RESEARCH NOTE

Deploying an Ethnographic Sensibility to Understand Climate Change Governance: Hanging Out, Around, In, and Back

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Abstract

What can an 'ethnographic sensibility' contribute to research on climate change governance? With its emphasis on meaning-making and understanding what may lie beneath more obvious interactions and processes, ethnographic methodologies, particularly collaborative event ethnography, are increasingly deployed to address complex questions and achieve conceptual leverage on issues related to climate governance. Drawing on literature in climate anthropology, material geography and political ethnography and with examples from our own fieldwork experiences, we devise a heuristic typology underpinned by an ethnographic sensibility to help guide the fieldwork phase of a research project. Building on the well-established practice of *hanging out,* we introduce *hanging around* which attends to spatiality and matter, *hanging in* which addresses issues of access and trust and *hanging back* to guide the practice of reflexivity. We articulate what fieldwork with an ethnographic sensibility entails and discuss its potential and implications for climate governance research.

Introduction

Studying the complexity of global environmental governance (GEG) has encouraged interdisciplinarity and innovation in research methods (Nielsen and D'haen 2014; O'Neill et al 2013; O'Neill and Haas 2019). Looking beyond macro-political questions, ethnography adopts a processual view of governance focused on interactions which can reveal previously invisible actors and social structures allowing for conceptual innovation (Corson et al 2019; O'Neill and Haas 2019). However, the use of ethnography to study GEG is in a state of uneven development. On the one hand, a series of studies using collaborative event ethnography (CEE) have made important conceptual and methodological contributions to the study of international negotiations (Brosius and Campbell 2010; Corson et al 2014; Corson et al 2019; Duffy 2014; Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti 2019; Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2020). On the other hand, Neilsen and D'haen 2014's methodological review of qualitative research in one environmental journal found sparse accounts of participation observation and did not refer to ethnography. Further, while CEE scholars rigorously discuss their use of ethnographic approaches, Neilsen and D'haen's more general overview (2014) found that there is often insufficient information provided about methodology, a regrettable omission in the case of interdisciplinary research given the varied epistemologies between (and within) different disciplines. It is also not always clear whether the conceptual distinction between ethnography as a methodology and as the method of participant observation (Jackson 2008; Schatz 2009) is fully acknowledged. Indeed, O'Neill and Haas (2019) specifically ask how ethnographic approaches provide additional insight compared with participant observation.

Our aim is to respond to that call and to contribute to the development of methodological approaches in the study of climate governance in two ways. First, drawing on recent advances in climate change anthropology, material geography and political ethnography, we consider the use of and potential for an ethnographic sensibility in studying GEG. Second,

building on existing studies, we develop a heuristic typology to inform the practice of deploying an ethnographic sensibility in climate governance fieldwork. To advance discussions on epistemology and research practice, we seek to engage with qualitative environmental social scientists, particularly in international relations and political science where ethnographic methods are increasingly being deployed as well as with longer-standing practitioners of ethnography. We also have in mind the needs of a new generation of climate governance scholars, who often want, and are expected, to draw on a wide range of methods to address complex, multi-scalar problems (O'Neill et al 2013).

An Ethnographic Approach to Studying Climate Governance

Ethnography involves approaching the research design in a cognitively expansive way. It pays attention to what people do as well as what they say, explores how people make sense of their worlds and seeks to answer the kinds of questions that resist simple or intuitive causal explanations (Cook and Crang 1995; MacKay and Levin 2015). By paying attention to overlooked actors and processes and "locating the transitory, dispersed, and often hidden sources of power in contemporary networks of environmental governance" (Corson et al 2014, 34), an ethnographic approach can expand the range of data sources, reveal power dynamics and processes of marginalisation while addressing the under-theorization of the various factors influencing global environmental governance.

We observe uneven development in terms of the scales, policies, processes, sites, materials and actors within climate governance that have been studied using ethnographic techniques. At the local level, scholars are advancing understanding of how city officials respond to climate change, how scientists create knowledge and how communities can participate in climate research (Knox 2020; Naquin et al 2018; Ramírez-i-Ollé 2020). Recent organisational and trans-organisational ethnographies have revealed the internal logics and

everyday rationalities of institutional mechanisms (MacDonald 2015; Thaler 2021). At the international level ethnographic approaches are deployed to make visible and thereby 'make sense' of politics and power in climate negotiations, whether through CEE involving large teams researching at many sites, building on Marcus' (1995) 'multi-site' ethnography (Corson et al 2014) or studies undertaken by fewer researchers (Calliari et al 2020).

Given the role that nationally-determined contributions will make in achieving the Paris Agreement's objectives, we see potential for more ethnographic research at the national scale. Ethnographic techniques may be uniquely useful in identifying, for example, where the barriers to effective implementation lie and how and why value-based decisions will be made about adaptation measures. Ethnographically-informed comparative work at this level could advance knowledge about the interaction of international norms, regional institutions and domestic political culture and the 'vernacularization' of global standards, concepts and legal frameworks (Brunnée and Toope 2010; Merry 2006).

A further area in development concerns the stages of the international policy process. The use of ethnography has uncovered important insights about agenda setting and agreement making (Hughes and Vadrot 2019), yet the practices of global policy implementation, compliance and enforcement processes are also amenable to this methodology. This type of research contributes to the development of a holistic understanding of where and how power, responsibility, accountability and justice manifest across the global policy process (Bulkeley and Newell 2015; Corson et al 2014; Thew et al 2020). Such an approach can also shed light on issues such as how climate governance objects are constructed (e.g. Allan 2016); how international agreements are "unmade" later in the policy process; the role and power of bureaucratic and NGO actors (e.g. Jinnah 2014; Larsen and Brockington (2018) and the conditions under which climate law is (not) complied with (e.g. Walker-Crawford 2019).

An interesting development relates to the types of actors whose political role or agency is brought into the frame. Recent climate governance research has advanced our understanding of the role of non-traditional actors, such as indigenous groups and youth coalitions, in the UNFCCC negotiations (Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti 2019; Thew et al 2020). Questions of who/what a 'political actor' is require paying attention to the role of space and place, gender and bodies, and ongoing processes of racialisation and colonialism. Widening the scope of what constitutes a 'political actor' and the locations and circumstances in which they struggle for influence, usefully problematizes the dynamics in which global climate policy is generated and allows existing theoretical boundaries about 'the political' to be revisited (Schatz 2009).

Scholars are exploring how human intention and meaning are enmeshed with materiality and articulating the significance of non-human actors – for example, ice, carbon dioxide and forests – in political processes (Aykut 2016; Ehrenstein 2018; O'Reilly 2018). Inspired by political theories of 'thing-power' and notions of how matter can 'force thought,' it becomes possible to consider the political contribution of 'vital materials' and other non-human 'actants' (Bennett 2010; Latour 2005; Stengers 2010). A 'material politics' brings technologies, infrastructure and other matter into the frame not as passive objects but as lively, contingent and unpredictable forces which, through their interconnectedness, produce political effects (Barry 2013).

Ethnography as Sensibility

A number of recent studies in environmental governance specify the use of ethnographic methods. Some treat it as synonymous with participant observation or instantiated by long periods of time in the field; others say their research is ethnographic without explaining how, why or with what effect while other scholars provide more detail (e.g., De Pryck 2021; Fletcher et al 2018; Knox 2020; Poulsen et al 2021; Thaler 2021; Thew et al 2020). We draw attention

to the variation in research practice and suggest the value of exploring the practice of ethnography as methodology rather than just method for GEG research.

Grounded in ethnography's commitment to looking beyond previously accepted conceptions, uncovering the invisible and being alert to the unexpected, an ethnographic sensibility goes beyond the face-to-face contact of conventional participant observation and informs the entire research 'enterprise' (Pader 2014; Schatz 2009; Yanow 2009). Researching with an ethnographic sensibility is an approach that covers the entire arc of the research project from identifying research questions through the phases of fieldwork, data collation and analysis, assessing findings to dissemination involving an ongoing reflexivity about the entire research process (Jackson 2008; Yanow 2009). Collapsing any 'absolute distinction' between the researcher and the field, an ethnographic sensibility encourages researchers to allow what happens there to challenge existing ways of thinking (Jackson 2008). In seeking to understand the contexts and contingencies that make what might seem like 'irrational' behaviours, outcomes or effects intelligible and to capture what might otherwise have been excluded as data, the researcher may deliberately plan for 'accidental' research opportunities (Fujii 2014; Henderson 2016; Pader 2014; Simmons and Smith 2017). While recognising that the fieldwork stage is only one constituent part of the life cycle of research, we focus on it as a moment where the ethnographic sensibility is particularly brought to life.

Operationalising an Ethnographic Sensibility

To put the principles of an ethnographic sensibility into practice we introduce a heuristic typology as a repertoire of thought-processes and activities that researchers can engage with in thinking about their fieldwork. Our 'hanging' heuristic draws on theoretical insights and practical guidance from across disciplines (Henderson 2016; Herzog and Zacka 2019; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Naylor et al 2018; Popke 2009; Sedlačko 2017; Vrasti 2008). It also seeks

to encourage reflection on the shifting constitutive nature of 'the field' and the human, spatial and material entanglements within it (see figure 1).

[INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE]

Hanging out

In its long-standing incarnation, hanging out, or 'deep' or 'serial' hanging out, involves 'close-in' immersion in the lives of a group of people in a locality over a long period (Clifford 1988; Geertz 1998). The concept captures the depth of the immersion, its duration and the notion of making oneself available, often in informal and social settings, to develop field relationships (Browne and McBride 2015; Nair 2021). It involves seeking out opportunities that may yield different reflections than those obtained through more structured methods or which those methods can inhibit. However, it is not 'just' hanging out in the common meaning of the term but part of a rigorous methodology based on a theory of learning (Evans 2012). By hanging out, researchers can capture how people contextualize their ideas in the before and after moments of formal interviews or by 'following' research participants in their daily work (Billo and Mountz 2015). In international climate governance research, hanging out has often involved following people from the formal negotiation room to corridors and attending 'cocktail parties' (Calliari et al 2020; Corson et al 2014 but see Kuus 2013).

Hanging out also involves the research tactic of observing key people and their networks in a variety of locations (Paterson 2019). This can shed light on how power plays out across different settings. For example, one of us observed workshop discussions on Climate Change Loss and Damage organised by civil society organisations alongside the 2019 Bonn Climate Conference. A breakout group was supposed to be discussing the definition of 'loss and damage' but a delegate from a Global North country steered the discussion towards the issue of finance (the topic at other sessions) to the observable frustration of the moderator. The delegate, who had the right to intervene in the formal negotiations in contrast to the moderator

who was an accredited 'observer' with only limited intervention rights in that forum, was overriding conventions within the breakout group about agenda setting and the role of the moderator. Witnessing these kinds of struggles in dispersed locations provides insight into the challenges faced by civil society in participating in governance.

Hanging around

Our notion of 'hanging around' encourages a sensibility to space, place and matter. Drawing on theories of the production of space, place as process and its role in political contestation (Campbell 2018; Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994), the idea of *hanging around* extends the researcher's gaze to 'mundane' entanglements between people, place and materials (Richardson and Thieme 2018). Observations of quotidian spatial practices, beyond official places of interaction, can contribute to understanding how environmental governance is realised or undermined. During their research at the 21st Conference of the Parties of the UNFCCC, Marion Suiseeya and Zanotti (2019, 47) recorded the "plentiful food service options and well-lit bathrooms" in the restricted access sites of the Blue Zone in contrast to the Green Zone (the location of side events and exhibitions and open to a wider group) where people sometimes had "hour-long lines only to arrive at the counter and learn the food had run out" and where the "pitch-dark, outhouse-like toilet stalls had no lights and often had multiple units out of order." The way space is constructed and the conditions within it are brought into the analysis and highlight how power and marginalisation are empirically established.

What we refer to as 'hanging around' is neither aimlessly 'hanging about' (Woodward 2008) nor just 'waiting around' but involves being purposively alert to the role of matter or technology in relation to place and people. The material may figure in politics both as an issue or governance object and in terms of the material arrangement of political institutions, debates, practices and processes (Barry 2013; Knox 2020). Participant observation where the researcher

takes note of what is presented or available may miss the significance of how underlying material arrangements – or the 'power of things' – might shape political dynamics. For example, one of us attended a public consultation meeting between the responsible state agency and the community over an infrastructure project to restore land lost to coastal erosion and sea level rise. The issue is controversial because of its effect on fishing. On the surface, the event appeared to be a low-key, subdued affair. The set-up in the room involved a series of stands depicting images of the proposed works beside which stood officials answering questions from small numbers of people. Elsewhere in the room, people, mainly from the fishing community, gathered in groups chatting. Everyone was standing and milling about because chairs had not been put out, they were stacked up along one wall. Several attendees mentioned the absence of chairs and how at previous events there had been formal presentations with chairs for the community to sit on. However, apparently, the discussions had become heated as the affected community stressed their opposition to the plans. One person remarked that the reason there were not any chairs was because of the risk that people would throw them. The observable quiet interaction was not an accurate representation of the strength of community feeling or the nature of the state's engagement with the community. Being alert to casual conversations and the political role of material objects, offered an empirical contribution to the research aim of theorising the performance of state responsibility for climate action.

Hanging in

We use the term *hanging in* to characterise the temporal dimension of ethnographic research and how questions of access and participation are navigated. While traditional ethnographies involve long periods of time immersed in the field, a review of recent ethnographic research in Geography found there is often ambiguity about the number of trips and the duration of each immersion (Hitchings and Latham 2020). We see hanging in as less about the number of

months clocked up than as a way for researchers to reflect on and describe practices of visiting, inhabiting, retreating and revisiting the field and how that affects their research (Burawoy 2003). Two of the authors are following UNFCCC processes and our practice of extended yet intermittent hanging in – in sync with the schedule of meetings – allows us to see how concepts, for example "expertise" or "climate displacement" are produced, contested and shaped over time through processes and practices of negotiation and institutionalisation.

Hanging in also represents the ongoing process of gaining access to key interlocutors (Woodward 2008). Through culturally appropriate hanging out and becoming 'known as a regular' the researcher can develop relationships and increase research opportunities though it takes time, patience, and personal resilience (Browne and McBride 2015; Kawulich 2011). Through strong relationships with research interlocutors (many of whom have been involved in climate governance for years, if not decades) we have been given access to information about what occurs in closed meetings, a common feature in climate diplomacy. Maintaining long-term relationships and conducting repeat interviews provides insight into how people's attitudes and positions change over time (Thew et al 2020). This concept also embraces the adoption of a collaborative, participatory and decolonial research design which allows for more equitable relationships with participants (Zanotti and Marion Suiseeya 2020).

Hanging back

Our term *hanging back* captures the reflexivity needed to assess both the implications and the potential pitfalls of an ethnographic sensibility. It covers ethical issues, researcher positionality, field sensitivities, what constitutes manageable, rigorous and trustworthy data and whether that data can bear the weight of knowledge claims. At times, hanging back will be more appropriate than the proactive stances of hanging out, around and in. Like other controversial and contested areas (Browne and McBride 2015), interlocutors may be reluctant to participate in climate governance research. Similarly, when researching sites of climate impact, risk, vulnerability

and loss, researchers (particularly 'outsiders') should question whether their research techniques are appropriate and whether their research questions and outcomes are relevant, meaningful and/or useful to the people and places they are engaging with. The notion of hanging back captures the respect and empathy demanded by the adoption of an ethnographic sensibility (Schatz 2009).

Deploying an ethnographic sensibility is inherently relational: knowledge is acquired through what other people say and do in the presence of the researcher and what they allow the researcher to see. The transmission and the value of the data depend on the quality of each relationship in the field. Hanging out with people may encourage different expectations about the relationship and the role in the research with associated risks of confusion or backlash (Thaler 2021).

Boundary questions about when the researcher is and is not in the field can become blurred in ethnographic work confounding both researchers and interlocutors (Katz 1994). Each of us has experienced the embarrassment of moving a friendly encounter to the formal interview stage. During a UNFCCC meeting, one of the authors met an individual with a leading role in the negotiations at an informal party. As it was a social event, the author did not describe the research in any detail or ask for an interview. The next working day, the author bumped into the individual again. This time the author explained how much the individual's perspective and expertise could contribute to the research and asked if they could meet. The individual agreed to meet later the same day and so the author communicated the terms for participation verbally. The interlocutor consented to be interviewed but seemed somewhat surprised by the formal recitation of the process. We have all struggled with knowing how much to push beyond discomfort and how much to hang back when building trust with someone and the challenges of identifying the appropriate moment to introduce formality, especially when there are tight time constraints and the risk of missed opportunities.

In ethnographic studies, the researcher becomes the 'research instrument' (Jackson 2008) bringing positionality to the fore. This involves researchers disclosing any professional involvement with organisations they are researching and reflecting on the impact on their research of being thought of as an insider (Anderson 2016; Thaler 2021; Thew et al 2020). While a thorough discussion of our positionalities is beyond the scope of this paper, we acknowledge that the vignettes presented here are inherently shaped by our experiences as female, white researchers from the Global North. We are independent of the institutions we study but have developed relationships with interlocutors who sometimes become 'interviewees' as well as long-term friends. Reflections on positionality and the impact of our research are an ongoing endeavour.

Conclusions

There has been a fruitful upsurge in the use of and reflection on ethnographic methodologies in research on environmental governance across disciplines. Qualitatively different information can be gleaned by an approach and techniques that delve deeper and think wider about meaning making activities and what constitutes data. In assembling a typology for deploying an ethnographic sensibility in fieldwork, we aim to encourage transparency in a research practice that we suspect is used more frequently than expressly acknowledged (Hitchings and Latham 2020). We seek also to enhance understanding and promote debate about the conceptual and methodological possibilities of deploying an ethnographic sensibility across different scales of governance, stages of the policy process and through decentering the types of actors examined. We leave some questions 'hanging over' for further research. While our focus here has been on the field and generation of data, more insight on the contribution of an ethnographic sensibility at other stages of the research project would be valuable. Finally, a sensibility to the role of the non-human and the relationship between materiality and meaning-making merits

further study as it is still at the early stages of its theoretical contribution to climate governance research.

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Figure 1 Operationalising an ethnographic sensibility

Hanging Out: Informal interactions with research participants and observation of people in the field site as broadly conceived.

Hanging In: The temporal dimension in which the researcher (re)visits the field, negotiates access and builds long-term relationships.

An ethnographic sensibility in climate governance research.

Hanging Around: Attends to the significance of place, practices, bodies, and materials in generating the political and encourages the researcher to explore proximate field sites.

Hanging Back: A reflective practice in which the researcher assesses the implications of using ethnographic approaches in relation to ethics, what constitutes the field and what can be included as data.