AA11: Anthropologists and geographers engaging in public policy and practice.

The making of policy in an English town: how councillors play their part in participation in meetings. An ethnographic study by a reflective practitioner.

ABSTRACT:

With over twenty years' service as a local councillor myself and experience of a variety of leadership positions and engagement with fellow elite practitioners at local, regional, national and international level, in this paper I seek to explore what takes place when local councillors speak in formal meetings and exercise their roles as democratically elected representatives. Part of a wider PhD research project which is considering the work of councillors in a northern English authority, this paper considers the value of an ethnographic methodology to a piece of work rooted in practice and performance. The PhD project is looking in detail at full council meetings in the municipal year 2019/2020 with verbatim transcripts created from observation of webcasts. In addition data is being gathered from observation in person and interviews with participants and other elite practitioners in this field which will be subjected to further analysis. The paper reflects on the initial findings from the data collected and considers the value of such observation and analysis and the impact of webcasting and archiving of meetings. In addition there is consideration of the impact and value of reflective practice and the privileged access this allows to individuals and settings where policy is debated.

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to consider the value of an ethnographic methodology as applied to work rooted in practice and performance. It is part of a wider PhD project which is gathering data from observation of full council meetings and interviews in an English local authority in order to test a set of research questions which explore what takes place when councillors speak in formal meetings and exercise their roles as democratically elected local representatives.[1]

To begin with, this paper requires some personal explanation and biographical detail, indeed, it is written in the first person as it is a reflective piece rooted in lived experience. I write some 23 years after having been elected myself as a councillor in the town where I

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[1] My work is set in the context of English local government. Welsh and Scottish local government is also a source of research within the UK and reference here to UK local government includes experience and evidence from both Wales and Scotland.

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live.[2] In that time, the political party I belong to has been both in and out of power nationally and locally. I have been a member of a County Council, of which I was the Leader for two years and of a Borough Council of which I am currently the Deputy Leader. I am a member of the UK delegation to the Congress of the Council of Europe.[3] In 2014 I completed a Master's degree in Local Politics and Policy at the University of Birmingham and in 2015 started a PhD, the starting point of which was a *hunch*, as defined by Charles S Peirce (Bajc: 2012), that councillors told and exchanged *stories* in their contribution to the policy making process in UK local government and that exploring this telling and exchange might uncover deeper insight into how policy is made. I have taken an interpretive approach to my research (Bevir & Rhodes: 2002; Hay: 2011; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow: 2012). I am using a case study of a unitary metropolitan borough council covering a northern English town and its rural hinterland to gather data (Yin: 2009). The fieldwork carried out has been observation and transcription of webcast council meetings, attendance in person at one such meeting, interviews with participants and other elite practitioners and additional reflection on print, broadcast and social media coverage.

This paper seeks to explore the use of ethnographic methods in such a project, to reflect on the existing literature and offers initial observations on the fieldwork carried out. It will consider what it is that locally elected politicians (councillors) do in carrying out their roles, give an overview of the literature and methodology used in this project and then reflect on the initial findings before concluding.

- ### *What do Councillors do?*

If I were to ask my political colleagues to keep diaries of what they did over any given period of time, they would offer rich and varied accounts of political life as lived by local representatives. There would be an eclectic mix of formal and informal meetings organised by the councils they are members of. They would include contact with the residents they represent, in person, on the telephone and virtually via email and social media. There would be contact with other local representatives from the public and private sectors, 'stakeholders' and 'partners' as they commonly known. There would be interaction with local and national media sources. The diaries would record this as

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[2] Ipswich, a town in the east of England, 110km from London. It is governed locally by a two-tier structure not uncommon in English local government, that is, a Borough Council administering and delivering local services with the town itself with a larger County Council covering a wider geographic area and strategic functions.

[3] https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/homer

happening throughout the day, even in the middle of the night and certainly every day of the week. Weekends and days off are not distinguishable from Monday to Friday and even a trip to the supermarket is likely to involve contact of some sort or observation of an issue or problem that needs resolution.[4] There is an existing body of literature on the lived experience of councillors which will be considered further below. It suffices here to rest with reflection from the most recent exploration of what councillors do, carried out in Scotland, "(T)he local councillor, like other elected representatives, mediates between state and society...(their) specialist task is a precisely general one, to mediate between these worlds: to listen to constituents, to argue with other representatives, to decide in council." (Freeman: 2019, p.564).

- ***What is a story?***

"Politicians and citizens communicate with each other through stories and anecdotes because stories convey symbols better than statistics and reports." (Nalbandian: 1994, p. 532). Thus wrote United States Circuit Judge John Nalbandian a quarter of a century ago. Deborah Stone has also written of stories as symbols and of how they are viewed and understood by those who tell and hear them and of how stories can explain, "(T)hese explanations are often unspoken, widely shared, and so much taken for granted that we are not even aware of them." (Stone: 1997, p.137). Interestingly, both Nalbandian and Stone were writing on the cusp of an era in UK politics, local and national, when evidence-based policy making was in the ascendancy. The primacy of this evidence-based approach became well-established after the election of the New Labour administration in 1997 and there is a wealth of academic literature which examines its use in action, with arguments both for and against its efficacy and validity. A speech made by David Blunkett, the then Home Secretary, in 2002 to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) set the tone for the Blair era and, arguably, beyond: "…we will guided not by dogma but by an open-minded approach to understanding what works and why…using information and knowledge much more effectively and creatively at the heart of policymaking and policy delivery." (Blunkett: 2000). Yet, from the outset, academics sought to explore and expose perceived shortcomings of evidence-based policy making (Parsons: 2002). The PhD project on which this paper is based is seeking to develop this argument further and test the hypothesis that councillors are not widely seen using

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[4] I once had to explain the structure of local government in Ipswich to the anaesthetist about to knock me unconscious for an operation.

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quantitative data and evidence in a routine and effective fashion and that in practice they have often relied on storytelling and narrative as a means of arguing for and against policy ideas, in other words, to explain what is going on in council meeting rooms.

THE LITERATURE

The academic literature which examines and reflects on the world and work of the councillors in the UK began effectively in the 1960's which produced a stream of ethnographic research which drew directly on observation and interviews with councillors. In 1963 Hebert Wiseman published research into the political management of Leeds City Council. A member of the council himself, he produced an innovative account of how it operated with additional insight into 'backstage' machinations and what happened when disagreement occurred within the majority political group (Wiseman: 1963a&b). Later in the same decade, Hugh Heclo used direct interviews with councillors in a study of Manchester City Council to define categories into which they each fitted (Heclo: 1969). Further, in referencing the activity undertaken by councillors as 'a job', Heclo signaled the notion of political representation as 'work', a concept that others have also more recently engaged with (Freeman: 2019). Ethnographic methodologies continued in use in the decades that followed (Friend & Jessop: 1969; Spencer: 1971; Newton: 1976). The turbulent relationship between local and national government in the UK in the 1980's is covered by the somewhat alarmingly entitled Councillors in Crisis (Barron, Crawley & Wood: 1991).   The election of New Labour in 1997 brought an emphasis on localism, strong leaders and cabinets, scrutiny roles for backbenchers and the prospect of directly elected mayors. Academic research was undertaken on these new governance systems (Cole: 2002; Copus: 2003; Coulson: 2004, 2011; Coulson & Whiteman: 2012; Elcock: 1998; Leach & Copus: 2004; Leach & Wilson: 2008; Wilson & Morse: 2004). At the same time parliamentary select committees, government departments and other bodies such as the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA), the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) undertook research into how and why individuals put themselves forward for election. Of particular note was the report of The Councillors Commission, Representing the Future, (Roberts: 2007), chaired by a former

Leader of Camden Council.[5] Most recently, Colin Copus produced In Defence of Councillors, (Copus: 2016) and The Voice of the Councillor, (Copus & Wall: 2017) from research carried out by the De Montfort University and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission.

In addition to these studies, there is a small body of autobiographical work published directly by councillors (Hodgkinson: 1970; Haynes: 1994) and collections of private, unpublished papers.[6] Further direct testimony is to be found in occasional examples of councillors recorded at work, on film and in audio. Documentaries have been made of town hall 'life', notably BBC studies of the London Borough of Lewisham in 1992 and Stoke on Trent City Council in 2014.[7] In 1973, Granada's World in Action team filmed a documentary about a councillor in Durham, including rare footage of local politicians knocking on doors and engaging with residents.[8] In each of these examples, content was moderated by the editorial process and needs to be understood in context. In Durham, the politician in the spotlight was the first openly gay representative on the council and in Stoke on Trent filming was set against the backdrop of austerity.   In the course of national and local news-gathering, councillors are interviewed on a daily basis by the media, although not often at length or in depth.[9] Again, as evidence of storytelling, it must be remembered that these interactions are controlled and moderated by both councils and media organisations and as such, might be better reflected on through the lens of political action as performance and dramaturgy.

This body of literature offers comprehensive cover of the daily activity of councillors and as such, has chronicled change over the past half century. For example, there are now more councillors for whom the role of elected member has become a full time occupation

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[5] Well received by councillors and other local government practitioners when it was published, the report and its recommendations soon became lost in the fall out from the financial crash of 2008.

[6] I have had privileged access to the unpublished papers of Sir Dick Knowles, leader of Birmingham City Council in the 1980's and '90's.

[7] http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/4ed2a49cb4454e43b262ee4bc3dd3b0c and http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01nr45q

[8] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt2250596/

[9] See here a rare contemporary example of a local council leader interviewed in depth by a national newspaper: https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/04/rich-people-reinvention-once-great-naval-cityplymouth and here https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=6N51Y1K65qE

and there is better renumeration for councillors at all levels and greater acknowledgement of caring responsibilities they might have and support for those with disabilities. The past two decades have seen an increase in gender and ethnic diversity (Bochel & Bochel: 2000) and, in urban areas the average age of those standing for and being elected to office is falling.[10]

In summary, this body of literature offers a wealth of data and commentary on how councillors have spent their time. However, there is arguably a gap when it comes to hearing from councillors themselves writing as academic practitioners in reflection on their work and performance of it. An ethnographic account of what is happening in a council meeting produced by someone who is a councillor themselves could offer particular rich insight into what is occurring and this is what the research project on which this paper is based is seeking to do.

THE METHODOLOGY: A POLITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY

The fieldwork carried out for this project has taken place over the course of the municipal year 2019/20 in the Metropolitan Borough of Rotherham (RMBC). Rotherham is a town in South Yorkshire in the north of England. The council is governed by 63 elected councillors representing 21 wards . Currently the Labour Party is in control of the Council with the Rotherham Democratic Party forming the opposition. Elections are held every four years with the next set scheduled for May 2021.[11] The governance structure of the council is a Leader/Executive model. The council webcasts the majority of its public meetings and an archive of past meetings is kept online.[12] During the course of my fieldwork I observed four online meetings of the full council at RMBC and made transcripts of each of these myself. I attended one of these meetings in person in addition to watching it later online. I also carried out semi-structured interviews with councillors who participated in the

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[10] Councillors in the UK are not salaried but are paid allowances for their service. Information about councillors relating to gender, employment, disability and allowances was until 2013 gathered in an annual census. The most recent results can be seen here: https://www.local.gov.uk/ national-census-local-authority-councillors-2013
[11] Postponed from May 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic.
[12] https://rotherham.public-i.tv/core/portal/home

meetings.[13] With regard to online meetings, I am seeking to find out how many people have watched meetings broadcast and stored by RMBC. Informal anecdotal evidence from my colleagues around the country suggests that councils have not routinely archived these recordings or reported information on who watches them and from where. Funding was provided by the devolved Welsh government in 2017 for mandatory broadcasting of meetings which led in turn to reporting by local councils on viewing figures, but this is not routinely evident in English authorities.[14] Arguably, the switch to virtual meetings by all councils due to the Covid-19 pandemic may bring change. It is outside the scope of this research project to look at how the pandemic has affected the work of councillors, although reflection will be made in the final PhD thesis on carrying out fieldwork during a pandemic. Again anecdotally, it appears that online meetings that can be watched live or at a later time have reached wider audiences and have provided source material for print, broadcast and social media during the Spring and Summer of 2020. Councillors interviewed for this project and others who I have interacted with in my work with the Local Government Association have referred myself and other colleagues to webcasts. Links to these are being increasingly shared on social media. Increased public interest in and easier access to council meetings may be an outcome of the pandemic. A research project which seeks to understand what it is that councillors do when they speak by examining their performance through webcasts is arguably of interest and value.

- ***Getting dirty with politicians and the value of being an insider...***

This research project can be seen as belonging to the interpretive tradition, carried out by a reflective practitioner with privileged access to politicians in the formal and informal arenas in which they operate. This in turn, is rooted in ethnographic practice. The work of Goffman and Geertz has informed this project from its inception (Goffman: 1951; Geertz: 1973). To quote Rhodes, t'Hart and Noordengraaf in their work on government elites, ethnographers ".... portray behaviour as creating meaning. They show how meaning is rooted in language, objects, identities and symbolism so all behaviour underscores the negotiated, symbolic and even theatrical or 'dramaturgical' dimensions of social life." (Rhodes, t'Hart & Noordengraaf: 2007, p. 3). Observing councillors in meetings - public and private, 'front' and 'back' stage (Wodak: 2009) - is arguably following in Goffman's

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[13] These interviews were carried out using the Zoom platform due to the lockdown restrictions of the 2020 pandemic.

[14] https://https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-39380070

footsteps back to the hotel in Scotland. This is where data can be gathered, by watching and recording behaviour. The ethnographer, as Hammersley and Atkinson have stated, "...participates, overtly or covertly, in people's daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues which he or she is concerned." (Hammersley & Atkinson: 1983, p. 2). So, put simply: sit, watch, ask and learn.

Existing recent literature on local governance and democratic practices which has engaged directly with practitioners and their lived experience is rooted in a range of public services - planning (Forester: 2009, 2012; Laws & Forester: 2007; Hajer: 2005a, 2005b; Healey: 2015), public health (Freeman & Peck: 2007), policing and frontline neighbourhood working (Maynard-Moody & Musheno: 2003; Tangherlini: 2000; Smith, Peterson & Burnett: 2014; van Hulst: 2008 2013; Verloo: 2015). Yet little of this has been produced by practitioners themselves. Hajer and Smith are exceptions and Verloo is arguably both researcher and activist. Yet, there is scant direct contribution from councillors in the UK themselves and so the project I am undertaking seeks to make a specific, possibly unique, contribution to this field of research by offering the reflections of a currently elected politician in a UK local authority on the practice of her fellow councillors. Being an 'insider' gives not only privileged and easy access to 'backstage' meetings – informal, private meeting spaces – and to elite individuals in the field but an easy grasp of words and concepts in common use. Francesca Gains has written compellingly about elite ethnography with specific reference to the world of politics, referencing in detail the work of Rod Rhodes on national governance in the UK, concluding that "(U)ncovering the understandings, beliefs and practices of actors in a governance setting can provide an understanding of the meaning making of policy-makers…" (Gains: 2011, p.165). My own practice and membership of this particular elite may arguably enable me to uncover the meaning of policy making in Rotherham with ease and nuance not so readily available to other researchers. My academic supervisors and colleagues have challenged me to devise a check list which they could use in observing meetings and this I have done. Yet I have also had cause to reflect on what I might have missed to tell them because of it being so rooted in my innate understanding of the field. Robert Park spoke of the need to 'get the seat of your pants dirty' (in Gains: 2011, p. 157). For this project, peeling back the layers of my own dirt has been necessary before getting dirty with others.

THE FINDINGS

This research project will be taking an interpretive approach to the understanding and analysis of the data obtained from observation and interviews (Bevir & Rhodes: 2002; Yanow: 1996, 2007; Wagenaar: 2007). Interpretive enquiry follows the argument that "...people can only engage in a practice because they hold certain beliefs or concepts. So political scientists can explore that practice by unpacking the relevant beliefs and explaining why they arose." (Bevir & Rhodes: 2003, p. 1). Thus, it can be argued that 'unpacking' and exploring the stories told by councillors gives insight to the practice of policymaking. There is a need, perhaps, to dig deep to reach 'thick description' (Geertz: 1973) and in this there is value in an ethnographic approach which "...gets below and behind the surface of official accounts by providing texture, depth and nuance..." (Finlayson: 2004, pp 135-136). An interpretive approach is one in which this texture and nuance is further enriched by examination of feelings and emotions (Yanow: 2007). It is about *understanding* and as such, "…entails establishing the beliefs and meanings which guide and inform actions (and the practices to which they give rise." (Hay: 2011, p. 172.). Furthermore, it is an approach in which what *actually* happens, as opposed to what might be recorded as *supposed* to have happened, is significant in making *sense* of what has happened, For example, the difference between the formal minutes and a digital recording of a council meeting may offer different accounts of what occurred. The performance of the speeches made and the responses to them from others present offer further texture and meaning to be uncovered. Beyond this, stories told may carry different meanings in different settings, hidden meanings even. Texture and nuance are all. As Lowndes and Leach observed in developing research design for work with councillors and officers, "...our theoretical framework...required the study of 'rules in use' as opposed to 'rules in form'. To unearth the 'real' rules that shape political behaviour- informal as well as formal - it is necessary to ask people 'how things are done round here..." (Lowndes & Leach: 2004, p. 560).

As previously described, the fieldwork for this project has included observation, transcription and interviews. I have yet to analyse the data in detail but I will reflect here

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on two strands of inquiry which have emerged so far. One is a storyline which can be seen as an embedded case study within my research project (Yin: 2003). The other is reflection on the behaviour and performance of councillors and how these might be categorised.

- ***The case of the Droppingwell Tip***

Observing the meetings and making the transcripts was an intimate and absorbing process in itself. I watched each meeting twice before making the transcripts. I came to know the voices and the performance styles of the councillors I observed in Rotherham as well as those of the colleagues I sit alongside in meetings myself. I came to anticipate the arguments they would make in debates and how they would present them. Most significantly, I became attuned to storylines and narratives they deployed. After watching the first two meetings I observed one case study in particular which was referred to by both councillors and by members of the public who participated in the meetings through questions and petitions and around which a particular narrative body has been constructed. This concerns a landfill site (an area where waste material can be disposed of) known informally as Droppingwell Tip. It has a complex history going back over a hundred years during which there have been efforts to close it wherein arguments have been made about the safety of its operation and its continued existence. At each meeting I watched, from May through to October 2020 the site was the subject of debate. In January 2021 a special meeting of the council's Scrutiny Committee was held to discuss it, taking evidence from councillors, residents and outside agencies. Emotive arguments are deployed about the operation of the site itself but it has also come to signify more to those inside and outside the council chamber. It is referenced as having more to say about the body politic of Rotherham Council, as signifying more about how politics are played out in the town and how the council is managed. This storyline about a refuse site can be seen to hold other narrative layers, referencing other events and behaviours in the borough. Exploring this further, unpacking the rich layers of 'thick description', will be at the core of the analysis work in this project.

- ***Teachers, Preachers, Actors and Administrators***

If the storyline of the Droppingwell Tip has become increasingly significant in RMBC meetings over the past year, what of those who are narrating it in the council chamber?

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The act of transcribing the meetings I observed was an intimate one. I came to recognise and anticipate the vocal tics and habits of each of the speakers. Listening carefully to their speech patterns revealed the development of common themes and arguments from meeting to meeting. I have no expertise in linguistic analysis, yet my experience of sitting in and speaking at my own council meetings had clearly attuned my ear to what the Rotherham councillors said. Instinctively, I began to develop descriptive categories which reflected the way they spoke and performed and the narratives they employ. These categories are set out in the table below. They have proved valuable in initial analysis of the Droppingwell Tip case study and have resonated with colleagues with whom I have discussed my research, one offering the observation that it was always important in politics to know what sort of a politician you were dealing with if you wanted to make progress on policy and decision making.[15] In 1969 Hugh Heclo developed a series of categories for councillors on Manchester City Council which still have relevance today (Heclo: 1969). This research project hopes to build on that insight.

Table 1.

Teachers
The councillors who seek to inform their fellow peers by way of instruction. They make speeches in which they seek to impart information in order to gain the support of their colleagues. They use evidence in the form of reference to data and reports but equally use narrative of lived experience (their own and that of residents) to the same effect in forming their arguments.
Actors and Preachers
These are the councillors who see appearance in the council chamber as an opportunity to demonstrate their oratorial skills as a means of commanding the debate. They demonstrate a higher degree of confidence than their peers. They speak without notes. They deploy humour to effect**.** They reference past events with confidence. They might also be categorised as ***preachers***. One councillor is a lay preacher at his local church and this lived experience is evidenced in his contributions to debates.
Administrators

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[15] From a conversation with Councillor Graham Chapman, Nottingham City Council, August 2020 recorded here with thanks

These are the councillors who are sensitive to the need for those present at the meeting to formally agree actions to be taken – usually in the form of instructions to officers. The chair of a meeting formally carries out the act of asking for assent, dissent and abstention to any such action, but there are others in the room who can also be seen to be taking responsibility for ensuring action is understood, planned and agreed to.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to reflect on the literature, methodology and fieldwork which forms part of a wider research project which is exploring the hypothesis that councillors in UK local authorities tell stories in their contribution to policy making thorough examination of webcast meetings in the town of Rotherham, South Yorkshire. This case study is being conducted using an ethnographic methodology by a researcher who is also a serving councillor and thus a member of the elite community under examination. I have sought here to offer some insight both into the literature which has helped in the development of my research questions and into the fieldwork carried out and some initial findings.

This research project began with a hunch. Over 30 years of working with and being a politician had given me a wealth of anecdotal evidence of the behaviour of councillors, of all political parties and none. In a climate where the primacy of evidence-based policy making had waxed and waned, I could see that the majority of politicians used evidence in a very particular way. They told stories. Some of these they had inherited from their predecessors on councils, handed down from generation to generation of elected representatives. Some of the stories were buried in the histories of the communities they represented. Some of them were true and formally chronicled. Others were less proven but had become part of the institutional fabric of the council and the community nonetheless. They were complex narratives that even those who told them struggled to unpack, full of 'situated knowledge', that is, "…context-based reflections on first-hand experience" (Epstein et al: 2014, p. 243). This hunch was one that colleagues would agree with if I put it to them informally was the launch pad for a slew of tales they would be only too happy to recount. If any learning were to be gained from stories, how they were told and retold and in what settings, I knew I would have to test this hunch properly and uncover the layered detail. Thus I developed my research questions and found a methodological approach and a case study on which to build my work.

There is arguably an irony about writing about evidence in the late Summer of 2020, when a global pandemic and political events in countries far from my home are shaking the foundations of scientific research and its acceptance by governments and their populations alike. It brings into sharp relief the need to understand what politicians do when they speak, the power they have and how they use it. The case study at the heart of this project is relatively small and localised but it seeks to speak to both practitioners and academics and perhaps a wider audience as to the nature of political performance. A reflective practitioner using an ethnographic methodology is arguably well placed to uncover the layers of dirt referenced by Robert Park a century ago.

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