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Full of Meaning: Thick Description as Product of Public Administration Research

Introduction

Ethnography, as a research strategy, is certainly not a dominant strategy in Public Administration. However, interpretive researchers have lately called for the use of an ethnographic research strategy to the field under study (e.g. Bevir and Rhodes 2003; Hajer 2003). Whether they stress the importance of the study of day-to-day working life of practitioners or call for more involvement with the experience of citizens, the idea is that the study of practices should be grounded locally. In this line of thought Yanow (2003) has argued that researchers should take *local knowledge* more into account.

A good way to show the relevance of an ethnographic strategy is by showing what it might lead to. The main focus of this paper is an important possible product of ethnographic research: *thick description* (Geertz 1993/1973). In this paper I want to show what thick description is and what it might offer the study of Public Administration. This paper does not claim however that thick description is not used in public administration or that it is superior to other ways of qualitative research. When a researcher makes a thick description, he is narrating social action in a dense way,¹ exploring the different meanings actors involved attribute to it. Although they will always remain interpretations of interpretations, thick descriptions will help us to *unravel daily life and to get closer to understanding the world of practice*.

The paper has the following structure: first ethnography will be briefly discussed. Thick description will then be put forward as a product of ethnography. The second half of this paper will be used to elaborate on an example of thick description from my own research in a Dutch municipality. This is intended to show the reader what descriptions *and* interpretations might look like. Moreover, the example will help me to illustrate the benefits of the product. In my conclusion I will discuss what we can learn from this example and from thick description in general.

1. Ethnography

Various authors have indicated that ethnography might be a useful strategy to the study of public administration. But what is ethnography? When we investigate the notion of ethnography, it is important to relate it to its roots. Ethnography was developed in anthropology, but made its way to other sciences a long time ago (Van Maanen 1988). It is often understood as *the study of a culture*, but perhaps better be described as “the process of discovering and describing a particular culture (Spradley and McCurdy 1987: 13)”. Although ethnography could be distinguished from the more common case study approach (Yin 2003), the one does not exclude the other in interpretive research (Stake 1995; 2000: 439).

The most distinctive feature of the approach almost always taken into account is the idea that the researcher stays for a certain period *in the field*.³ This way of researching seems to be the result of a certain necessity in times that people became interested in studying remote societies. Closer to home sociologists lived in the neighbourhoods of the communities they studied. The

last twenty-five years organizational anthropologists and sociologists spend periods up to a couple of months in an organization.

If ethnography is a strategy to gather data through intense fieldwork, the question is what it will bring us. A very general answer is that it will inform us about the worldviews of actors in the field. Early theoretical thinking on ethnographic research had as an important outcome the idea that to 'really' understand people you have to do like they do, you have to change your etic (outsiders) view for an emic (insiders) view. The general idea is that "[t]he emic perspective – the insider's or native's perspective of reality - is at the heart of most ethnographic research (Fetterman 1998: 20)". Geertz (1983) wrote about the difference between using concepts of the locals, calling them "experience-near concepts", and concepts used by specialists, calling them "experience-distant concepts". The enterprise is not to make a perfect 'translation', from one 'language' into another, because that will never happen, but to mediate between two worlds. On the part of the 'non-native' reader this demands a certain amount of openness and patience for what in the first instance might seem tedious details on an irrelevant level, because "the concern with the general is incidental to an understanding of the particular (Spradley 1979: 207)".

Even though a perfect translation is not possible, ethnography might help us to understand life in practice. Put differently, ethnography is relevant, because it brings us in touch with actual worldviews, that "are not made out of whole cloth, but are shaped, incrementally and painfully, in the struggle of everyday people with concrete, ambiguous, tenacious, practical problems and questions (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003: 14)". We might learn more about the way the world is re-created daily and about the complexities that are involved in what seems to be simple from a distance. Being in the field (doing observation, frequently talking to people) then sets ethnography apart from the more common ways of doing research in public administration. The downside of this way of doing research (adjusting to the rhythm of practice, which is a time consuming effort, being stuck in the present with no way of knowing whether what one is studying is 'meaning-full' five years from now) can help the study of public administration find out what public administration is 'all about' for the actors in the field, since researchers are forced to interpret what happens in the field in 'real time'.

But being in the field is just one part of the ethnography enterprise. 'Doing ethnography' can only live up to its promise if it is able to render life in practice to an audience. 'Good' (or at least 'convincing') ethnography, as defined by Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) and applied to qualitative studies in public administration by Brower et al. (2000), is authentic, plausible and critical. The

way, *par excellence*, to mediate between the world of the researcher and the world of the researched according to these kinds of standards is through *thick description*.⁴ This way to write about what we 'bump into' in our fields is certainly not new (Thompson 2001), although some will not give it this name and others reinvent it (Rhodes 2005).

2. Thick description

Clifford Geertz popularized thick description in his 1973 book "The Interpretation of Cultures". The point Geertz made is that if we observe actions we can give thin descriptions, describing only the act, or thick ones describing the possible meanings of that act within its context. The standard example, as well as the concept "thick description", he borrowed from the 'Oxford philosopher' Ryle, who talked about describing the act of rapidly contracting ones eyelids. This act can be seen as twitching, but it might also mean winking or even a parody of winking. The same act means something totally different, depending on the depth of the analysis. A detailed description of what the act means goes further than the thin description ("actor X rapidly contracted his eyelids"). It tries to get to the bottom of what this movement means to the actors involved, unpacking "stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures", although that bottom will never be reached.

What Geertz told us is that to understand social action we have to investigate the meaning various actors attribute to it. This meaning is not just something personal, but part of a 'system of meaning', called culture, that is shared by actors. Interpretation, ethnography and thick description form a unity. We, as readers, can try to grasp the meaning of a social context we are not familiar with as it comes to us in an ethnographic report, in thick description. According to Denzin, thick description can be identified as such if it "creates verisimilitude: that is, truth like statements that produce for readers the feeling that they have experienced, or could experience, the event described (Denzin 1989: 84-85)".

Taken together, I would say that thick description is a descriptive-interpretive narrative that shows the reader various meanings that, parallel or not, can be found in social acts. A thick description consists of at least two parts: a description of social action (most often a social act in the sense of an event or a situation) and its various interpretations. It might not be easy to separate them, since a description of an act always involves some interpretation.⁵ Actors might

not even agree what event they are part of, since the definition of a social act (just like the definition of a problem) can strongly influence its outcome. A description that all actors involved in a certain social act will agree on, will often be the result of a quest for a formulation that contains all possible interpretations various audiences will want to be able to read in it. In other words, a description that everybody agrees on has a big chance to be at least a little bit ambiguous. Thick description can be used to unravel all these meanings, showing them apart *and* in relation to each other. This way, we might also be “increasing the ability of the public to understand the issues at stake (Thompson 2001: 68)”.

A thick description does not come from ‘thin’ air. It is the result of looking at social actions, and particularly at what we call ‘events’, in a certain way. It asks the researcher to actively look for different ‘readings’ situations, events, processes etc. might have (Yanow 1996). The resulting narratives might have the aim to give the reader the feeling he or she is able to understand what ‘really’ happened in a situation, but might also have been used to give a more impressionistic reading or even provide the researcher a space to talk about his or her own role and experiences in the field (Van Maanen 1988). Regardless the type of narrating, the researcher should be aware that Public Administration is just as much about story telling as the world it claims to know (Van Eeten et al. 1996).

So, even more than showing a structure or system of meaning, thick description might be said to uncover the various meanings, the various narratives, that are attributed in a parallel fashion. Thick description can show how multiple meanings can coexist, struggle and get lost in the process of sense making (Weick 1995). That makes thick description interesting for students of politics and administration. Thick description gives room to all what Yanow called interpretive communities (Yanow 2000). In addition to the understanding of local practices it offers, it might therefore have a democratic quality, if it includes as many interpretive communities as possible and makes their interpretation visible and accessible. This line of thought was also mentioned in Thompson’s plea for the use of thick description as a “methodology for communications and democracy” (Thompson 2001).

Thick description can follow from a combination of a democratic way of researching giving room interpretations and interpreters that normally do not have it on the one hand and an interpretive epistemological focus on the way people attribute meaning to things like decision making, policies, politics etc. on the other (Fischer 2003: 150-151). To be able to narrate in a dense way, the researcher has to look for possible meanings that are at work in social action. This way of looking is especially applicable in contexts in which social action has

often physical and multiple (people with various ways of seeing things coming together), like in public gatherings (e.g. demonstrations, public hearings, meetings of public bodies etc.).⁶ In the second part of this paper I will show and analyse a thick description I made of an event in a municipality in a Dutch municipality.

3. An Example: The Core Task Meeting

A good way to assess thick description is by looking at an example. The example comes from my Ph.D. research. This research develops a cultural analysis framework for the study of municipalities. During a six months period I visited the municipality R., focussing on two themes that actors defined as relevant. The research involved intensive observation, over 40 (semi-structured) interviews and document analysis. The description you are about to read focuses on a meeting that took place halfway through a project (one of the two themes) that took place in the municipality.

In the Dutch municipality R. the municipal council has decided to talk about the tasks the municipality should perform. The municipality starts a project that is called the 'Core Task Discussion'. In three different workshops council members discuss the possibilities of changing the status quo. A method is adopted to determine what the municipality should be doing. The method is called 'zero-base budgeting'. Zero-base budgeting means that the budget of all products is set at zero, after which the authorized actors (in this case municipal council members) can decide how much 'they want back'. The council members all received a long 'product list' on which they had to give a value to the 'products' the municipality 'produces'. A working conference is planned to discuss the outcome of this 'exercise'.⁷ The moment the meeting starts the council members have just handed in their lists.

The conference starts at four o'clock, halfway through the afternoon. In the council hall the chairs are placed in such a way that then council members are in the inner ring surrounded by the civil servants and the members of the board. A consultant, who also played a role in one of the preceding workshops, chairs the meeting.

First, the party leaders get the opportunity to give their opinion on the project. Some of them draw attention to the fact that not all political parties have made substantial cuts. Especially two of the four coalition partners are accused of

putting minimal effort into finding products that can be cut. The opposition has gathered the most money with their cuts. Then, a short debate develops about the meaning of the numbers the council members filled in. The two coalition parties interpreted the numbers they had to fill in as the relative importance they give to a certain product, and gave 150 points to some products they estimated as very important. The exercise is nothing more than a way to start a debate about a vision of the future of the municipality. Other parties had a more instrumental idea of the exercise and saw the numbers as relative to the budget that is reserved for the products and never exceeded 100.⁸ In their opinion giving a product a number simply meant deciding what budgetary cut they think is acceptable.

One of the council members fears that the process will end up in the act of taking a bit of money from all of the products without 'really taking decisions' (the Dutch expression used is 'kaasschaafmethode', translatable as across-the-board-cuts)⁹. Various party leaders argue that it is important that the money that is needed is coming from efficiency cuts in the civil service organization as well, for instance through the enlarging the amount of 'productive' hours. After the party leaders have given their opinion, the outcomes of the preceding workshops are discussed.

A short break is followed by a presentation from the management of the administrative organization. The chief executive officer (gemeentesecretaris), who is working ad interim in the municipality, sketches three options to proceed. The options have been developed in the administrative organization and all involve a certain way of interpreting the result of the 'exercise'. The question is how the results should be interpreted so that enough budget cuts are made. It turns out the money that is needed is not the 1.8 million euros that were talked about in a previous stage, but 3.5 million. According to the manager this has to do with a difference between gross and net amounts.

The council members agree with the second option: of every product the result will be established by taking the average amount of points the council member attributed to it. Whenever the result is less than 75 points, the product (or at least the part that involves no legal obligation) will be cut all together. Products above the 75 points line will be kept (in principal). The scores over 100 are set to 100. In addition, the head of the administrative organization promises that management will look into the possibilities to realise substantive cuts in the organization. Finally, management will investigate the possibilities of lowering the costs of municipal task that are legally obligatory. The meeting ends at eight fifteen, earlier than expected.

The part of the description you just read could make you wonder about a lot of things, but first we should address the description as such. What can we get out of this detailed account? Admittedly, it is quite messy. A thin description, including the glossy highlights and for instance focussing on the commitments that were agreed upon, might have given a clearer picture of what happened. It might have summarized on the outcome of the debate. It might have described the various opinions, but focussing on the ambiguity and the various interpretations of the project and its method (the zero base exercise) would have made such a description fuzzy and undirected. Thin descriptions will typically give one version of what happened. However, such a description would have presumed that 1) what happened could be caught easily in its essence and 2) there are no multiple accounts of what happens.

The thick description, in contrast, invokes us to ask different questions. It does not try to present a practice that is messy as one that is not. It might look for the multiple realities that are 'forced' to happen within one moment. It tries to account for the ambiguity that would make thin description impossible. To clarify the point I will deal with two (possible) questions that might have puzzled the reader: 1. Why was there a discussion about the way the exercise had to be interpreted? 2. Why did the meeting end a lot earlier than expected?¹⁰

To answer these questions we need to look at the situation in its contexts. Doing this means that we look for the experiences and expectations actors brought to the meeting. Here, we clearly enlarge the description to involve interpretations that are needed to understand what is going on. The difference of opinion about the way the exercise had to be interpreted is part of a bigger debate that had been going on in the months preceding meeting. The debate started some months before. At a kick-off meeting two actors in the local authority (a party leader and a member of the board of mayor and aldermen) discussed the goal of the process. One of them stressed the fact that the municipality had to cut budgets, while the other one insisted that the ultimate reason for starting the process was to debate what local government should be all about.

In general, different actors seem to interpret the problem the municipality has to deal with and the goal of the project differently. They use different narratives to understand the situation. Some actors say that the municipality (the administrative and political unity) has to become a different one because times have changed. A few council members criticize the exercise because for them it seems a technocratic way of deciding what to do as a municipality. One council member even calls it "Russian Roulette". Other actors (the majority) argue that the municipality basically has to cut costs. The zero-base method is perhaps not a

perfect way to decide, but at least it helps to take action. In the first case the problem is the identity of the municipality, in the second the expenditure.

This background description helps us to interpret the debate about the meaning of the exercise. The actors that want to give 150 points to products, think of the process more in terms of finding out what are important products. The other actors (mostly) argue it is not possible to invest more, it is necessary cut budgets. In the first case the points given to products are to be understood as relative numbers, indicating directions. The numbers are nothing more than a basis for debate. In the second case, the numbers are to be taken quite literally, in the sense that they can be used right away as a basis for decisions.

A possible instrumental answer to the first question might have been that the preparation was bad. The question, however, can be answered in a different manner as well. The whole event and the way it has developed can be seen as a way of (temporarily) settling the debate on the goals of the process. Various actors told me that what is most important is that decisions are taken. The debate can follow in a later stage. This is not the most logic order in textbooks about designing a process, where defining broad directions are followed by precise actions. Later in the process the board admits that the way things have been done can be seen as the opposite of a 'proper' process. That does not in any way change that various actors (not just members of the board) at the moment think this is *the* way to handle the problem, to force actors to take action.

The management of the administrative organization supports the first definition of the problem the municipality is faced with, focussing on budgetary cuts. Some civil servants had told me that the worst thing that could happen was that the politicians did not take decisions. That is what had happened in a same process a decade ago.¹¹ Management offers three very concrete options. Two of these options were hardly realistic in the sense that the necessary cuts are not made. This strengthens the idea that management was heading for a premeditated solution that steers clear of the debate and already includes a direction. This tactic becomes even more clear when management proposes to convert all 150 scores to 100. For now, we can conclude that it is as plausible to understand the different interpretations of the exercise as a result of bad preparation as it is of the different narratives actors brought to the scene. Of course, the one does not seem to exclude the other, but we might ask who gained from this 'bad' preparation. The answer to the second question helps us to get more insight in this preparation and its strategy.

The second question (why did the meeting end a lot earlier than expected) can be answered following the same line as the first one. Most, if not all, actors expected the meeting to last long, at least some hours more than it really lasted. The idea was that the politicians would need quite some time to discuss between themselves. This did not happen in the way that was anticipated. How was this possible? One interpretation given by my respondents was that politicians agreed quite quickly because they all saw the need of a swift operation. This of course makes the politicians the heroes of the story. A critical voice would add argue that the event might have ended early because the political actors were well aware that the pressure was on them. They did not act the way they did because they wanted to, because they agreed to agree, but because they saw no other way out. One actor described the project and especially the meeting as a process in a pressure cooker.

Those who interpret the exercise as (only) input for a debate form a minority. Politicians are demanded to take action, to show that it is not a lot of talk followed by nothing, like what happened ten years ago when a similar project ended without much result. Politicians are put in a difficult situation when the different options are offered. Supporting the only option that seems acceptable at the same time means postponing the more political debate that is necessary according to them. One of the party members told me that his party had been accused of obstructing the last process and that this put the party in a difficult situation, since they did not like the way of doing things now either. If they would complain, they could be blamed for always obstructing action when it is needed.

Another reason why the meeting might have ended early is because it was a closed meeting. At various moments during my research in the municipality actors pointed at the correspondence between public attention on the one hand and the length and multitude of the interruptions placed by politicians on the other. In this sense the meeting might be seen as a very special one. Moreover, since it had no clear rules that were made or agreed upon at forehand by the various participants, the meeting offered space for somebody who was able to take the lead.

One actor told me in an interview that even to the actors who prepared the meeting, it was not clear until just before the meeting, what the outcome of the meeting should be. A short before the meeting they did formulate a plan though, scenario that was intended to lead political actors to decisions that were necessary. Nevertheless, even they did not have a clear idea of to what extent decisions could be made during the meeting. The alderman in charge of finance

told me he had two speeches to conclude the meeting, one in case things went wrong and one in case the necessary decisions were taken.

The only thing that was very clear was that the board and the high ranked civil servants needed the council to take action (which can easily be reformulated as 'to cooperate') and not slow down the process. As various actors told me, an alternative solution (asking more money from the citizens) to solve the problem of deficits already failed the year before and was not seen by the politicians as a possible solution in the present situation. Looking back we could start to think that what happened was part of a scenario that was written before, although even the writers (mostly a high administrator and an alderman) expected more protest from the star actors (the politicians).

The scenario was as follows.¹² The main idea is that the politicians are in a difficult situation because the municipality is in financial trouble. Although it will hurt a lot, the only way to save the municipality is to decide on big budget cuts. In the first act everybody can have his or her say, in the second the politicians hear their options (although there is not really a choice because two of the options are dummies). In the final act the politicians 'choose' the only realistic option. Because the scenario works as planned and the politicians even seem to want to 'get it over with' as soon as possible, an early ending is the result. Of course, 'real' bad preparation might have had a very long meeting as a result. Nevertheless this early ending seems logical only if we know how the actors interpret the situation and its meaning, even though the actors expected the meeting to develop in a different way before it started. The conclusion we can draw from a thick description of the municipal meeting is that although there was room for different narratives (the municipality has a budget deficit, the municipality has an identity problem) one course of action (the council has to take decisions) dominated the meeting.

Conclusion

The example has told us something about what thick description can show us. In the case of the "Core Task Debate" various actors (retrospectively) analysed the meeting in ways that help them to feel satisfied about their own role. Even the actors that seem to be unhappy about the way things are happening are able to find interpretations of the situation that point at factors beyond their control. They point at the necessity to act or the fact that the debate really still has to start, not at their inability to manage the situation. The richness of the analysis leads to the idea that what was described could only be interpreted in a thick way if the

researcher uses various methods common to ethnography (observation, open or semi-structured interview). The added value of ethnography then is that the presence of the researcher probes him or her to pose different questions, to notice things that might not have been if the researcher exclusively depends on retrospective methods like the formal interview and document analysis that are regular in main stream case study practice.¹³

The conclusion might be that we can learn a lot about practice if we get close to it in this way. Thick description can show that acting (Wagenaar 2004) is open-ended in the sense that various interpretations are always at work and need to come together in the need to act. In a meeting some interpretations might dominate, what does not mean that others are no longer available for or applicable to the situation.

Descriptions and the following or intrinsic interpretations, explicitly or not, make a point. In the case of this, and perhaps many, thick description, it shows practical logic in a context, that what mattered for the actors involved. It also shows an event which structure is not pre-given. Rules have to be invented or reshaped on the spot because actors bring different ideas of what they are doing to the scene. One of the party leaders in R. had the idea that the head of the administrative organization had taken the council by the hand and most of the council members did not know what they were doing. I asked him whether he minded that? No, it was time action was taken. Endless discussion would not take them anywhere.

The thick description has led us to consider questions about the different interpretation actors gave of the event and the exercise that preceded it. A detailed discussion of the way things happened also helped us to get some first insight into the relation between different interpretations and the different positions actors had. These kind of close-to-practice descriptions and interpretations are needed, if not in their democratic function, than for the value of taking the experience of the researched into account for the quality (depth) of the scientific product.

At the end, three final points should be made on the limitations of interpretation. Firstly it is not possible to narrate all events in a thick way. As Stake puts it: “many a researcher would like to tell the whole story but of course cannot; the whole story exceeds anyone’s knowing, anyone’s telling (Stake 2000: 441)”. Making thick descriptions might helps us to interpret and understand a lot of what is going on. Secondly, different ‘readings’ (from plane description to speculative interpretation) might look distinguishable (due to our

commonsensical feeling for the difference between fact and fiction, between what we can easily observe and what we 'think we might perhaps' infer) but very often it is hard to do so in a rigorous way.

Finally, there is, of course, not something like *the* meaning of the events sketched above, not even of their smallest parts. Thick description is not as straightforward as it might seem. The thickness of the description is not in just in a detailed factual description, but in what follows (Maxwell 1992: 288n5). But than again, even what follows does not lead to final statements. Thick descriptions are always part of a large whole. The thickness never stops, as Geertz (1993/1973) already knew. The danger of using an insiders or a detailed approach is claiming to get to the bottom or essence, because there is none (outside the construction given). There is only interpretation on top of interpretation and going for depth might mean ignoring the people that should be in focus. This makes it is hard if not impossible for the researcher to speak with any sort of authority (Crapanzano 1986; Richardson and Adams St. Pierre 2005). The description is already an interpretation by the researcher, showing the material he or she is interested in, that what supports his or her story and if we are something that enhances our understanding.

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¹ Social action is rather vague, I must admit. What I am mostly thinking of is an event, but it might as well be a chain of events or a situation. Perhaps it is even better to follow Denzin who talked about contextualized experience (Denzin 1989).

² I myself would even replace describing by interpreting, but that point is discussed later. Spradley has also use an other definition, that focuses even more on the 'writing' part of ethnography: "Ethnography is the work of describing a culture (Spradley 1979: 2)".

³ New practices of ethnographic work are perhaps less easily distinguished with this criterion from others, not in the last place because ethnography has diversified (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

⁴ Although Brower et al. (Brower, et al. 2000) associate thick description with the criterion of authenticity, I think that thick description can also contribute to making ethnographic work plausible (in the same way as it tries to attain authenticity) and critical (showing multiple voices, interpretations and critique the interpreter has as an observer that are typical of being close by the field, but that might get lost when researchers or other audiences develop theories and ideas outside the field). Brower et al. conceptualize the use of thick description that seems to separate description from interpretation: "providing copious access to the typical words and behaviors of the research participants, the particulars of every day life, and detailed physical descriptions that help mentally transport the reader to the setting of the study."

⁵ Denzin (1989) does nevertheless assume that description and interpretation are separable.

⁶ However, thick descriptions are not necessarily limited to what the researcher can observe, because its main interest is to be found not *observing* an act as much as in investigating its meaning. Therefore, thick description is not limited to investigation "in the field", but ethnography itself can be said to have escaped its early limitations.

⁷ Small adjustments were made in the description of the event.

⁸ The confusion got even bigger when one of the members of the two collation parties told the audience that he thought it would be possible to invest more money in some products.

⁹ I owe my thanks to Frans van Nispen for this translation.

¹⁰ I am not claiming that these are the only questions that can be asked.

¹¹ Other actors told me that the last process lead to decisions because money came from the national government. The difference between these two interpretations is interesting, because the first interpretation comes in handy when actors want to explain what is wrong with local

government. They therefore might value the second interpretation more. It helps them to give explain the present situation.

¹² Part of this scenario was a physical strategy. By not giving the politicians the idea was that they could not hide from each other and could not find support. An other part was thought of before: by planning the meeting only 6 days before the official council meeting in which the results of the meeting had to be publicly decided on, the politicians would not have the time to reconsider. An like I mentioned, of the three options that management offered to the parties, only one met the requirements of a 'healthy' budget. Other elements that might have helped to prevent critique were the promise that all options stayed open, the promise that a political discussion will follow in the near future, new calculations that were presented to the council members on the spot and finally the promise that not only the products (municipal services) but also the civil service organization itself will be economized on.

¹³ The well-known work of Yin does encourage observation, but at the same time differentiates between case study and ethnography on the basis of the time spent in the field (Yin 2003). What I would call the benefit of ethnographic research (being there, in the field, picking up on things that matter in the field in 'real time') is not a requirement for the case study work Yin has in mind. For me, an alternative to being in the field can be long open interviewing.