

7 Reflexivity, positionality and normativity in the ethnography of policy translation

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Introduction¹

Policy translation is the process by which policy ideas, knowledge and models travel across various boundaries, such as nation-states, organizations, sectors and cities. It became a prominent subject of research inquiry across the social sciences, from geography to international relations (e.g. Peck and Theodore 2015; Stone 2012). Especially prominent is the attention paid to policy translation with the advance of interpretive policy analysis in public policy (e.g. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Bliesemann de Guevara 2016).

Public policy scholars have long struggled to develop theories and models to account for the process by which policies and policy ideas spread across countries and political systems. Conventional approaches to this process hinge on concepts such as ‘policy transfer’, ‘policy diffusion’, ‘lesson drawing’, ‘institutional isomorphism’, and ‘policy learning’ (Westney 1987; De Jong, Lalenis and Mamadouh 2002; Robertson 1991; Rose 1993; Jacoby 2001; Dolowitz and Marsh 1996; Evans and Davies 1999; Dolowitz and Marsh 2000; Mukhtarov 2014). The complexity of the phenomenon is the major reason why there is such a diversity of approaches to studying it. A student of policy translation must acknowledge and account for differences in both *what travels* across jurisdictions, and *what kind of boundaries* are being crossed in such a process. The object of policy translation may be abstract knowledge and ideas, policy models, arguments or wholesale blueprints. The boundaries transcended in such translations, in turn, could be spatial, temporal, organizational, disciplinary or inter-personal. Thus, it is a very complex process and the conventional approaches outlined above have fallen short in explaining *which* and *whose* ideas matter, *why* these matter, as well as in explaining the impact of such policy ideas on the ground. Such factors as symbols, power, values, complexity and chance in the contextualization of a particular policy model have not been adequately discussed in the conventional literature on policy transfer and diffusion (e.g. Simmons, Dobbin and Garrett 2007; Freeman 2009; Mukhtarov 2014, 2016). In order to fill these gaps in the conventional literature, scholars have gradually turned their gaze towards policy translation approaches.

Historically, policy translation has been built upon research in multiple disciplines since the 1970s, and relatively recently has acquired its distinctive place in public policy with a number of advances across various disciplines, such

as urban geography, cultural studies, public health and law (Carlile 2004; Yanow 2004; Lendvai and Stubbs 2009; Clarke 2008; Freeman 2009; McCann and Ward 2012). The evolution of the concept of *translation* proceeded from a focus on the micro level and the process of communication and sense-making between actors in scientific process (Latour 1986) as well as policy process (Clarke et al. 2015), to one on the meso level – interaction in an organization (Czarniawska and Sevón 1996; Yanow 2002), and then to one on the macro level of the spread of ideas and models across countries and jurisdictions (Freeman 2009; Simmons et al. 2007). Thus, for sociologists of science, translation is ‘the spread in time or place of anything – claims, artefacts, goods . . .’ (Latour 1986, 267). For scholars of organizational studies, translation is an iterative process by which ideas are materialized, turned into slogans, objects or actions in practice and then once again turned into ideas as they are communicated (Fadeeva 2004). For recent theorists of translation in public policy, the central research question is to understand the effects of language and meaning in politics (Freeman 2009; Iveković 2005; Newman 2006; Clarke 2008; Lendvai and Stubbs 2009) and what it means to translate ‘effectively’ and ‘successfully’ (Mukhtarov, de Jong and Pierce 2016) and whether such insights have implications for institutional design (Mukhtarov et al. 2015). In that sense, it is important to distinguish between ‘policy translation’ and ‘policy as translation’ conceptualizations of this process (Lendvai and Stubbs 2009). The former concerns the travel of policy ideas and innovations across borders, the latter concerns a fundamentally interpretive take on the process of policy making as ontologically fluid, one which always moves and occurs in ‘waves’ (e.g. Freeman 2012). In this chapter, I focus on policy translation and not policy as translation.

More specifically, policy translation literature views the travel of ideas as contingent and emergent as opposed to being amenable to strategic management. Such ideas as ‘assemblages’ (Bueger 2015; Clarke et al. 2015) and ‘bricolage’ (Bridges, Kurakbayev and Kambatyrova 2015; Freeman 2007) are helpful in understanding this contingency as well as the nature of institutional design under such contingency. Furthermore, such literature acknowledges the modification of meaning in the travel of policy ideas and the possibility of the active construction of meanings by interested agents in this process (Kingfisher 2013; Shore, Wright and Pero 2011; Peck and Theodore 2015; Mukhtarov and Gerlak 2013). Finally, such work pays explicit attention to the issues of scale and space as socially constructed, incomplete and contested (Pow 2014; McCann and Ward 2011; Prince 2016). This new approach attempts to embrace politics in the process of the travel of ideas, as well as language as a tool for political struggle and analytical insight (e.g. Mukhtarov 2013, 2014; Lejano and Shankar 2012; Stone 2012; Park, Wilding and Chung 2014). As a result, such concepts as ‘narratives’, ‘assemblages’, ‘bricolage’, ‘contact zone’, ‘policy mobility’ and ‘policy otherwise’ have been added to the growing vocabulary of public policy studies (Mukhtarov 2016; Mukhtarov and Daniell 2017).

While further conceptual deliberation is key to understanding the process of public policy and international relations through a translation prism, equally

important is the discussion of the methodologies used in such inquiry. Increasingly, scholars interested in interpretive policy analysis and policy translation propose to study policy through ethnography and prolonged immersion in the field with the major emphasis on observation and the lived experiences of the researcher as well as informants (e.g. Schatz 2009; Mukhtarov et al. 2016). Such ethnography inevitably presents a number of political and ethical challenges to a researcher and a more extended discussion of such challenges and possible ways of dealing with them is needed in the literature. In this chapter, I attempt to address these issues. The chapter is structured as follows – the next section will discuss the call for new methodology in studying policy translation; the third section will discuss the dilemmas and issues which a researcher needs to consider in such work; and the fourth section will deal with three categories which help guide a researcher in the work of studying policy translation through ethnography. The final section will conclude the chapter.

New methodology for policy translation

Due to the historical links of policy translation with sociology and anthropology, some scholars have called for a greater use of ethnography in policy studies (Wedel et al. 2005; Peck and Theodore 2012). The anthropology of policy studies forms the ‘cultural and philosophical underpinnings of policy – it enables discourses, mobilizes metaphors, and underlies ideologies and uses’ (Wedel et al. 2005, 34). Critical ethnographies, it has been suggested, and such methods as ‘extended case study’, may shed light on the fluidity of the policy process and various translations within it (McCann and Ward 2012; Peck and Theodore 2012). On the other hand, there is also a greater focus on the language in studying politics as ‘policy is made in words’ (Freeman 2009, 431). Moreover, narratives are getting extra attention as they are powerful in framing the reality and structuring interactions (Mukhtarov and Cherp 2014; Mukhtarov et al. 2013; Lejano, Ingram and Imgram 2013). With the focus on these symbolic issues of politics, the key question is how to understand the policy process interpretively and yet make a useful contribution to the enterprise of institutional design (e.g. Mukhtarov et al. 2015; Thiel, Mukhtarov and Zikos 2015).

The broad framework of political ethnography is therefore useful in order to analyse policy translations, as discussed in Shore et al. (2011) and Schatz (2009). Within the broad theme of political ethnography, two recent proposals concerning the methods in studying policy translation warrant our attention: ‘mobile methods’ (McCann and Ward 2012) and the ‘extended case approach’ (Wedel et al. 2005; Peck and Theodore 2012). According to Büscher and Urry (2009), the research methods become mobile in two senses. First of all, they are mobile because researchers follow their subject to multiple sites and localities and therefore document the process of policy in the making and ‘on the move’. Second, the researchers pay attention to the moves in which policy makers participate, as in a game, where each event contributes to the development of another event and, as a result, a formation of a policy. Such ethnographic attention to policy making

as 'piecing together' multiple events that are responses to one another is a novel way of conducting policy research (Büscher and Urry 2009).

A closely connected approach was developed by Burawoy (2001, 2009) – an extended case study method, which Peck and Theodore (2012) further refined and called the '*follow the policy*' method, that is, one that enables mutations in policy meaning to be traced by following various actors and their movements. A researcher looks for a place in cosmopolitan policy networks in order to observe how policy is made and how policy success is produced (Mosse 2006). The work of a researcher is not devoid of difficulties such as staying at a distance from those networks and not taking things at face value. Peck and Theodore (2012) suggest that there are four requirements when applying the extended case study method to the study of the travel of ideas. First, researchers must become participants as well as observers of the process they study. For a researcher who becomes part of a global policy network, it may be challenging to be engaged in the development and propagation of 'best practices', and at the same time preserve reflexivity and observe how the context influences 'best practices' being introduced in various countries. This speaks to the sociological tradition of participant observation (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012), but in a context where a researcher needs to reconcile conflicting identities and the roles of a reflexive observer and a policy advocate. Second, researchers must engage in a multiplicity of sites and have an 'understanding of policy reinvention as a continuous, multisite "process"'. Such an approach calls for a questioning of the established models of the top-down diffusion of ideas, linear transformation and the centre-periphery travel of ideas; and, instead, suggests studying through multiple sites without trying to assign any hierarchical relationship between them. Third, researchers must be able to jump between the micro and the macro processes, between what is perceived to be both local and global. As Peck and Theodore (2012, 28) put it,

'(f)ollowing the policy', in this context, cannot be reduced to the relatively straightforward task of tracking norms, practices, and agents 'downstream' from sources of conspicuous authority, or outward from dominant centers of calculation; it must be multidirectional and it must span not only the spaces of intensive exchange but also those of contingent connection, marginalization, and exclusion. And it must also encompass not only the immediate local context of policy adoption – adaptation – implementation, but the 'context of context' . . . the positioning of experiments, failures, and alternatives within an understanding of the wider patterning of policy formations.

Finally, researchers must not be satisfied with proving theory in a certain case, but instead must select and design case study research in such a way that the most interesting cases of where theory may not stand valid are investigated. Burawoy initially referred to such an approach as a 'kamikaze' approach to theory development, which with all its drive for disproving theory at the same time works towards a new, reconstructed one itself (Eliasoph and Lichterman 1999).

Furthermore, McCann and Ward (2012) discuss the use of ‘mobile methods’ to study policy assemblages and mutations. These constitute ‘studying through’ as opposed to ‘studying down’, which is what occurs in traditional accounts of government public policy, and ‘studying up’, which is what transpires in emerging accounts of governance (Wedel et al. 2005). ‘Mobile methods’ include direct and participant observations, field-notes, oral histories and standard methods of policy analysis, including interviews and questionnaires.

Engaging in both ‘follow the policy’ and ‘mobile methods’ includes a particular form of political ethnography as the boundaries between the roles played by a researcher get eroded. As a result, a number of ethical and political challenges arise for a researcher, and these can be productively considered and discussed before the fieldwork to prepare the researcher. In the next section, I elaborate on such dilemmas and challenges in more detail. While the focus of this chapter is on ethnography as a methodology for studying policy translation, our discussion is relevant to those interested in methods for interpretive policy research more generally, such as intervention research (e.g. Daniell 2012), action research (e.g. Whyte 1991) and community-based research (Benoit et al. 2005). The discussion of ethical and political challenges is relatively scarce in the methodological literature applied to public policy and urban planning issues, and I hope to contribute to this literature by this discussion.

Ethical and political challenges in studying policy translation ethnographically

Anthropologists of policy or ethnographers of international development have discussed the political and ethical dimension of ethnography in the past (e.g. Mosse 2004; Wedel et al. 2005; Fujii 2012). For example, some of the chapters of the volume *Policy Worlds: Anthropology and the Analysis of Contemporary Power* discuss the politics and ethics of ethnography (Shore et al. 2011). Furthermore, both Joseph, Mahler and Auyero (2009) and Wood (2007) also discuss political ethnography and the issues of ethics and politics involved in it. These discussions, however, are largely confined to an audience of anthropologists and are virtually non-existent in policy studies and international relations. One exception is the book edited by Edward Schatz on political ethnography (2009) which also contains a number of chapters dealing with the issues of identity, reflexivity, positionality, dilemmas and challenges in such work (e.g. Pachirat 2009). Another notable exception is Clarke et al. (2015, 218), who proposed the ‘ethics and politics’ of policy translation connected the task of a researcher with the activity of an advocate and a practitioner (Mukhtarov et al. 2016).

Not only are the ethical and political issues under-represented in the methodological literature on policy processes, but a discussion of an ‘embodied’ character of such methodology and political research made prominent through ethnographic immersion has also been absent from this literature. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012, 115–116) summarize the situation in the following passage:

(m)ethodological treatments, including the research design literature, irrespective of the methodological approach followed, have not yet taken on board the vast variety of researchers engaged in field and archival research. Where are the explicit engagements with race-ethnic issues in the field? Gender? Sexuality? Physical ability? Class? Is it as if the researcher body is (still) male, middle class, Caucasian-European, capable of unfettered physical mobility, and a-sexual?

It is of course impossible to cover all the potential dilemmas and issues which arise in the field and are related to the 'embodied' nature of researchers, the ways in which they understand the world and are seen by others. However, I would like to draw on a number of my personal experiences in the field as well as those of my colleagues in order to illustrate a number of key reasons/situations where a researcher engaged in political ethnography may encounter ethical and political challenges. I briefly outline these issues before I continue with possible ways of dealing with them.

First of all, an ethnographer studying powerful policy actors *in situ*, that is in their natural milieu, will inevitably struggle to remain at a distance and not fall under their influence (Peck and Theodore 2015). It may be hard for a researcher to learn to speak the language and grasp the symbolic repertoires of cosmopolitan policy actors engaged in the processes of transferring and modifying knowledge across various sights and borders. Perhaps the greatest challenge to avoid is getting caught in an 'in-group' mentality binding influential policy actors and others (Peck and Theodore 2012, 25). In the settings that we describe here, this challenge becomes one of learning enough to understand and effectively utilize the various layers of text that are being exchanged in communications, verbal and otherwise, and, at the same time, keep the psychological distance necessary for a balanced view and research. One example of such a danger comes from my experience of studying water policy making in southeastern Turkey in 2007–2008, when a powerful policy actor performed the function of a gatekeeper to many interviews and documents and supplied me with his own interpretation of various accounts of events. Not least, his support provided me with symbolic capital in that organization amounting to better relationships and access to data overall. A prolonged contact with such a powerful actor proved useful for access to data; however, it presented a danger of being brought into the sphere of his influence, not least the power of his narrative about the project. It is a political skill to strike the right sort of a balance between loyalty and dependence on one hand, and intellectual independence and critical attitude on the other. It is worthwhile to mention that such carefulness needs to be present at both the data collection stage during interactions with powerful actors, and at the stage of writing up when self-censorship may be a constraint. A related challenge that is present in the work of a policy ethnographer is the need for vigilance with regard to major hegemonic discourses and forms of knowledge which may obscure particularly salient concerns and questions and nudge a researcher to reproduce existing power relationships. While ethnographic research of policy translation does not

have to be counter-hegemonic by definition, a researcher would benefit from recognizing the ideologies present in the field and the dangers of reproducing dominant narratives in his/her analysis.

The second and closely related challenge occurs when researchers find it hard to provide critical accounts of policy work not because they have been 'charmed' and influenced by charismatic policy actors, but because they are afraid to potentially place a strain on valuable relationships with former or current clients, colleagues and friends (e.g. Mosse 2006). Unlike the previous dilemma, here the major conflict occurs between the desire of the researcher to be loyal, and fulfil the requirements of 'do no harm' to research informants and colleagues, and at the same time to be honest and comprehensive in accounting for events and stories. Mosse (2005) emphasized a particular sort of conflict that anthropologists of development (and aid) have – on the one hand they have an obligation to be critical and honest and provide alternative views on the subject matter privileging 'lived experiences', on the other they depend on new projects, good relationships with colleagues in the field and in centres where such projects are funded and drafted. Mosse quotes Little and Painter (1995, 605) in his argument that ethnographers of development failed to acknowledge as reflexive scientists that 'anthropology as a whole has helped produce and maintain, and continues to benefit from power relations on which development institutions and the discourses they generate rest'. This places a moral burden on those who pursue particular career paths in the anthropology of development and policy (Mosse 2005, 243). One example of such a conflict is the story of David Mosse in the aftermath of the publication of his book *Cultivating Development* (2005) about public participation in a development project sponsored by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) in India. Mosse (2005), whose work has been severely criticized by colleagues, attributes the key reason behind such contestation of his account to his refusal to negotiate his narrative with informants and colleagues on the project. He writes that 'the ethnography failed to be what all good evaluations are, namely an acceptable story that mediates interpretative differences in order to sustain relationships and the flow of resources (Mosse 2006, 943). And such a narrative runs a danger of alienating funders, colleagues and friends, as well as endangering one's career in a highly competitive and cash-stripped field of humanities.

Third, a researcher always depends on gatekeepers to enter the field and gain access to data and support in their fieldwork. Perhaps such dependence is even stronger in authoritarian contexts where hosting institutions may feel threatened by the results of investigations. Researchers often learn to operate under the norms of 'obedient autonomy' when they have little choice but to agree with the client's or host's choice for what, in their view, is an inferior policy option, or an inferior site for data collection (Klotzbucher 2014). There is little that can be done about such power imbalances, and a researcher must agree to be limited in the scope of access in exchange for support, some access to data and trust from hosting actors. I encountered this dilemma during my fieldwork in southeastern Turkey when I felt that I was straightjacketed by a research assistant

to particular sites, and only introduced and represented to particular informants (Mukhtarov 2009; Mukhtarov et al. 2016). His behaviour may not have been driven by the desire to conceal information, or restrict my movement, but by the genuine desire to help by taking the initiative and control during site visits, but, nevertheless, such occasions constitute cases of restriction in the freedom of movement. Although it is perhaps inevitable to some extent, the influence of gatekeepers on research design needs to be negotiated and a researcher must make it clear, as much as it is possible, that this is *his/her project* and it is important that he/she retains freedom in making choices on where to go, which sites to visit and who to interview (Mukhtarov et al. 2016). This type of dilemma is especially common when researchers also engage in consultancy work, are institutionally dependent on their supervisors and have a tendency to apply self-censorship to what they produce (Stubbs 2014).

Fourth, ethnographers introduced to the field by a particular authority may 'receive highly customized lessons based on a highly partial version of policy success stories' (Pow 2014, 296). Pachirat (2009, 158) eloquently proclaimed that 'there were the ways in which my being seen would affect how and what I saw'. This has lately been studied in the literature on interpretive policy analysis under the label of 'positionality' (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012; Mosse 2005). Mosse (2005), for example, claimed that in the last few decades, researchers have operated across multiple sites and worked with a plethora of actors – ingredients which greatly complicate the issues of positionality. An illustration of positionality from my work in Turkey was the special treatment I felt I received due to my ethnic background as an Azerbaijani, a linguistically and ethnically related Turkic nation, as well as the non-threatening status of a PhD student seeking opportunities to learn from the experiences of practitioners. A broader discussion of the issues around positionality of a researcher during fieldwork can be found in Cohn (2006).

Finally, there can also be misunderstandings, intentional omissions and miscommunications during the fieldwork caused by cultural differences. For example, the concept of freedom of speech is very different in the Netherlands compared to China, and the acceptability and manner of discussing certain policy issues in public or in private can show considerable cultural variety, as described by de Jong in his recollection of the Sino-Dutch cooperation project (Mukhtarov et al. 2016). An ethnographer needs to be aware of such limitations and opportunities and be reflexive and honest about the possible impact these may have on his/her knowledge claims (Cleary 2013; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). This, as any other form of ethnography, requires a non-judgemental attitude towards the culture, worldviews and behaviour of the subjects under study. It is important to maintain constant cognizance of the 'contact zones' between cultures; and what is taken for granted has the potential to create many ethical and political tensions in the daily life and work of a researcher (Clarke et al. 2015; Stubbs 2014).

These challenges and dilemmas invite the further attention of researchers interested in anthropology of policy and policy ethnography. Such attention is

justified by the notion that prior consideration of dilemmas as well as possible ways of resolving them may prepare a researcher for fieldwork, although I recognize that no prior textbook or list of points of consideration would liberate a researcher from experiencing the ethical and political dilemmas of fieldwork. In the next section I discuss three key categories which may help a researcher to grapple with the politics and ethics of policy ethnography.

Researcher as a translator: reflexivity, positionality and normativity

Reflexivity in policy ethnography

First of all, a researcher needs to be reflexive about his/her physical, social and cultural background in conducting social and political research. This encompasses such issues as race, gender, sexuality, physical health, ethnicity, age and particular views and opinions, which may push a researcher towards some knowledge claims rather than others. This is broadly called *methodological reflexivity* in the literature on anthropology and social science methodology, and scholars consider it to be one of the most important considerations in judging the trustworthiness of interpretive research (e.g. Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Reflection may be directed to the background of a research project, at the stage of writing, but also during the fieldwork when making choices about whom to approach and how to deal with the information and knowledge collected.

One example of reflexivity is research design choices made transparent to the reader. In my own PhD research, the choices I made for case study selection (England, Turkey and Kazakhstan) had something to do with my own background as an Azerbaijani, who spent a part of his PhD at the University of Oxford in the United Kingdom. Being limited in time, and interested in contrasting policy backgrounds, I chose to focus on three countries where I had best access as well as spoke the language. As a native bilingual Azerbaijani and Russian speaker, I also speak advanced Turkish, which has a close similarity with Azerbaijani. In addition, my proficiency in Russian made the case study of Kazakhstan attractive, and my base in England at the time of the research design, was an opportunity to engage with a case study in that country, also benefiting from the access provided by the 'brand' of Oxford. My research design choices, and indirectly knowledge claims, therefore, were partly conditioned by personal characteristics, the ability to speak the language and anticipation of access. Another example of reflexivity is presented by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2012), who cite Reinhardt (2009, 297) and her choices of sampling directed not by 'most different' or 'most similar' designs, but personal experience of research in Mozambique – 'I ended up spending the majority of my time with people who had shown they would respect my engagement [despite my fiancé's absence from the scene]'. These types of explicit connections between one's characteristics and background and knowledge claims in social science research enriches its trustworthiness through opening up to the reader the context of research in more detail.

Positionality in policy ethnography

Second, the researcher needs to be aware of and, if possible, to adjust, the way he/she is positioned in the field of political actors during the social and political research. In other words, the way a researcher is seen influences what and how he/she sees. This category is called *methodological positionality*. Jeremy Gould (2004, 7) defined positionality as:

the need for finding a serviceable and responsible way of situating oneself in 'the field', and is a threshold issue in all ethnography. In practice, positionality is not a problem, but serves as conceptual shorthand for a range of social, cognitive and ethical-political issues at the core of the ethnographic endeavor.

Timothy Pachirat gives an excellent example of positionality in gaining access to the research site: his mixed Thai-American background, age and personal outlook made it possible for him to get a job in a slaughterhouse in a Midwestern state of the US (Pachirat 2000). Another example of positionality, discussed mostly in relation to gaining rapport, is the study of climate change denial in everyday life conversations and situations in a small Norwegian community conducted by an American scholar. Norgaard (2011, 238) writes about how her Americanness may have influenced the way she was seen and the type of data and access she was given,

Features of life such as the fear of standing out and not speaking to strangers did not influence me so much as an American per se as they applied to me as a person who was unknown to the community members I spent time with. If anything, it seemed at times that my status as a foreigner exempted me from some of the suspicion I would otherwise have received, making it more normal for me to do and say some of the things that I did (because I was this type of outsider, I could hardly be expected to do things in the normal Norwegian or Bygdaby fashion). People explained things in more basic terms to me than I suspect they would to a native. As an outsider, I was a kind of cultural dope and thus less threatening.

Jeremy Gould (2004) distinguished between three kinds of positionality: spatial, social and normative. While many overlaps between these three exist, the distinction helps researchers to realize how their position may impact the data they collect and claims they make. Spatial positionality has to do with how people in various corners of the same 'site' or locality relate to a particular proposal or ideas, or the researcher. In the case of social positionality, the major point is access to data, the issues of trust between a researcher and informants and the power dynamics involved. And normative positionality has to do with the approaches to development or policy change in a particular setting which are shared by informants, powerful policy makers and citizens. In other words, and in line with the earlier discussion by Mosse (2005), the researcher must navigate the official

and unofficial narratives, identify the front and back stages and position him-/herself in this field normatively in such a manner that it allows both connection and critical reflection. The issues of positionality will most often emerge in the context of action research and policy ethnography which runs in parallel with policy or consultancy work, and this is a context which is rife with potential dilemmas and challenges. This brings us to normative issues in political ethnography more generally.

Normativity in policy ethnography

A researcher has particular normative inclinations and predispositions, which are inescapable and which influence the way a researcher engages with the research. If the pretences of objectivity and neutrality of a researcher are dropped, a researcher emerges as a human being with views, tastes, ideas and preferences, which often become explicit in research or influence research outcomes. This ‘embodied’ vision of a researcher, and the blending of advocacy and research has become a subject of much debate recently in the social sciences broadly, and is not limited to ethnography alone (e.g. Brandt 2007; Mukhtarov et al. 2016; Pasgaard et al. 2017). An enlightening discussion about the debate on research and advocacy appears in the epilogue of a meticulously researched book *The Cigarette Century* by Allan Brandt (2007, 494–495, emphasis added) who has gradually become involved in court proceedings in cases against big tobacco companies,

I saw no reason why a historian’s perspective would carry much weight in a courtroom, where the combat scarcely resembles the staid academic debates I had become accustomed to. It would be best for me to present my work not in the adversarial context of tort litigation, but in the form of a book, where I could lay out my arguments in detail. *I did not want my scholarship to be dismissed as “advocacy”*. The lawyers could use my work as they saw fit. I did not want to become a combatant in the tobacco wards; I much preferred my role as a war correspondent and military historian.

Thus, this dilemma also exists in historical and archival research which is non-ethnographic, but arguably becomes even more savvy in the context of political ethnography when a researcher, either during or after the research, may find him-/herself drawn into advocacy and a political struggle. *Methodological normativity*, therefore, revolves around the question of whether a researcher may also act as an advocate in particular policy issues, and whether a researcher needs to take a particular normative position in order to improve the quality of the research. Clarke et al. (2015) directly engage with the issue of the ‘ethics and politics’ of translation, by stating that translation researchers have an obligation to engage with the ‘praxis of translation’ through excavating and making visible alternative scenarios and futures of ‘policies otherwise’ as well as ‘not yet’. They powerfully sum up their argument for the politics and ethics of translation as follows:

In summary, 'policy otherwise' takes advantage of the ways in which policies are constructed, contested, contradictory and constitutive (Clarke 2004, 147) to explore 'the limitations, the refusals, the counter-tendencies, and the instabilities that constitute the conditions for *other* possibilities' (2004, 154). The importance of enlarging the possibilities of thought and action (2004, 157) throughout, not as a 'dislocated gesture at the end' (2004, 158) requires a commitment to both 'studying' and 'acting through' (Wedel 2004), if translation is to be given an ethical and political force.

(Clarke et al. 2017, 204)

In other words, the simple argument that policy researchers are at the same time policy actors and advocates, in the spirit of 'vita activa' of Hanna Arendt (1958), requires an additional sensitivity and transparency on the part of a researcher, before, during and after the fieldwork (see also Chapters 5 and 6 this volume).

Conclusions

In response to the growing need for ethnographic studies of the cross-boundary movement of planning and policy ideas and practices, the political and ethical challenges of such research need to be acknowledged and elaborated upon in academic communities of public policy and international relations. In this chapter, I described a number of occasions when ethical and political dilemmas may arise, and proceeded to discuss three key analytical categories which require attention from researchers in order, on the one hand, to prepare a researcher for the complexities of policy ethnography and, on the other hand, to engage with a methodological and theoretical discussion of what a new approach to policy may amount to (Kubik 2009). These three categories are *positionality*, *reflexivity* and *normativity*.

I proposed that policy ethnographers should consider four issues in designing and conducting fieldwork that are likely to give rise to political challenges and ethical dilemmas: (1) actors and their composition; (2) defining research questions; the theoretical approach, research methods, access to information and the language of communication and reporting; (3) the distribution of benefits and rewards; and (4) the assumed identity of the researcher (Mukhtarov et al. 2016). All four issues for consideration mentioned above have to do with the shifting roles of a researcher and the need for reflexivity and positionality in research design and implementation. The norms of reflexivity and positionality are particularly important for a researcher who wishes to remain transparent, honest, yet effective and focused. Furthermore, additional layers of complexity may be present, such as the context of development aid, the context of conducting ethnography in one's own country of origin and many others.

In all cases, and as Sultana (2007, 383) writes, 'being reflexive is important in situating the research and knowledge production so that ethical commitments can be maintained'. Klotzbucher (2014), in the context of his fieldwork in China, also argues that researchers may need to be 'obedient' and listen to governments'

or clients' requests, at the very least they need to be reflexive about their choices and the silences, or the policy options which could have been put in place otherwise and produce 'policies otherwise' (Clarke et al. 2015). And this notion of 'policies otherwise' has a strong normative charge to it, that of uncovering, problematizing and actively seeking counter-hegemonic narratives (Gould 2004; Mukhtarov 2016; Rojas 2007).

It is important to mention that considerations brought up in this chapter are based on some instances of participatory observation and policy fieldwork (e.g. in Turkey), which may not qualify as 'ethnography' in the classical sense of the word. My immersion in the field in Turkey was limited to two trips amounting to a cumulative time of 2.5 months. However, such experience was sufficient to identify and recognize some of the potential ethical and political issues involved in research and provoke a retrospective interpretation of the events in which I participated with the objective of offering useful insight. My point of departure in this chapter is that knowing about the importance of dilemmas and proper consideration of reflexivity, positionality and normativity in research design and implementation would help to prepare researchers to face these challenges. My goal with this chapter, therefore, is not to provide a 'how-to' guide for researchers, but rather to raise issues for reflection in individual situations and to facilitate the process of preparation, foresight and implementation of policy ethnography.

This chapter contributes to the relatively limited literature on the ethics and politics of ethnography, specifically in the cases of studying policy mobility and translation. This is a relatively new subject for the urban planning and public policy audiences, as well as for international relations scholars, and I hope to draw attention to these issues and stimulate more research and the sharing of personal research experiences, ethical dilemmas and political hiccups. I believe that in making methodological and policy literature more reflexive, scholars serve in providing a new yardstick for trustworthiness and transparency in research as a measure of its quality as well as transformation potential. And explicit and in-depth discussions of reflexivity, positionality and normativity provide great opportunities for both reflexive and transformational social science research (Fournier and Grey 2000).

Note

- 1 This chapter presents a significant rewriting of an earlier article by Mukhtarov et al. 2016 published in *Environment and Planning A* and entitled 'Political and ethical aspects in the ethnography of policy translation: research experiences from Turkey and China'.

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