

Ethnography as a Method for Comparative Public Policy Analysis: Premises, Promises and Perils

Raul Pacheco-Vega
Assistant Professor, Public Administration Division
Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE)
Circuito Tecnopolo Norte 117, Tecnopolo Pocitos II, Delegación Hacienda Nueva
Aguascalientes, Aguascalientes 20313
Mexico
E-mail: raul.pacheco-vega@cide.edu
Website: <http://www.raulpacheco.org/blog>

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Introduction

Undertaking comparative public policy analysis requires us to think broadly about types of policies we are required to analyse, tools we should use to investigate them and strategies to implement research projects and policy analytical programmes. While qualitative methods have a very broad repertoire of tools to choose from, it is important to ensure that we choose the right approach for the public policy issue we are researching, as well as the appropriate implementation strategy for the method we've chosen. In this chapter, I focus on ethnography as a robust research method to study comparative policy analysis.

While there are numerous other approaches to studying and engaging in policy analysis from a comparative perspective, ranging from qualitative to quantitative to spatial, ethnographic research strategies can yield insights we would not be able to gain through other methods. Ethnography enables a researcher to embed him/herself in a specific community in a way that can provide in-depth coverage and analysis of policy issues that are often rendered invisible if we use other methods, even qualitative ones. Frequently, the only way to properly uncover thorny issues with public policy implications is undertaking in-depth ethnographic fieldwork. Thus the importance of including ethnography in the repertoire of research strategies available to comparative policy analysts.

In this chapter, I engage with a broad range of literature, though I narrow down my literature review by focusing on scholarly works that have both public policy implications and a focus on ethnography as a research method. Moreover, I use a comparative lens to explore the literature. While single-case studies can have insights for comparative policy analysis, here I follow Wolf and Baehler's lead, drawing lessons that can be applicable to various cases despite using a single unit of analysis, but looking toward using these lessons, insights and learnings and apply them to larger N studies, even if N is still within the medium range (3-6 cases).

The chapter is organized as follows: in the second section, right after this introduction, I outline what is ethnography, how and when we use ethnographic methods in policy research, and what limitations does the method have. In this section, I also outline how ethnography works, and how we can link comparative methods with ethnography more clearly. While many ethnographies are specific to one case study, there are very clear and tangible ways to cross-link comparative methods with ethnography and policy analysis. I lay out the contributions that the method itself can provide and how we can link methodology usage with policy analytical goals. In the third section, I outline how the method can be applied in comparative policy analysis, offer a brief summary of each one of the stages that my framework outlines, and provide a number of examples of how comparative policy analytical lessons can be drawn from various ethnographies.

What is ethnography and how can it be applied in comparative policy analysis?

Ethnography as a research method involves engaging in deep observation of a phenomenon, as well as embedding oneself in the site where the research is taking place. Ethnographic work seeks to understand (much like the root of its method in the anthropological sciences) cultures (McGranahan 2014). While there's a discussion on whether fieldwork is necessarily anthropological and thus ethnographic, McGranahan argues that it is possible to teach ethnographic sensibility without having to necessarily enter a research site. What McGranahan suggests in her teaching-oriented piece is that we ought to teach students (and by extension, I would argue, policy analysts) to consider the broad variety of cultural contexts, practices and individual characteristics that make up a research site.

As McGranahan writes:

“Ethnography is the writing of the people, the writing of society, the writing of culture. Ethnographies have long been what anthropologists write and read, but recently we have also been using the term as a shorthand for fieldwork, saying we are “doing ethnography” when we mean ethnographic research. By ethnographic research, anthropologists mean the ever-evolving Malinowskian program of an ethnographer in the field conducting participant-observation paired with a range of other methods, living within a community, and getting deeply into the rhythms, logics, and complications of life as lived by a people in a place, or perhaps by peoples in places. Ethnographic research, then, is more than a method.” (McGranahan 2014, p. 23)

While there are dozens of methodological book manuscripts that have been published on the topic of ethnography and how to undertake an in-depth, fieldwork-based study using ethnographic approaches, I will not survey the vast literature on the topic in this chapter. However, I do want to help the reader situate him/herself in the broader context of why is it that we use ethnography in comparative policy analysis and where in the analytical process are methodological choices made. Fundamentally, ethnography is about culture, about understanding how communities, individuals and societies live. Ethnography also asks whether and how their lived experiences have shaped choices, decision-making processes and individual behaviours.

Though ethnography is used in a broad variety of disciplines and fields of scholarship, some of the most interesting applications include museum ethnography (Burt 1998) and corporate (organizational) ethnography (Ladner 2014). Traditionally, human geographers, sociologists and (less frequently so) political scientists borrowed from anthropology and applied ethnographic approaches to understand key issues. But as surveys of the field as recent as 2016 (Becker et al. 2004; Cappellaro 2016; Huby, Harries, and Grant 2011) have shown, there's been a renewed interest in applications of ethnographic approaches in the policy sciences.

As early as 1981, Rist had already called attention to the value of ethnography as a research method. His main concern was that the policy sciences were veering towards a more complex and confusing model of undertaking studies of policy design, implementation and evaluation (Rist 1981). From problem definition to instrument choice, ethnographic engagement with local communities facilitates learning from those individuals whose lives will be affected by

decision-making processes from which they are often excluded. As Rist outlines, “[q]ualitative research can contribute by means of restricting the problem definition, by isolating the levers of change, and by identifying unintended consequences of policy decisions” (Rist 1981, p. 487)

Van Hulst also showed how ethnographers can make sense of how local governments’ decision-making processes have an impact on communities. As van Hulst indicates,

“[e]thnographic work brings something special to the study of sense-making in local governance: the ethnographer’s access to the experiences lived by the people under study. In addition, ethnographers not only look for the experiences of the people in and around local government, they also draw on their own experiences. Because the experiences of politicians, administrators, bureaucrats, professionals and citizens are both the result of and the basis for their acts, understanding these experiences helps ethnographers to explain the practice of local governance.” (van Hulst 2008, p. 143)

Van Hulst makes explicit the reasons why ethnographic methods offer great contributions to the study and practice of comparative policy analysis: it allows researchers to understand all stakeholders’ viewpoints. It is much harder to gain these understandings through a simplistic quantitative analysis. Even qualitative semi-structured interviews are not able to provide as much in-depth insight as deeply embedded fieldwork. While van Hulst’s description is specific to one field site, engaging in comparative analysis isn’t hard because all we really need to do is simply increase the number of case studies or leave one constant and vary other dimensions, even within the same case study¹.

We can find ethnography used as a method in a very broad range of policy issue areas, from language policy (Johnson 2009) to foreign policy (Kuus 2013) to welfare control and redistributive policies (Dubois 2009) to health policy (Erasmus 2014; Walt et al. 2008) to urban regeneration (Cossa 2009; Davies 2002; Guarneros-Meza 2009; Mah 2010), to citizen participation strategies in comparative urban policy (Maginn 2006). But as I will outline in further sections of this chapter, there has always been a reciprocal, symbiotic and intimate relationship between anthropology and public policy.

Hackenberg indicated that Bohannan first argued how anthropology was supposed to engage with the policy sciences by providing a compass and directional strategy to focus on issues that are relevant to society rather than abstract, simplistic examinations of public agencies, bureaucracies and political life (Hackenberg 1985). Around the early 1980s, conversations between anthropology and public policy began in earnest, although it wasn’t until later that policy scientists began taking anthropology more seriously and engaging with the literature. More importantly, a new wave of interest in ethnographic, intense, time-consuming, in-depth fieldwork-based approaches for policy studies began around the mid-1980s to early 1990s. Obviously, this coincided with a search for policy relevance, a phenomenon that has also regained traction in the political science literature. Even experimental political science is beginning to look for ways to integrate qualitative, ethnographic approaches with field experiments (Paluck 2010).

¹ Though I note that within-case variation usually is examined using process tracing.

Most scholars of public policy will probably remember Dvora Yanow's "Conducting Interpretive Policy Analysis", perhaps the most cited single-author book on policy analysis using qualitative methods. Yanow has almost single-handedly taught two generations of policy analysts how to conduct this type of work, even if her book isn't specific to comparative analysis.

One can trace the growing interest in applying anthropological research methods to studies of public policy to a few works by Shore, Wright, Seidel, Vidal, Wedel, Feldman and several other scholars. The anthropology of public policy emerged as a new field of study because this discipline is well situated to understand the complexity and messiness of public policy making processes (J. Wedel and Feldman 2005; J. R. Wedel et al. 2005). While there's much work done on social policy (Okongwu and Mencher 2000), this renewed interest in an anthropological examination of policy processes, mechanisms, actors and outcomes has sparked important innovations in how we study public policies across a broad range of issue areas.

While there's some literature on the use of ethnographic methods in corporate governance (Trondman 2000), and public management (Cappellaro 2016; Huby, Harries, and Grant 2011), there's still a dearth of reliable sources on the application of ethnography to undertake comparative policy analysis. Ethnography in comparative policy analysis has been relatively shunned, as Geva-May and coauthors have shown in a recent analysis of twenty years of *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* articles. Only 2% of all articles surveyed by Geva-May et al are reported as having an ethnographic methodological strategy. This means that over a period of twenty years, just 7 pieces published in the last 20 years of JCPA issues do explicitly use ethnography as a method for comparative policy analytical work (Geva-May, Hoffman, and Muhleisen 2018). Contrast this figure with 55 pieces that use quantitative approaches (15%) and 219 case-based (62%). While JCPA is not as quantitative as, say, the *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* (JPART), it is quite clear that ethnography does not enjoy the same degree of popularity that other methodological strategies have. In this section, I survey available literature and examine different approaches to the application of ethnography in comparative policy analysis.

Naturally, one can safely assume that case study research can also involve ethnographic approaches, but it is striking that comparative policy analysis does not seem to have an appreciation for the benefits that in-depth observation over a substantially long period of time can have. In this chapter I answer the question: what can ethnography contribute to our understanding of comparative policy analysis and how can insights from ethnographic research methodologies be best implemented in policy analysis of comparative cases. While there is much

² For the reason I noted earlier in the chapter, I looked at how ethnography was used within the policy sciences. Therefore, in this section I do not make a distinction between public administration, public policy and public management as my intent here is to demonstrate that the method is being applied. In later sections of the paper I explain how ethnographic methods are applied to specific policy issue areas including, but not limited to education.

value in presenting specific, detailed cases of comparative policy analysis where ethnography is used to learn from the community under study, throughout this chapter I take a much more focused approach. Instead of presenting a detailed case study of a comparative policy analysis ethnography, I draw lessons from a broad range of scholarly works and offer an analytical examination of the utility of the method itself. While I do survey literature across disciplines and policy issue areas, I maintain a narrow focus on how the method addresses the policy problem under study.

Throughout the chapter, I emphasize a variety of methodological challenges that comparative policy research problems can present, how theory can be applied to specific issues and what the scope of comparison is. It's important to note that while ethnographic work can be reported at the national level, by its very nature it is a method that is more amenable to subnational comparisons, particularly across communities in one country, state or metropolitan area. One could also potentially conduct comparative ethnographic work across different states and countries, but the generalizability of those findings could be challenged simply because of the sheer amount of work and number of cases that would be required to properly and reasonably report national-level patterns. Finally, while it is clear ethnographic work lends itself to cross-scalar comparisons (from the neighbourhood-level to the local scale to the federal), insights don't necessarily "scale". One should be wary of, for example, generalizing about Canadian federal-level policies and their impacts on local communities when drawing from case studies of specific locations.

Three modes of ethnographic engagement in comparative policy analysis

There are at least two main modes of inquiry in comparative policy analysis using ethnographic methods. One way is purposefully choosing ethnography as a research method and creating an inquiry/investigative strategy around the project so that researchers embed themselves in field sites from the beginning. I call this a "push approach". This approach is purposive, intent, crafted, because here the methodological choice is made before engaging in comparative policy analysis. This strategy "pushes" ethnography to the core of the project and demands from researchers that they think about case study selection, tactics for engagement with community members, processes to enter field sites as well as exit strategies. The "push approach" makes comparative policy analysis the core framework of thinking and ethnography the fundamental mode of scholarly and analytical inquiry. From a methodological perspective, using a "push approach" necessitates a lot of previous work before engaging in fieldwork, or even thinking about case study selection. This method, however, is much more robust in terms of ethics and also logistically is the one that makes most sense if policy issue areas are thorny and require a lot of care in developing a strategy for fieldwork deployment. There are various subjects that can be this worrisome, like border policy, security policy, drug policy and homelessness policy.

Another way of using ethnography in comparative policy analysis is to draw from already-published ethnographic accounts and systematically examining their content, looking for patterns, processes and ideas that can be applied to policy analytical work in comparative perspective. I call this the "pull approach". The "pull approach" focuses on exploring a broad

range of ethnographic works to then draw insights from each one of the case studies and policy areas where this method has been applied and then, afterwards, synthesizes these learnings in a comparative policy analytical report. This methodological framework puts the issue area at the core, and therefore the ethnographic application is the main substantial data contributor. Comparative policy analysis then functions as a lens through which various ethnographies can be examined and lessons be drawn. In this chapter I demonstrate the usefulness of the “pull approach”, albeit I also draw attention to potential concerns with the

Moreover, there’s a third way of integrating ethnographic approaches to comparative policy analysis. I call this the “mixed approach”. In a mixed approach, we draw insights from the pull approach to better design potential fieldwork and choose case study sites more systematically and carefully. This strategy combines the best of both worlds, as it engages in an iterative process that can be then improved through repeated engagement, review and revision.

To conduct this component of the literature review for this chapter, I read and analysed 20 single-authored book-length volumes that are reported as ethnographies, in a broad range of policy issue areas and geographical regions, from housing in Milwaukee (Desmond’s *Eviction*) to policing in Pennsylvania (Goffman’s *On The Run*), from conservation in the Brazilian Amazonia (Kawa’s *Amazonia in the Anthropocene*) to border migration in the U.S-Mexico border (De Leon’s *The Land of Open Graves*) to foreign aid in Sierra Leone for HIV prevention programmes (Benton’s *HIV Exceptionalism*). A few ethnographies focused on similar issues across different geographical scales (Millar’s *Reclaiming the Discarded* study of waste pickers in Sao Paulo, in Brazil and Reno’s *Waste Away* analysis of waste picking in a Michigan landfill, in the US) and types of work (Robin Nagle’s *Picking Up*)³. I also examined other sole-authored, book-length ethnographic works that covered important issues that may be under-researched but have relevant policy implications, like Mears’ ethnographic account of the modelling industry.

None of these volumes were specifically written by public policy scholars, but they provide important comparative public policy and policy analytical insights, even if in many of these cases authors conducted their ethnographies in a single country/city. To be able to draw lessons for comparative policy analysis from published works that weren’t specifically written by policy scholars, one needs to look for insights that are specific to the policy sciences: how did conservation work in the Amazonian region and what lessons can we draw from ethnographic work for instrument design and implementation? Why isn’t the modeling and fashion industry properly regulated and why isn’t this regulation apparently or visibly part of any government’s agenda-setting process?

One of my contributions with this chapter, as I demonstrate in the next sections, resides in making the connections between how ethnographies are conducted with whether they have explicit policy goals. Moreover, I highlight the comparative component and show how policy analysts can use these ethnographies to help bureaucrats and politicians make more informed policy decisions. I should note that I will not attempt to synthesize every one of the twenty volumes I’ve analyzed. Nevertheless, I will use a few vignettes from these published works to illustrate how their ethnographic work facilitates comparative policy analysis. Moreover, in doing an in-depth, broad-ranging and far-reaching review of the literature, I also came across

³ A complete list of these books is included in the references section.

several journal articles that can also illuminate how we think about analyzing policy using a comparative lens.

On comparative immigration policy and borderland security policy, we can draw many insights from Francisco Cantú's "The Line Becomes the River". Cantú's experience as a border patrol agent illuminated his ethnographic study of the failures and shortcomings of border policy across the US-Mexico border (Cantú 2018). While we can use the United States of America as a case study of draconian border protection and security policies, Cantú demonstrates the variegated trajectories that immigration policies take when dealing with a broad range of heterogeneous populations. The US has extraordinarily tough border policies, but Cantú's work allows us to use a comparative lens to explore and attempt to understand the differences between US-Mexico and Mexico-Belize/Mexico-Guatemala border policies. While the US has extreme vetting processes, Mexico does not lag far behind and has possibly equally bad or even worse policies to deal with illegal immigrants.

Sectors that have been poorly regulated include the modelling and fashion industry and the meat commodity chain. Ethnographic work that investigates how each one of these industries operate enables comparative policy analysts to draw attention to key regulatory issues, including discretionary government action, unregulated sectors, poor enforcement and weak policy design. Both *Pricing Beauty* (Mears 2011) and *Every Twelve Seconds* (Pachirat 2013) offer insightful overviews of the key regulatory issues plaguing both modelling and fashion and meat production. While both ethnographies were conducted in the United States of America, insights drawn from both can be generalized to other countries' industrial performances. Hence the potential for cross-national comparative policy analytical work.

On immigration policy, both De Leon's *Land of Open Graves* and Cantú's *The Line Becomes the River* offer gripping and painful ethnographies of border policy issues (Cantú 2018; De Leon 2015) across the US-Mexico border. Methodologically speaking, the ethnographic approach Cantú takes is quite different from De Leon's, as Cantú embodied policy and became a border security guard in order to conduct his in-depth fieldwork. De Leon uses ethnography, archaeology, linguistics and forensic science, combining all these disciplines and methods masterfully. What makes these two volumes quite useful for comparative policy analysis is that they can showcase different ways in which ethnography can be applied to understand a policy issue that affects not only the Southern border of the United States of America, but by extension what's happening in the Southern border of Mexico. Wolf's *Mano Dura* complements these texts by offering an examination of street gangs in El Salvador. Though El Salvador is not directly bordering Mexico, it does share a border with Guatemala, and therefore, many of the migratory issues that affect and drive US immigration policy respond by extension to violence in El Salvador. Even if not her main research goal, Wolf's work offers some insight into policy initiatives such as the *Frontera Sur* programme and the effect of US immigration deterrent practices on immigration from El Salvador as well as a comparison of US and Salvadorean approaches to gang policy (another cross-national issue) (S. Wolf 2017).

Comparing water governance and infrastructure policy across countries is important if we intend draw relevant policy learnings and implement appropriate instruments across countries, regions and cities. Nikhil Anand's "Hydraulic City" provides a much-needed examination of the

various ways in which urban water policy in Mumbai fails, and how we can learn from those failures (Anand 2017). Throughout his book, Anand illuminates the multiple mechanisms by which infrastructure and water and sanitation delivery in the Indian city of Mumbai do not perform to the required standard. Moreover, Anand shows that the Mumbai case can also shed light on how informal water markets emerge to ensure robust service provision. It's important to note that other scholars have also shown similar patterns of emergence of informality in potable water and sanitation service provision in different cities in India, as Ranganathan shows in her study of water mafias in Bangalore (Ranganathan 2014, 2018).

Hoover's multidisciplinary examination of activism against toxic emissions in a Mohawk community allows us to understand how politics and racism can play a preeminent role in where Superfund sites are located. Environmental racism is prevalent in the United States as it has been widely documented elsewhere, but where Hoover's ethnographic contribution can help comparative toxics policy is in synthesizing knowledge and information not only from traditional sources including scientists, experts and activists, but also from the Indigenous communities where her ethnographic engagement occurred, in the community of Akwesasne in upstate New York (Hoover 2017). Hoover's work can also be linked to that of Sarah Ann Wylie and her ethnographic study of activism against fracking (Wylie 2018). Wylie's work in comparison with Hoover's can offer enormous insight into how different communities respond to toxic emissions and polluting industrial processes occurring within the scope of their daily lives. A related account of communities affected by pollution in China by Anna Lora-Wainwright suggests again potential for comparative toxics policy analytic work, as one could compare community responses in three Chinese communities (Lora-Wainwright 2017) with how other countries' populations responded.

Global health issues affect domestic populations and offer great potential for comparative policy analytical work. Adia Benton's HIV Exceptionalism is one great example that cross-links the global sphere of action of the World Health Organization and its HIV programmes and the domestic application of these approaches in Sierra Leone (Benton 2015). As Benton indicates,

“Sierra Leone— like most African countries— benefits from a large influx of foreign aid money specifically targeted at HIV/AIDS prevention and care programs. This foreign aid comes, in large part, because international donors believe HIV is an exceptional condition, requiring a focused, intensive response that is unlike any directed to other diseases” (Benton 2015, p. x).

As I have shown in this section, even if ethnographies aren't written with a comparative policy analytical framework in mind, a pull approach allows us to combine insights from a broad range of disciplines, policy issues and sectors. For example, one can just as easily gain insights for global environmental policies by examining conservation at subnational scales, as Nick Kawa's Amazonia in the Anthropocene does (Kawa 2016). His examination of pre-Columbian Amerindians and contemporary rural Amazonians have shaped conservation policies. Using a cross-temporal approach, Kawa's work allows me to show by extension how comparative policy analytical work can be undertaken within the same geographical region at two points in time. Moreover, as Benton and Kawa's ethnographies offer bottom-up (Kawa) and top-down (Benton)'s examinations of the direction of policy intervention, their work helps us understand

how comparative policy analytical work can be undertaken vertically in both top-down and bottom-up trajectories.

Three contributions to studies of the regulation and governance of informal work, Nagle's *Picking Up*, Reno's *Waste Away* and Millar's *Reclaiming the Discarded* all focus on the governance of waste, but examine different work functions in different geographical regions. Nagle conducted an ethnography of sanitation workers in New York City (Nagle 2014), whereas Reno embedded himself in a US local landfill (Reno 2016), and Millar examined the lives of informal waste pickers in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (Millar 2018). We could use my pull approach to peruse these authors' research to conduct cross-national (Reno and Miller) and cross-sectoral (Nagle and Reno) comparative waste governance analyses.

Comparative policy analysis and policy studies from a comparative perspective: The two faces of Janus?

One of the important and most interesting issues that arise when we attempt to categorize the various ways in which ethnographic methods are applied to comparative policy analysis is the broad range of applications that various methods of comparison offer public administration, public policy and public management. While I am wary of engaging in a categorization and labeling war, of which we've seen very little productive discourse emerge, it is important to note that comparisons can be pursued in all areas of the policy sciences and public administration literatures. Comparative analysis can be applied to all these areas, and therefore we continue to see blurred definitions of what comparative public policy (Engeli, Rothmayr Allison, and Montpetit 2018), comparative policy studies (Engeli and Rothmayr Allison 2014), comparative public administration (Van de Walle and Brans 2018) all mean. A recently published survey article marked the 20th anniversary of the JCPA, the premiere journal outlet for comparative work, by outlining the multiple meanings of comparative policy analysis (Van de Walle and Brans 2018).

Even though I am reluctant to conflate definitions presented by Van de Walle and Brans, Engeli, Rothmayr Allison and Montpetit and Radin and Weimer, after the careful display and thorough categorization their authors offer, I do argue that comparative policy analytical work can emerge from, and be undertaken through, systematic applications of various theoretical frameworks that inform all areas (public management, administration, policy) of the policy sciences. As Peters, Fontaine and Mendez indicate, the purpose of comparative policy analysis is to help understand a broad range of phenomena, of which change is a fundamental one. I want to call special attention to the questions they raise about comparative analysis of policy change:

“Change is a multidimensional problem which raises many questions for policy analysis. Why does it occur (or not)? Where does it come from? How can it be measured? When does it become irreversible? How can it be predicted?” (B.G. Peters, Fontaine, and Mendez 2018, p.135)

Tracing the causal mechanisms of policy change and following potential trajectories that can emerge from implementing a specific policy instrument can both be undertaken through the application of a comparative perspective at a micro-scale. Qualitative methods are particularly

amenable to this undertaking. Of all these non-quantitative methodological tools, ethnography is the one that best provides insights about individual and group behaviour that can be then used to inform policy design (Howlett and Mukherjee 2018).

One could also use process tracing in combination with ethnographic approaches to establish trajectories of causality and evaluating effects of instruments, programmes and policies. These applications can be undertaken using a comparative perspective, very much along the lines of what the field of comparative politics does. In fact, one could easily argue that both fields (comparative policy analysis and comparative politics) are inextricably linked, as B. Guy Peters demonstrates. While these sub-fields seem to have followed diverging trajectories, Peters makes explicit the clear linkages that exist between the two scholarly camps (B. Guy Peters 2018).

Researchers should be forewarned, of course, when attempting to use qualitative methods. There are several valid critiques that arise when engagement with the method and its application is done poorly. These criticisms usually focus on the possibilities of making mistakes by choosing a quantitative tradition and epistemology to a problem that requires a qualitative approach. The very nature of how we do research and the type of policy issue area we are trying to address have impacts on methodological choices we make. As Brower and colleagues indicate, researchers should be very careful when designing a study requiring a qualitative research strategy, primarily because the assumptions that quantitative approaches have do not apply to qualitative methods (Brower, Abolafia, and Carr 2000).

Which policy issue areas use ethnography?

Perhaps the most well-known substantive policy area where ethnography is clearly and legitimately used to conduct and engage in comparative policy analysis is education. A quick Google Scholar search using the search terms “ethnography” AND “policy analysis” immediately yields citations associated with educational policy on the first page of results. Certainly, ethnography is frequently applied in critical policy studies. While it is not a prerequisite that ethnographies have a critical component, the method emerges from a conversation between interpretivist and positivist methodological traditions in qualitative research.

Educational policy studies have used ethnographic approaches for a very long time now, in particular because of the critical nature of the method itself. Ethnography has a very critical approach to social investigations. Ethnographic research necessitates a clear acknowledgement of the researcher’s own positionality and a deep understanding of reflexivity as a mode of inquiry. Positionality and reflexivity are extremely important components (Katz 1994; Sultana 2007)

Ethnography is not the only method that critical education policy scholars use. In his analysis of policy historiography, policy archaeology and policy genealogy, Gale outlines how different research methodologies contribute to our shared understanding of the factors that shape educational agendas, policy instruments and outcomes. Gale’s analysis focuses on Australian higher education during the late 1990s (Gale 2001), but his insights can be extrapolated to other countries, issue areas and temporal horizons. Hence the value of this kind of work for

comparative policy analysis. Gale's typology of policy analytical methodologies helps us situate ethnography as a research method within a broad range of qualitative methods. While Gale's paper isn't about ethnography itself, his main comment does highlight the importance that the researcher's own positionality has in undertaking comparative educational policy analysis. Making ethnographic research explicit about this issue is also fundamentally at the core of critical inquiry.

While there are some elements of positivism in ethnographic inquiry, the method itself and its theoretical grounding are clearly located closer to the critical side of the spectrum. Even though ethnography can be used to describe an observable phenomenon, it also can (and probably should) be used to reflect on practices of oppression and engage in critical examinations of power imbalances. As Levinson and collaborators outline, a critical approach to policy can lead to the democratization of policy processes as well (Levinson, Sutton, and Winstead 2009).

Comparison as a research strategy in ethnographic work

Comparison is inherent to the study of policy analysis and its pragmatic application to researching and providing solutions to public issues that are deemed important and appear on governmental agendas. As Wolf and Baehler aptly state,

“Comparison lies at the heart of all policy analysis. Initially, policy students may learn how to compare different policy interventions in theory and in application to a specific problem. Analysing “what should be done” to improve situations involves applying specialist techniques to project (based on trends), predict (based on theory) and conjecture (based on expert judgment)” (Wolf and Baehler 2017, p. 1)

Comparing is inherent to both ethnography and comparative policy analysis. (Vogtz 2002). This point is brought home by Vogtz quite masterfully as she conducts a multi-case study with fieldwork in four primary schools in Switzerland and England. She uses a variation of a 2x2 matrix (English Large, English Small, Swiss Large and Swiss Small) to choose the types of schools where she would be engaging in fieldwork. She categorized these institutions by size and country. A multi-site ethnography of this sort can be easily used to undertake comparative education policy analysis, which in the end was the main goal that Vogtz pursued.

However, not every ethnographic comparison must be multi-country, cross-national. A researcher could easily draw lessons from single-country, sub-national cross-unit comparisons. Even more so, one should not be wary of using single-case studies, particularly because iteration can enable researchers to generate enough understanding about a phenomenon that it becomes easier to analyze even within the confines of a single case study. I quote Wolf and Baehler again:

“Specifically, we suggest that an essential aspect of lesson drawing – gaining a new, plausible idea – draws on policy professionals' natural capability to iterate between cases that supply transferable lessons and cases to which those lessons may be best applied” (Wolf and Baehler 2017, p. 3)

Methodologically speaking, Wolf and Baehler provide a very useful template for how we should conduct comparative policy analysis, using a single-case study as the cornerstone of our examination. While their discussion is specific to policy transfer, it can be easily translated to the application of ethnographic approaches to lesson drawing. In this case,

“For the policy professional at the centre of a transfer, attention is essentially comparative: a receptive and attuned learner acquires and judges plausible lessons from B for application in A to achieve A” (Wolf and Baehler 2017, p. 13)

Finally, Wolf and Baehler draw home the crux of any attempt to use ethnography as a research strategy for comparative policy analysis. As they indicate, the research process (and by extension, the analysis) is iterative, and dialogic. Analysts should engage in repeated dialogue with communities under study and with stakeholders across all levels and sectors. Following Wolf and Baehler:

“Comparative case learning can be enhanced through the dialogic interaction in network exchanges between the source and target case actors, the memories of the past and prospective mages that are presented, triggered and created in the course of those interactions” (Wolf and Baehler 2017, p. 13)

Doing ethnography for comparative policy analysis: An applied approach

In this chapter, I pay special attention to the methodological strategy, and focus not only to the theoretical underpinnings of why we do ethnography or when should we use it, but also on how a policy analyst should enter the field and what tactics should he/she use. While the core of this chapter is centred on doing comparative policy analysis using ethnographic work, one could easily adapt these techniques to fit non-comparative, single-case study work. My main goal with this chapter is to help the reader navigate the broad range of strategies and techniques that ethnographers in various disciplines use, and facilitate decision-making processes in which investigators must engage.

There are several choices that inherently accompany every research project. How to decide on the number of cases? How many individuals should engage in fieldwork and what tasks should be assigned? What are the ethics of engaging in studying vulnerable populations? Given that so many policy problems impact highly marginalized communities, how can a researcher minimize negative impacts on these communities? What kind of data should the seek to researcher find and extract from informants and contexts, and to what extent should he/she be engaging in action-research or participant observation that has a public/societal engagement component? In this chapter I address some of these questions, albeit I can't offer a more in-depth examination than what I provide here within the space allotted and scope of this volume.

Here I just would like to briefly outline strategies for each stage of the research cycle. While a detailed discussion of each one of these steps falls outside the scope of this chapter, I do want to ensure that the reader is aware of the broad range of activities that engaging in

ethnographic work using a comparative policy analysis approach would entail. I list these stages below.

- a) positing a policy-analytical research question,
- b) choosing target populations/communities/countries/case studies,
- c) deciding on specific investigative approaches, fieldwork strategies and team composition
- d) preparing interview and open-ended question protocols
- e) entering the field and building trust, rapport through engaging with the community
- f) writing field notes that are specifically policy analytical
- g) synthesizing data gleaned from field notes and analyzing these data with a comparative policy analytical lens
- h) reporting ethnographic data for policy makers

I would also take the time to discuss the ethical, practical, pragmatic and field-specific implications of using ethnographic approaches to comparative policy analysis. For this specific component, but also relevant to the other too, I focus on the three combined elements that make comparative policy analysis what it is: a) *analysis* (that is, the systematic examination of information, data and evidence to produce insights that can then explain phenomena); b) *policy* (that is, an approach to solving public problems) and c) *comparative* (therefore, implicitly drawing comparisons across observation, cases, approaches, units of analysis).

Ethnographic work facilitates analysis by providing rigorously collected empirical evidence. Data obtained through in-depth fieldwork can then be used to analyse individual policies performances, their effects on specific target populations and potentially, evaluate the positive and negative consequences of policy implementation. For example, van Hulst has demonstrated that local governance can be used to understand local governance

In previous sections of this chapter I've defined ethnography, but at this specific point in my development of the paper's argument I want to come back to what exactly makes ethnography a suitable method for comparative policy analysis. I argue that smaller-N, in-depth observational and participatory approaches to understanding policy processes across different cases have high explanatory power to discern potential causal pathways and developmental policy trajectories. Because ethnographers follow individuals and smaller groups throughout a longer/extended period of time, they are also able to trace how decision-making processes take place at a micro-scale. Larger N methodologies are unable to capture individuals' reasoning processes, whereas continued contact with interviewees and key informants can provide more insight into how they made policy choices and/or brought issues to a specific forum.

Take the issue of comparative policy agendas' research. This area has had enormous growth in recent years, and the Comparative Policy Agendas Project has facilitated large-scale, larger-N scale studies of how specific issues reach the agenda. How agendas are set can be studied with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, but micro-level analyses can only be undertaken using a smaller-N research strategy. Given that ethnography necessitates but also facilitates in-depth connections between informants and the researcher, it is more likely that

he/she will be able to trace decision-making processes throughout more easily than if we inferred them from a larger-scale study.

Promises and peril of the application of ethnography as a research method for comparative policy analysis

While in previous sections I have presented the virtues of using ethnographic methods in policy research through a comparative perspective, in this section I want to outline the potential this method has, but also the challenges that it posits for comparative policy analysts. Even though ethnography as a research strategy is highly involved and can enable researchers to create long-term bonds and establish relationships of trust between communities under study and scholars, it is also time-consuming and frequently expensive, not only in terms of financial investments but also researchers' personal time.

Ethnography as a research method has relatively solid popularity in sociology and human geography, but its applications in other social sciences and fields of study seem to be sparse, and sometimes questioned. Even though there are many excellent recent ethnographies that have proven to have societal relevance, wide global visibility and the potential for important policy impact such as Kathy J. Cramer's political ethnography of rural voters in Wisconsin and Matt Desmond's devastating analysis of evictions in Milwaukee, some critics remain adamant about the negatives that accompany the use of ethnography in policy-relevant scholarship. This is partly in response to recent critiques of sociological work such as Alice Goffman's in-depth ethnography of overpoliced African American communities in Philadelphia, partly a result of the overt trend of social sciences to focus in quantitative methods and large numbers of cases.

There are also valid critiques recently made about the potential for questioning researcher ethics upon the use of this method, the (apparent) lack of reproducibility and the boundaries and limits of what an ethnographer can capture within a certain temporal and spatial horizon. Many of these critiques are quite valid regardless of whether the method is used in anthropological studies, sociological analyses or public administration scholarship. In this section, I review recent critiques of ethnography as a research method, while maintaining the position that there is still much potential for this methodological approach for the comparative study of policy development, and for conducting comparative policy analysis.

There are critiques of ethnography that center around generalizability and the validity of broader generalizations drawn from a primarily inductive approach. Given the extraordinarily low number of cases that can be analyzed through ethnographic approaches if there is only one researcher, critics of the method argue that there is not a lot of room for generalization from the specificity that ethnography brings along.

Other criticisms focus on *external validity, reliability and replicability*. These critiques center around the question of whether one can draw causal claims from ethnographic observation, given the deeply personal nature of this method and the implicit but clear potential for bias. Ethnographers bring their own experiences to the field and can potentially also show biases and maintain priors instead of looking for puzzles, uncovered patterns and paradoxes. I

have explicitly specified that there is a potential and therefore a possibility for a comparative policy analyst using ethnographic approaches to show bias and to have that bias applied to his/her understanding of a phenomenon. But there is conflicting evidence on whether this is a frequent occurrence. If we seek to demonstrate that researchers and analysts have inherent implicit (or even explicit) biases that they can then apply to their case study, we will need to be very specific in pointing out the mechanisms through which biases are transmitted and affect the validity of ethnographic researcher.

One of the major critiques of ethnography has come from an ethnographer himself. Rist's concern is that, because of "the low price of admission", anybody who declares to be an ethnographer can be perceived as such, even if they don't actually have any training nor experience (Rist 1980). This worry has been echoed elsewhere, particularly because conducting an ethnography "appears easy". It would seem as though simply embedding oneself without any systematic method nor robust technique nor strategy for rigorous data collection, would be able to perform ethnographic work. Nothing further from the truth. Simply parachuting into a community and spending a few days/weeks/months talking to residents does not entail ethnographic work and cannot be considered as such. Hammersley has called attention to this problem by indicating that disagreement about what is ethnography and how it should be used could potentially lead to even more attacks on the method (Hammersley 2017) and less interest not only from sociologists, political scientists and human geographers, but from other disciplines as well. I agree with this take only partially because critiques are necessary for survival and growth of a research method.

I can recognize three main concerns with ethnography that can be of relevance to comparative policy analysis. As far as I can tell, researchers from other disciplines and ontological traditions are concerned with reproducibility, transparency, reliability, validity and ethics. The first concern I'd like to tackle in this discussion is the combination of issues of reliability and validity. How do we decide what kind of ethnographic data is valid and whether the ethnographer is reliable? What kind of data collection, systematization and storage practices are necessary to make ethnographic reports valid? These are valid questions and remain important if we are to conduct comparative analyses of policy issues that rely on the perceptions of a few researchers. One potential mechanism to alleviate this concern would be to undertake intercoder reliability measurements. This strategy works at the analysis stage, when themes and codes have already been generated (Ryan and Bernard 2003). However, this process probably wouldn't work as easily or as well when the number of researchers is high or when the ethnographies have been multi-sited and different researchers have conducted components of the same project.

On the second issue, it is clearly important to have a more reliable science. Reproducibility and replicability both ensure that our research process can be reproduced, data generation process be replicated, leading to more robust conclusions about the mechanisms at play. With ethnography, this replicability becomes a tad problematic because no two ethnographers. Individual positionality and reflexivity are distinct across scholars and analysts, and therefore interpretation of the same event and experience can vary. This is a feature of the method, and not a bug. Fieldworkers could potentially store and share their field notes, and ask other researchers to interpret from recorded interview transcripts, but it is quite likely that these

investigators will reach different conclusions. Moreover, fostering transparency and data sharing also improves reproducibility. Obvious concerns such as protecting vulnerable populations and ensuring data privacy need to be addressed, of course, and are not minor items on the agenda, specifically because policy analytical work usually deals with sensitive information about target populations, stakeholders, budgets and policy actions. Thus, researchers will need to ponder how to balance transparency with data protection.

On the ethical conundrum that ethnography poses, there are at least two elements that intersect previous concerns. The first one is whether it is ethical to destroy fieldnotes when marginalized populations' privacy is at risk. This worry first arose as a result of numerous critiques of Alice Goffman's award-winning *On The Run*, which is the result of her 6-year-long ethnography of over-policed African-American communities in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in the United States. While lauded in many forums, and winning Best Dissertation Prize in the American Sociological Association's annual meetings, Goffman was also heavily criticized because she disposed of her field notes to avoid having them subpoenaed. These critiques are quite valid because there is no way to verify any of her claims, given the strong degree of anonymization that her data underwent. Goffman's tribulations became a warning sign that other ethnographers heeded. Matthew Desmond, in his ethnography of evicted individuals and families in Milwaukee, had an external verification process throughout the process of generating his award-winning *Evicted*.

The second ethical issue concerns ethnographers' treatment of vulnerable communities and individuals. How to engage in fieldwork in areas where extreme deprivation and abject poverty are rampant? What kind of strategies should researchers use to prevent harm and at the same time, ensure visibility and avoid erasure? Comparative policy analysis has enormous potential for positive societal impact by conducting what Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau call attention to, doubly-engaged social science. This is a term coined by Theda Skocpol, which these authors apply to suggest a doubly-engaged ethnographic approach (Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau 2018).

I should note, however, that more recent, innovative approaches to ethnography, specifically quantitative ethnography and computational ethnography have been praised as having potential to address many of the shortcomings ethnographic techniques have, and to respond to criticisms that this method faces (Trondman 2000). Moreover, a more pragmatic approach to causality in ethnography can potentially strengthen perceptions of validity of inferences drawn from in-depth observational studies through fieldwork. This pragmatic approach is applied by Tavory and Timmermans in their study of reactions of parents and clinicians to positive newborn screening results (Tavory and Timmermans 2013).

Conclusion: Embracing ethnography in comparative policy analysis?

In this chapter, I have outlined the many ways in which ethnography can be used in comparative policy analysis. I have presented not only a basic overview of the method, but I have examined whether choosing a small-N qualitative methodology such as ethnography is beneficial or detrimental to comparative studies of public policies. One clear and obvious

advantage of using ethnography in comparative policy analysis is the benefit of drawing insights from marginalized and vulnerable communities which would otherwise be rendered invisible. In-depth immersion enables the researcher to absorb key details from target populations that would not be easy to determine through other methodologies.

When should we use ethnography in comparative policy analysis? Clearly, as the rest of the works presented in this volume show, and as I argue in this chapter, these in-depth, detailed insights cannot be drawn from large-N studies, but even in smaller N analyses, ethnography is clearly superior to other qualitative methods as it enables the researcher to narrow its focus in such a way that the lived experiences of individual participants can be better, more accurately and clearly reported. From a policy analytical perspective, ethnography facilitates robust policy design and effective instrument choice by connecting target populations with policy analysts and decision-makers.

Who should be responsible for conducting ethnographic comparative policy analysis? While policy analysts can be ethnographers themselves who could conduct field visits and in-depth observational tasks as well as analyse and synthesise data, some projects may specify that trained fieldworkers be the ones conducting ethnographic work. While governments may conduct these studies on their own, it is also likely that they will hire someone, either a private firm, a university group or a subcontractor. In any case, when conducting ethnographic work for comparative policy analysis, it is imperative that everyone working in the field undertake work that is ethically robust, methodologically sound and substantively insightful.

Why should ethnography be used in comparative policy analysis when other qualitative techniques are also available to researchers and could potentially yield similar insights to those drawn from in-depth observational fieldwork? As I outline in the chapter, ethnography allows researchers to be physically and intellectually closer to their subject of study. While structured and semi-structured interviews can help draw relevant insights from key informants, the embedded nature of ethnographic work facilitates repeated interaction with participants, and enables the researcher to capture observational data throughout a longer period of time.

How should we implement ethnography in comparative policy analysis? I attempted to answer this question throughout the chapter, and it would be glib to attempt to provide a short, witty answer here. But one of the most important elements to consider is applying a framework that facilitates community engagement with policy analysts, bureaucrats and politicians. A model of ethnography such as the one championed by Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau (2018), where not only are vulnerable and marginalized individuals and groups protected but also, policy issues that are relevant to them can be brought to light and amplified (Pacheco-Vega and Parizeau 2018). Their “doubly-engaged ethnography” framework can provide a template for comparative policy analysis that is not only theoretically insightful, empirically robust but also socially responsible.

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