal—and therefore enact vital choices and decisions themselves * The researcher might explore practices that sustain inequalities and differences in power between distinct stakeholders, comparable to traditional critical theorists |

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| **Improving the quality of policy ethnography** |

When conducting policy ethnography, researchers should strive to uncover and to disseminate trustworthy conclusions. To achieve this goal, these researchers need to consider how their own experiences could bias the results. The following table outlines some of the principles they should consider (see Mukhtarov, 2017).

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| Principle | Details |
| Methodological reflexivity | * At every phase of a project, including the literature review, field work, and writing, researchers should consider how their experiences and characteristics—such as their ethnicity, age, or education—might bias or shape their decisions, interpretations, and conclusions * Some researchers, for example, might devote time to interviewing social categories with whom they feel most similar or respected |
| Methodological positionality | * Researchers need to consider how they may be perceived by the various stakeholders, because these perceptions affect the responses and behavior of other individuals * A researcher might be perceived as an outsider, for example. Sometimes, this perception diminishes scepticism, because these individuals are not perceived as threatening to the existing hierarchy. |
| Methodological normativity | * Researchers, as they learn more about a community or circumstance, often start to develop beliefs about how changes should unfold. * These researchers need to consider whether they should advocate to support a particular stance or not. * If they advocate to seek change, they might expose themselves to more insights, improving their research. Alternatively, this advocacy could undermine their credibility or bias their conclusions. |

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| **Insights from policy ethnography** |

To really appreciate policy ethnography, you should probably skim a few of the key insights this methodology has uncovered. Indeed, researchers who have utilised policy ethnography have unearthed some vital insights about government policies. The following table illustrates some of these insights

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| Insight | Details |
| The tension between national policies and local endeavours | * National or state policies often detract resources and attention from local project * Yet the local projects often energise staff more than national agendas * So, national policies can stifle motivation |
| Unjust performance indicators | * National policies often impose key performance indicators onto local organizations, such as clinics. * Yet, local organizations often feel these key performance indicators do not characterise or recognise the key activities and achievements of staff * When the government clarifies the benefits of these indicators, this problem may subside. |
| Tensions between immediate and future goals | * Governments often seek more immediate achievements or successes to justify their approaches. * But, these immediate achievements, called quick wins, are sometimes pursued to the detriment of future objectives. * For example, the pursuit of immediate achievements might preclude consultation and other strategies that foster trust. |
| Reliance on insecure funding | * Governments sometimes introduce ambitious changes and may offer extensive funding to support these changes. * However, this funding is often transient and may, for example, dissipate after the next election * Consequently, local agencies are often unsure of the extent to which they should sacrifice their other goals to pursue this funding |
| Redefining problems | * The various stakeholders, such as public servants and staff interacting with customers, tend to define problems differently; for example, to justify the importance of compliance, public servants might refer to laws whereas staff might refer to the welfare of customers (Griffiths & Hughes, 2000) * Because they define problems differently, these stakeholders will often conflict on decisions and priorities |

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