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Network ethnography: following the ‘whos’ and the ‘wheres’ of education policy

1. Objectives and purposes

This session aims to present and discuss the method of network ethnography, considering its possibilities and challenges and its appropriateness as a research method for the study of the functioning of global policy networks. We then ‘put the method to work’ by providing an empirical example of one such network and one set of policy mobilities drawing from our research data from Ghana. Here, we follow a pipeline – an embodied policy and explore some of the ‘whos’ and ‘wheres’ of policy, focussing on microfinance as a mobile policy.

While in the last few decades there has been a developing interest in mapping policy networks, there are still relatively few examples of direct research in education on the work of networking, which ‘follows’ policy through networks, or addresses the work and movement of key actors (see AUTHOR, 2010) or which attends to network change and evolution. Our research attempts all of these things. We are interested in how networks work. In doing this, we are involved in ‘testing the limits of ethnography’ as Marcus (1995) puts it and ‘forsaking the perspective of the subaltern’ – to research up and along rather than down.

Policy networks are a set of interconnected policy spaces that are both virtual and real, distant and intimate, formal and informal, ideological and social, vibrant and sometimes fragile. They constitute a set of interactions, interdependencies and exchanges, which do governing work, and are constituted through structures and flows, spaces and places. Network participants exist and interact both virtually and face-to-face. Thus, in understanding a global policy network, the natural setting of the research study is neither geographically fixed nor singular - settings are multiple, fluid and evolving, in part virtual but also with moments of ‘meetingness’ (Urry, 2003). Consequently, network ethnography, as a way of collecting and analysing data, involves a set of adaptational research tactics.

Network ethnography involves *mapping*, *visiting* and *questioning* and as Marcus (1995) puts it – *following*. That is, following people, ‘things’, metaphors, plots, lives and conflicts: and we would add ‘money’ (AUTHOR, 2015). It involves attention to organisations and actors (and their trajectories) and to ‘situations’ in which policy knowledge is mobilized and assembled – the ‘whos’ of policy but also the ‘wheres’ of policy, that is, the places and events in which the ‘past, present and potential futures of education co-exist’ (McCann and Ward, 2012, p. 48). So in our research we have attended to ‘the people, places, and moments’ (Prince, 2010, p. 169) involved in the making and remaking of mobile policies. We ask then, what spaces do policies travel through on the way from one place to another? Who is it that is active in those spaces and who moves between them? How is space/are spaces reconfigured as policies move through it/them and how are policies changed as they move?

2. Theoretical framework

Our research and our methods have built partly on a tradition of policy community/policy network research within political science. These rest on the sensibilities of ethnography and are designed to capture the ‘realities’ of governing and policy making in ways that conventional accounts, that focus on formal state institutions, do not (see Skogstad, 2008). Our work also draws from some incipient efforts within social geography that are concerned with the understanding of what has been called policy ‘mobilities’ (McCann, 2011). This approach problematises the static, transactional and rational perspectives underlying policy transfer studies to consider ‘the constitutive sociospatial context of policy-making activities, and (...) the hybrid mutations of policy techniques and practices across dynamized institutional landscapes’ (Peck, 2011, p. 774).

In the field of education policy analysis, there have been some recent attempts to explain ‘the mobilization, movement and spread of education policy and practice across the global space’ (Dale and Robertson, 2012, p. 2), in particular, focusing on the influence of international organisations in global education agendas (Mundy, 2010; Mundy and Verger, 2015). Therefore, some new, powerful policy

players in global education have been well researched, like the OECD, the World Bank and UNESCO, but others, like edu-businesses, Ed-Tech companies, philanthropies and social enterprises have only recently started to be explored. Some of our recent work (AUTHOR, 2012) has begun to address the global interdependencies and mobilities of policies and business and philanthropic actors as they have begun to have a significant impact on the formulation and reformulation of education policies and practices.

3. Methods

We suggest that 'network ethnography' (AUTHOR, 2012, 2017) is best suited to our attempt to specify the exchanges and transactions between participants in global education policy networks and the roles, actions, motivations, discourses and resources of the different actors involved. As a version of ethnographic practice it broadly adheres to what Burgess (1985, pp. 8-9) identifies as the four primary characteristics of qualitative research. That is:

- The researcher works in a natural setting;
- Studies may be designed and re-designed;
- The research is concerned with social processes and meaning;
- Data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously.

The method shares the fundamental principles of ethnography as a tradition committed to the search for subjectivity and meaning, a suspension of preconceptions and an orientation to discovery.

Network ethnography involves close attention to organisations and actors within the global education policy field, to the chains, paths and connections that join-up these actors, and to 'situations' and events in which policy ideas and methods are mobilized and assembled. To be more precise, a first consideration in describing the different elements of our method stems from recognition that as our research settings are multiple, fluid and evolving, they are also to a large extent virtual. Therefore, our 'following' is both face-to-face through in-depth

interviews with nodal actors within the network and attendance at network events – and virtual (through the Internet and social media).

Thus, network ethnography involves deep and extensive Internet searches (focused on actors, organisations, events and their connections) and attention to related social media, blogs, podcasts, twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, and documents. Wittel (2000) describes the growth in ethnographic work that focuses on online communication and interaction ('ethnography of the Internet') following the emergence of new and rapidly expanding kinds of virtual interaction patterns. *Cyber anthropology, virtual ethnography, netnography* (a combination of internet and ethnography), are all versions of qualitative, interpretive research methodologies that 'adapt (...) the traditional, in-person ethnographic research techniques of anthropology to the study of communications' (Kozinets, 2006, p. 135).

However, little of the potential of the Internet either as a research site or as a research tool has been utilized in education policy research. Hogan (2015, p. 15) suggests that the Internet can provide what she calls the *cyberflâneur* with 'the best illumination for our complex modernity by allowing (...) a researcher to travel and dwell alongside the contemporary mobility of global education policy'. There is a large body of material available (newsletters, press releases, videos, podcasts, interviews, speeches, webpages, as well as social media like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and blogs), that can be identified and analysed as data in policy research. We deploy and examine these sorts of materials and claim they have the potential to illuminate the extent of influence of new kinds of actors, including donors, policy entrepreneurs and various brokers, on processes of policy; and the identification of new spaces of policy and conduits (both virtual and face-to-face) for policy ideas and discourses and crucially, relations and interactions between actors.

Irrespective of the role of digital relations, face-to-face encounters are central to the functioning of 'virtual' networks and policy communities 'in order both to "establish" and to "cement" at least temporarily those weak ties' (Urry, 2003, p.

161). As Cook and Ward (2012, p. 139) put it, places such as ‘conferences, and the various face-to-face communications that occur, continue to be important in creating the conditions under which policy mobility may or may not take place’. These are, in Putnam’s (2000) and Granovetter’s (1973) terms, moments when both bonding and bridging ties are forged and re-newed. Thus network ethnography also involves participating from some of the key occasions where the network participants under consideration come together. We visit such events, although we do not spend long periods of time in the ‘field’. In this sense, again, we move away from studying ‘fields’ or ‘sites’ to studying networks, not just as sets of nodes but as sets of connections between certain nodes. We use these data as the basis for an analysis of the dynamics and labour of the network.

Finally, Burawoy (2000, p. 4) argues that the ethnographer has ‘a privileged insight into the lived experience of globalisation’, in as much that the ethnographer’s occupation is ‘to study others in “their space and time”’. Indeed, he argues, as we are also trying to suggest, that network ethnographers, or what he calls global ethnographers, ‘become a living embodiment in the processes we are studying’ (p. 4). As researchers, we travel, we attend, we meet, we network – in order to research networks. We build relationships in the field. We become circumstantial activists;

it is activism quite specific and circumstantial to the conditions of doing multi-sited research itself ... one finds oneself with all sorts of cross-cutting and contradictory personal commitments. These conflicts are resolved, perhaps ambivalently, not by refuge in being a detached anthropological scholar, but in being a sort of ethnographer-activist, renegotiating identities in different sites.... (Marcus 1995, p. 113)

4. Data sources: an empirical example of network ethnography

In the remainder of this session, we turn to an empirical example of the functioning of networks and policy mobilities adumbrated above, focused on a global education policy network which begins from a US philanthropist, Irene

Pritzker, and her support of local Low Fee Private Schools (LFPS) through microfinance banking and related support activities in Ghana. Through this example, we attempt to do a number of things: First, to demonstrate and *follow* a policy pipeline – that is, in Cook and Ward’s (2010, p. 13) terms one set of ‘trans-urban linkages between geographically discrete territorial clusters of those involved in the policy making business (academics, activists, advocates, consultants, evaluators, gurus, journalists, politicians, policy making professionals and so on’. To do this, we follow Irene Pritzker, the co-founder and President of the IDP Foundation, a Chicago-based philanthropic organisation involved in the funding and support of LFPS in Ghana, along a path – to put it simply, from her money and her commitment to the acquisition of a cause, a ‘solution’, to being influenced along the way, and gathering support, talking to others about the ‘solution’, and creating an infrastructure locally. This is an enterprise model - enterprise as a solution to problems of education, and it involves the exporting of a sensibility, a view of the world, micro-liberalism in a way. We trace the movement of microfinance from USA-based philanthropic organisations like the IDP Foundation, Edify and the Global Philanthropists Circle, and the ideas that go with it about enterprise and supporting local initiatives.

5. – 6. Conclusion and significance of the study

Our work draws from some incipient efforts within social geography and policy community/policy network research in political science that problematise the static, transactional and rational perspectives underlying policy transfer studies to consider the ‘flows’ of policy. In this session, we have outlined the main elements of what we call the method of ‘network ethnography’ which has been developed as a set of techniques and a research sensibility appropriate to the study of the functioning of global education policy networks and policy communities. We have used this session in two ways: First, as an opportunity to discuss and reflect on some of the challenges and possibilities of the method in its attempt to move us beyond ethnography’s traditional attention to ‘fields’ or ‘sites’ to a focus on (fluid and evolving) networks. Second, to provide a practical

application of the method, that can offer other researchers insights into the practicalities of conducting a network ethnography and upon which they could draw and develop further in their own endeavours.

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