

Political and ethical aspects in the ethnography of policy translation: Research experiences from Turkey and China

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Abstract

A currently burgeoning literature in planning and policy studies engages with the travel of policy models across countries and sites through novel concepts such as policy translation, policy mobility, and mutations. Increasingly, this literature calls for ethnographic methods to study the travel of policy models. Such methods require various degrees of researcher's participation in the policy process. As a result, ethnographers become entangled in complex webs of relationships during and after their fieldwork, which introduces political and ethical dimensions to ethnographic fieldwork. The literature on policy mobilities and translation, however, has provided few practical guidelines regarding the politics and ethics of conducting ethnographic research. Based on two vignettes from our research experiences in China and Turkey, we discuss the politics and ethics of applying ethnography to policy translation and offer a number of hints for future researchers.

Keywords

Ethnography, methodology, ethics, politics, mobilities, translation

Introduction

With the increase in the means of communication and the rise of non-state political actors, domestic policy is more likely to include ideas, norms, or models from other countries and jurisdictions (Stone, 2012). The ubiquity of the travel of policy models and practices across countries makes it an important subject for policy studies and urban planning. As the

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methods and approaches to study the travel of policy models emerge, the call becomes greater for researchers to use ethnography as part of their investigation. This paper aims for a methodological contribution and sets out to examine some of the political and ethical challenges in engaging with an ethnography of policy translation. From this discussion, it offers practical guidelines for researchers interested in pursuing such methods.

The travel of policy ideas and models is not a new phenomenon and has been well studied in political science and public policy (Dolowitz and Marsh, 2000; Simmons et al., 2007). The conventional schools to study this process hinge on concepts such as policy transfer, policy diffusion, lesson drawing, and others (Clarke et al., 2015; Freeman, 2009; Benson and Jordan, 2011; Marsden and Stead, 2011; Stone, 2012). These schools, however, have been criticized on a number of grounds, such as assuming the linearity of the policy process and the immutability of meanings when policy models travel (McCann and Ward, 2013; Mukhtarov, 2014; Peck and Theodore, 2015).

As a result, a number of alternative approaches started to develop within the tradition of interpretive policy analysis, critical geography, and urban planning. These approaches include “policy translation” (Clarke et al., 2015; Freeman, 2009; Mukhtarov, 2014; Stone, 2012), “policy mobilities” (McCann and Ward, 2012, 2013), “policy mutations” (Cook and Ward, 2012), “fast policy” (Peck and Theodore, 2015), “policy assemblages” (e.g. Clarke et al., 2015; Prince, 2010), and “travelling rationalities” (Mosse, 2011: 58). While different in their foci, these approaches emphasize the micro-politics of knowledge as a socially constructed process, the malleability of space and scale in policy practices, and “multiple translations of ideas across sites and networks” as policy moves (Mukhtarov, 2014: 72). Shore and Wright (2011: 21) summarized the weakness of the policy transfer literature as follows:

(p)olicies are not simply ‘transferred’, they are reinterpreted as they travel across cultural boundaries. This is rarely a neatly rational or coherent process and the effects are unpredictable, as policies tend to have ‘social lives’ that outlive their authors.

For convenience, we refer to these alternative approaches to policy mobilities that disagree with the schools of policy transfer and diffusion as “policy translation.”

Scholars of policy translation made significant progress in conceptualizing the object of their study but have been relatively slow to develop and test methods for their analysis (Mukhtarov and Daniell, forthcoming). Many scholars call for ethnography to study policy translation. For example, Peck and Theodore (2012) proposed on the pages of *Environment and Planning A* the “extended case method,” initially developed by Michael Burawoy (Burawoy, 2008, 2009; Peck and Theodore, 2012, 2015). McCann and Ward (2012, 2013), also in this journal, provided a survey of methods to study policy mobilities and suggested a variant of global ethnographies where a researcher follows policies, people, and places in “studying through” the policy process. Stubbs (2014) building on Marcus (1998) called for a multi-sited political ethnography of policy translation, whereas Schatz (2009), in his edited volume, provided a general discussion of ethnographies to study politics. In addition, a number of ethnographic studies of politics have recently appeared in public administration and policy studies journals (Escobar, 2014; Maybin, 2014; van Hulst et al., 2012).

With the growing number of calls for ethnography of policy translation, we need to discuss the political and ethical implications of such research (Mosse, 2011; Mukhtarov, 2016). As Pachirat (2009) suggested, ethnography of policy is political in two ways: it studies politics, but it is also a political activity on its own. “Political ethnography ought to give an account. . .of how the ethnographer navigates the specific political decisions that inevitably infuse the process of ethnographic research and writing itself” (Pachirat, 2009: 160). Mosse, in turn, claimed that the logic of ethnographic work is fundamentally different

from the logic of professional work. The key danger for an ethnographer here is to “fail to exit from professional communities so as to allow description” (Mosse, 2011: 64). Thus, the ethnography of politics is also an act of politics and warrants the label “political ethnography.”

Political ethnography also presents formidable ethical challenges (e.g. Mosse, 2006, 2011). The multi-sited nature of such ethnography, the influence and power of research subjects, and the common commitment of an ethnographer to represent the marginalized and the under-represented voices, all present ethical dilemmas (Mosse, 2006; Stubbs, 2014). These and many other ethical issues can arise in the course of ethnographic research. Ranging from ethical issues regarding researcher conflicts of interest to issues of representation and voice in decisions deriving from or affecting local populations, to general protection of research participants, these considerations together construct a complex research pathway for the ethnographic researcher. An additional layer of complexity enters in the study of policy mobility or translation in that the objective of the translation is to introduce ideas or practice from one community into another, thus requiring the researcher to assess the influence of multiple cultural factors and assume no bias while doing so. Inasmuch as ethics seeks to identify “right action,” the researcher is called to identify the “right way” of dealing with ethical dilemmas in the field and avoid missteps that could compromise the integrity of the research. Finding ways to deal with the politics and ethics of ethnographic research of policy translation is therefore a very timely and important subject of analysis. It is important that we acknowledge the interconnection between the political and ethical issues, as both deal with the relative power of research subjects and the agency of researchers to gain access and report their research findings. However, for the purposes of our analysis, we maintain this distinction.

With this paper, we introduce the discussion of the politics and ethics of conducting ethnographic research on policy translation to a new audience: that of planning and public policy. Moreover, we introduce two different cases that highlight different types of political and ethical issues that arise in the context of ethnographic research of policy translation. The first is of a researcher acting as a participant observer in Turkey and the second is from an academic operating as a leader for an international consultancy team in the role of an “observant participant” in China. We borrow this distinction from McNeill and St. Clair (2013: 115) who, as former World Bank professionals, justified their research methodology on the ground of “observant participation.” This distinction is relative, as any ethnographer is also a participant in the process of policy-making and narrative construction. However, we believe that the prevalence of one role over another (observation over participation or vice versa) has implications for positionality which in turn determine choices made in the face of ethical and political dilemmas that appear in the situation at hand (e.g. Gould, 2004). The first of our two cases describes a number of dilemmas that the participant-observer deals with during his ethnographic work in Turkey, while the second case identifies dilemmas from the perspective of the observant-participant in his interaction with a powerful Chinese client. The two cases offer insight into the different types of dilemmas these two “types” of ethnographers face in their research in action and how they deal with issues of positionality.

Based on our own research experiences, we offer a list of four categories for consideration by researchers before, during, and after their fieldwork: (1) policy actors and their composition; (2) defining research questions, theoretical approach, methods, and access to information; (3) distribution of costs and benefits; and (4) assumed identities of a researcher. These four categories have emerged as a result of our interrogation of the theoretical literature and our own field experiences. We realize that ex-ante consideration would not

prevent the possibility of challenges and dilemmas of emerging. However, we trust that researchers are better off in navigating these issues if they enter these research settings with an awareness of potential challenges that may arise.

Following the introduction, the next section presents the key arguments for ethnography in studying policy translation and discusses the political and ethical issues therein. At the end of this section, we introduce our four overarching categories for consideration. In sections “Policy translation in GAP Regional Development Administration” and “Policy translation at the Shenzhen Sino-Dutch Low Carbon City”, we provide two case studies of policy translation in which two of the authors were involved, one in Turkey, and another in China. Section “Policy translation in GAP Regional Development Administration” provides a description and analysis of the case in Turkey, and section “Policy translation at the Shenzhen Sino-Dutch Low Carbon City” discusses the case in China. The final section points to some key findings and discusses the main implications for policy translation research and the use of ethnography in policy processes more generally.

Political and ethical aspects in the ethnography of policy translation

Policy translation and ethnography

Various scholars writing on policy translation almost unilaterally call for ethnography to study policy mobilities and translation (Yanow, 2004; Clarke et al., 2015; Lendvai and Stubbs, 2009; Mukhtarov, 2014; Peck and Theodore, 2012, 2015). Burawoy (2009: 201) argued for taking ethnography to the global level with multi-case ethnography “across national boundaries.” Peck and Theodore (2012), in a similar way, claimed that “drawing on the tradition of multi-site ethnography and the extended case method, especially with respect to questions of research design...represents an attempt to take the translocal relativisation and mutability of policy seriously.” Along these lines, Clarke et al. (2015) also argued for an ethnography of policy translation, as well as Blaustein (2015) and Kingfisher (2013).

Willis and Trondman’s (2000: 5) defined ethnography as “a family of methods involving direct and sustained social contact with agents, and of richly writing up the encounter, respecting, recording, and representing at least partly *in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience.” In Schwartz-Shea and Yanow’s (2012) terms, this means that ethnography is more than a method; it is a methodology, which suggests a certain logic of inference and ways of asserting the quality of research. In this view, policy ethnography means “studying through” policy issues (McCann and Ward, 2013; Shore and Wright, 1997), as opposed to the more traditional in political science logic of “studying up” or “studying down” (Wright and Reinhold, 2011; Clarke et al., 2015).

Scholars voice multiple arguments in favor of an ethnography of policy translation. Some of these authors make a general argument for an ethnography of politics, such as Schatz (2009: 10–12), who claims that it helps to “flesh out...generalizations produced or meanings assigned by other research traditions.” The immersion of ethnography allows a researcher to gain humility in understanding the limits of our knowledge of social reality, and at the same time, clothe our research efforts with a normative stand and commitment (Schatz, 2009). More specifically on the ethnography of policy translation, Peck and Theodore (2012, 2015) suggested that shadowing global policy-makers across multiple spaces is necessary to understand how knowledge is created and communicated. Many claim that it can illuminate both the micro-politics of meaning making and breaking and the macro-politics of international capacity-building policy projects (De Jong and Edelenbos, 2007; Mosse, 2011; Pachirat, 2009; Shore and Wright, 2011; Zirakzadeh, 2009).

Ethnography of policy translation entails “tracing ways in which power creates webs and relations between actors, institutions and discourses across time and space” (Shore and Wright, 1997: 14). Political ethnography relies on participant observation, often in multiple sites and over various periods of time, and necessarily involves sustained contact of a researcher with the researched in which the inter-subjective element is further complicated by the cross-cultural element (Pachirat, 2011).

However, these calls for ethnography entail a different form of ethnography as opposed to the accounts of “classical” ethnography. The contemporary forms of ethnography or “ethnography-lite” attempt to respond to the requirements of “policies on the move” (Clarke et al., 2015; Schatz, 2009). Comaroff and Comaroff (2003: 151) illustrated this with the question “how – given that the objects of our gaze commonly elude, embrace, attenuate, transcend, transform, consume and construct the local – do we arrive at a praxis for an age that seems...post-anthropological”? Instead of ethnography, Kubik (2009) speaks of “ethnographic sensitivities,” where ethnography is global and multi-sited. Similarly, Peck and Theodore (2010: 172) suggested global ethnographies in which a researcher would “follow or travel with policymakers, intermediaries or models, to connect sites of experimentation and emulation, or to expose nodes and networks of resistance.” Thus, these forms of “ethnography-lite” are different from the classical forms of ethnography, in which prolonged immersion in the field, language training, and a heightened sensitivity to how cultures are constructed play key roles. Nevertheless, we view these new forms of ethnography, capable of jumping scale and avoiding imprisonment in one locality, as advantageous on their own terms; these therefore should not be dismissed as inferior forms of ethnographic research.

A prominent method in this tradition of contemporary ethnography is the extended case study method developed by Burawoy (2001, 2009) and further refined by Peck and Theodore (2012, 2015). This method is infused with ethnographic sensitivities, but also includes more conventional methods for policy analysis, such as interviews and focus groups. In a similar vein, McCann and Ward (2012, 2013) suggested “mobile methods” which comprise ethnography, field notes, and oral histories, and standard methods of policy analysis, including interviews and questionnaires. One innovative method discussed in human geography and planning is the study of planners’ conferences and “policy tourism” in order to follow the policies as they travel (McCann and Ward, 2011, 2013). Similarly, Cook and Ward (2012) and Cook et al. (2015) view international conferences, meetings, and Internet platforms as enabling infrastructure for policy learning, exchange, and mobility and therefore important sites to study ethnographically. Taking this thinking further, Buscher (2014) suggested the “global event ethnographies” of international convention secretariat meetings in order to understand how hegemonic concepts emerge and are later granted the license to travel. Essentially, an ethnographer attempts to study multiple objects across multiple places and communities attempting to evade the constraints of local narratives and position them in a broader light within the context of developments and understandings at other scales and levels (Gould, 2004). Doing such ethnography is both a political and an ethical project, and explicit acknowledgment of this as well as some practical guidelines in dealing with the challenges of ethnographic fieldwork require more attention.

Political and ethical challenges in applying ethnography to policy translation

The political and ethical dimension of ethnography is not a new subject for anthropologists of policy or ethnographers of international development (e.g. Mosse,

2004, 2011; Wedel et al., 2005). For example, some of the chapters of the volume *“Policy Worlds: Anthropology and the Analysis of Contemporary Power”* discuss the politics and ethics of ethnography (Shore et al., 2011). However, these debates are largely confined to an audience of anthropologists and virtually non-existent in policy studies and planning. A notable exception is provided by Clarke et al. (2015: 218), who proposed the “ethic and politics” of policy translation. They clothe the research of policy mobility with the explicit “ethic” which calls on researchers to open up space for alternative narratives and “policies otherwise” (Rojas, 2007). This is, however, different from the discussion of politics and ethics in research methodology. We briefly mention some of these challenges below and then offer four categories of consideration for researchers.

First, an ethnographer will inevitably struggle to remain at a distance from the networks and the zones of influence of policy actors he/she studies in order not to take “things” at face value (Peck and Theodore, 2015). It may be hard for a researcher to learn to speak the language and grasp the symbolic repertoires of cosmopolitan policy actors engaged in policy translation, and at the same time not get caught in the “in-group” mentality of those networks (Peck and Theodore, 2012: 25). In the settings that we describe here, this challenge becomes one of learning enough to understand and effectively utilize the various layers of text that are being exchanged in communications, verbal and otherwise, and, at the same time, not forego the (psychological) distance necessary for objective research. An attendant danger is to fail to “objectify” the professionals (policy-makers) because the latter are powerful actors and have the ability to interfere with the researcher’s career or research implementation.

Second, the researcher may find it hard to provide critical accounts of policy work that potentially place a strain on valuable relationships with former or current clients, colleagues, and friends (Mosse, 2006). Here, the challenge stems from the feelings of personal loyalty and gratitude for access and support in fieldwork or data collection.

Third, a researcher is often sanctioned by particular gatekeepers to enter the field and is provided with access and support in their fieldwork. This could place certain limitations on what the ethnographer has access to. Researchers often learn to operate under the norms of “obedient autonomy” when they have little choice but to agree with the client’s choice for what, in researchers’ view, is an inferior policy option, or an inferior site for data collection, for example (Klotzbucher, 2014). Fourth, ethnographers introduced to the field by a particular authority may “receive highly customised lessons based on a highly partial version of policy success stories...” (Pow, 2014: 296). Pachirat (2009: 158) put this as follows “there were the ways in which my being seen would affect how and what I saw.” Concerns with “double patronage” may cause a researcher to feel straightjacketed in his or her ability to “see” certain things in the field, always and necessarily aware of the interests of his or her local facilitating authority. This has lately been studied in the literature on interpretive policy analysis under the label of “positionality” (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).

Finally, there can also be misunderstandings, intentional omissions, and miscommunications caused by cultural differences during the action of carrying out or studying policy translation. For example, the concept of freedom of speech is very different in the Netherlands as compared to China, and the acceptability and manner of discussing certain policy issues in public or in private can show considerable cultural variety. An ethnographer needs to be aware of those limitations and opportunities and be reflexive and honest about the possible impacts these would have on one’s knowledge claims (Cleary, 2013; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). This, as any form of ethnography, requires a non-

judgmental attitude towards the culture, worldviews, and behavior of the population under study. However, as Gould (2004) noted, any ethnography is either explicitly or implicitly an evaluation, and therefore carries normative aspects. Without going into the debate on the possibility and extent of transcending cultural differences in the work of an ethnographer, we emphasize the importance of constant cognizance of the contact zones between cultures and that what is taken-for-granted in them creates many ethical and political tensions in his/her daily life and work (Pratt, 1991).

While the focus of this paper is on ethnography as a methodology for studying policy mobility, our discussion is relevant to those interested in intervention research (e.g. Daniell, 2012), action research (e.g. Whyte, 1991), and community-based research (Benoit et al., 2015). The discussion of ethical and political challenges is also scarce in this methodological literature, to which we hope to contribute in addition to the literature on ethnography.

We believe that key challenges in reflexivity and positionality for ethnographers of policy translation can be systematized around the following four categories of consideration: (1) policy actors and their composition, (2) research design and access to data, (3) distribution of costs and benefits from the research, and (4) researchers' identities. This typology has emerged from our engagement with Cleary's (2013) recent treatise on cross-cultural ethnographic research, and the literature on political ethnography in practice as well as our own research experiences (e.g. Klotzbucher, 2014; Mosse, 2011; Pachirat, 2009). While these four categories clearly have application to other types of field research, their centrality in ethnography as invariably pertaining to this type of study and taking specific forms with specific kinds of impacts on the research justifies orienting them to ethnographic methods in this essay. Of course, these considerations are also relevant to other fields within planning and policy whether and to what extent this is the case is open to future methodological exploration but beyond the scope of this contribution.

Below, we briefly introduce each of these categories of consideration and discuss them in more detail in the case studies that follow.

- (1) *Actors and their composition.* When delineating which organizations or departments are involved in the policy translation and ascribing positions, goals, and perspectives to them, it is important to examine how they operate internally, and which person(s) is/are entitled to speak externally on their behalf.
- (2) *Research design and access to data.* It is vital for researchers to assess whose wishes and choices have prevailed in the formulation of the research questions, the adopted conceptual framework and the selected research methods.
- (3) *Distribution of costs and benefits.* Researchers and "the researched" in policy translation often engage in a form of implicit or explicit exchange in terms of who gets what during and after the research activities. Awareness of this "unwritten contract" at the outset can minimize potentially research-compromising complications. A threshold ethical principle that figures prominently in this category is non-maleficence (Beauchamp and Childress, 2008), i.e. "do no harm." This requires that whatever distribution of costs and benefits or post-research activities takes place, any possibility of harm to the research participants must be minimized.
- (4) *Assumed identities.* When observing and conducting interviews, researchers normally have the possibility to profile themselves in various ways vis-à-vis their research and respondents. Alternatively, when operating as a team, researchers may need to make strategic use of various individuals with different potential identities.

Table 1. Four categories to consider in ethnography of policy translations.

Issues to consider	Questions for the researcher	Sources of dilemmas
Actors and their composition	Who are the main players or who speaks on their behalf? How are the various teams organized internally? Is the researcher or the research group a cultural mix in terms of backgrounds?	Connecting to the other culture; Power politics
Defining research questions, theoretical approach, research methods, access to information	Who formulates the research questions, the dominant theoretical perspective and the research methods? Who gets access to what information sources (interviews, data)? How is translation handled in speaking and in writing reports? What procedures had to be followed in doing the research?	Dealing with power relations; Handling different ontologies and ways of knowing
Distribution of costs and benefits	Who gets what benefits associated with the research (monetary, reputation, political choice, publications etc.)? Who decides on the dissemination of the findings? In what form? Is this done collaboratively or separately? Is any attention paid to “do no harm” in dissemination of reports?	Dealing with different reward systems and the ethics of giving back to researched communities
Assumed identities	What identities does the researcher take on during the study? Does (s)he claim scientific neutrality or openly engage in criticism or advocacy? Is there a long-term commitment to implementation?	Dealing with ambiguous and shifting roles of the researcher

In Table 1, we propose a number of questions that researchers can ask themselves, regarding the proposed four categories of consideration.

In the next section, we introduce and discuss two case studies to illustrate the four categories of consideration presented above in the real-life process of participating in and studying the policy translation process. Section “Policy translation in GAP Regional Development Administration” discusses the case of policy translation in South-eastern Turkey, whereas section “Policy translation at the Shenzhen Sino-Dutch Low Carbon City” discusses a Sino-Dutch project. In both sections, we briefly introduce and discuss our personal histories of engaging with policy translation research and then present a detailed analysis organized around the four categories of consideration. These two cases have been selected to illustrate and highlight different issues arising from different postures of positionality, and in this way offer complementary insights. In the case of Turkey, the issues of research design (2) and exit from the fieldwork (4) are salient in the key role of Mukhtarov as an academic researcher. In the case of China, the issues of actor composition (1) and distribution of benefits (3) are most telling in the key role of de Jong as a project advisor. The differences in positionality are evident in the relationship with the research environment, including participants, and carry different implications for the research itself. The juxtaposition of these two cases also illustrates the importance of the four categories of consideration that we have introduced in this paper.

Policy translation in GAP Regional Development Administration

Case background and research engagement

The Southeastern Anatolia Project (GAP in Turkish abbreviation) started in 1989 with the Master Plan, which had the ambitious goal of building a number of dams and hydro-electricity power plants in order to lift inhabitants of the region out of poverty (Ünver, 1997, 2001). Southeastern Anatolia is home to some 8.4 million people (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2015) and one of the poorest regions in Turkey almost fully dependent on agriculture. With the GAP project, the government of Turkey attempted to modernize the region and create industrial jobs in order to transform small farmers into industrial workers (Barham, 1996). Its embroilment in domestic electoral politics, the Kurdish question, trans-boundary politics with Syria and Iraq, the EU accession issues and the recent refugees deal made GAP much more than just a water-based regional development project (Mukhtarov, 2008, 2009; UNDP, 2016).

A number of policy innovations have been translated to the GAP region since 1989. One of the most important innovations was the administration set up to oversee the development process of the project, the GAP Regional Development Administration (GAP-RDA). Being itself an embodiment of policy translation as the first and only regional development organization ever set up in Turkey, the GAP-RDA has also become a platform for a number of further projects to be translated into Turkey, such as the centers for women's empowerment and entrepreneurial support and water user associations (GAP-RDA, 2002; Mukhtarov et al., 2015; GAP-RDA, 2002).

As a result of his study, Mukhtarov (2014) described how GAP-RDA, a model initially "transferred" to Turkey by international consultants, evolved away from its initial purpose of being a coordinating agency in the early 1990s into a fund-raising and public relations agency in the mid and late 1990s, and finally into a monitoring and reporting agency with little political influence in the 2000s. This case has offered a vivid illustration of how policy innovations become contextualized in new areas in contingent and unpredictable ways. The grand-narratives of "sustainable human development" and "sustainable regional development" promoted by GAP-RDA and taken up by the researchers, politicians, and the media in the late 1990s and early 2000s had little to do with the reality on the ground. In reality, the project struggled to find finances, and a considerable amount of environmental harm, social change, and unequal distribution of benefits have occurred (Harris, 2008; Mukhtarov, 2014; Mukhtarov et al., 2015). The picture of a grand-project struggling to secure funding, fight off the critique of the environmental groups and the largely negative attitude of the domestic population of Kurds contrasted with the glamorous image of GAP-RDA in international development and academic circles in the 2000s (Mukhtarov, 2009). In the course of this research, Mukhtarov spent six weeks in total at GAP-RDA as an intern, divided in two periods of three weeks each. On his first visit to Ankara in March 2007, Mukhtarov spent three weeks as an intern at the international relations department of the organization. His internship also included a three-day trip to Şanlıurfa, where the regional branch of GAP-RDA was located. There Mukhtarov interviewed various stakeholders, additionally interviewing farmers in the field in the Harran plain. On his second trip to Ankara in August 2008, Mukhtarov spent two weeks in Ankara and two weeks in the GAP-RDA regional office in Şanlıurfa, where he had time to visit with various officials in the organization, interview representatives of other state organizations, and inspect the irrigation fields several times, mostly in the Harran plain (Mukhtarov, 2009). Mukhtarov used participant observations and interviews as part of his research, and had a researcher identity completely uninvolved in the project at hand by any means. During the course of

this six week research visit, Mukhtarov encountered several situations presenting ethical and political questions.

Four categories of consideration in Ethics and Politics of Policy Translation

Actors and their composition. A number of ethical and political issues in this research has come to fore. Two initial issues arising in this research were (1) ease of researcher access due to shared cultural aspects and resulting complexities and (2) loss of autonomy in selection of interview sites, participants, and portrayal of affiliation. First of all, the fact that the researcher was from Azerbaijan, a Turkic nation with a language closely related to Turkish, was experienced as an advantage in building trust and gaining access. The relatedness between the cultures and language helped Mukhtarov in gaining access to documents from GAP-RDA in both the headquarters and subsidiary and in being introduced to farmers. For example, the ease of access to internships at GAP-RDA, allocation of a car and a driver, and extensive time that GAP-RDA experts and employees spent with Mukhtarov indicate the friendliness towards the researcher, partly explained by his cultural background. The GAP-RDA employees felt at ease when Mukhtarov observed daily work at the office, and not a single interview request was refused during the fieldwork. At the same time, Mukhtarov occasionally felt patronized and straightjacketed during field visits. For example, on one occasion, the field assistant responsible for introducing the researcher to farmers and explaining the developments in the region decided for himself whom to visit, at what time of the day, and how to frame the interviews with farmers without consulting Mukhtarov in advance. Furthermore, Mukhtarov traveled in a car with an official from that organization. This meant that farmers saw Mukhtarov as affiliated with the GAP-RDA, resulting in possible self-censorship or alternative narratives being shared. This social positionality as, in many ways, embedded and dependent upon local hospitality for access and execution, places the researcher in a situation that is likely to give rise to ethical dilemmas given the conflicting allegiances to the integrity of the research and the need to appease, or at least, not offend the host community.

Defining questions, approach, research methods, access, and language. Gaining access to data and preserving one's research design has been another challenge. Overall, Mukhtarov had the support of two key players in the field. One particularly friendly employee at the administration had been the liaison for contacts with others during the internship at GAP-RDA in Ankara. Another contact person at the State Planning Organization, the key government-planning department, had been instrumental in getting access to that organization for interviews and, through snowballing, to other state agencies. Not incidentally, the field assistant employed at GAP-RDA attempted to influence the research design of the study. The assistant had a PhD in agricultural engineering from a reputable university in Turkey, and therefore felt compelled to provide both supervisory and logistical input, placing Mukhtarov in the position of having to accept unsolicited input or reject it and risk disrupting the relationship, which could have consequences for research implementation.

Another possible factor, which may have contributed to attempts of the research assistant to interfere in research design, was the vulnerability of the interpretive and exploratory research design that Mukhtarov used. This may have led to concerns on the part of the agricultural engineers about the robustness of the research design and a more proactive role in re-designing the study along his disciplinary and methodological inclinations. Fencing off

such attempts, and gaining legitimacy for an exploratory study, was certainly a serious challenge to Mukhtarov during his fieldtrip, both in terms of implementing the study and maintaining his research morale.

Distribution of benefits and rewards. The issue of distribution of benefits and rewards had not been important in Mukhtarov's research as his mission was a purely academic effort, with no direct ambition of policy change. Moreover, GAP-RDA had little to benefit from this research. Thus, little conflict occurred here due to the separation of the academic research field in which the researcher operated and the policy field in which the informants operated. However, the political reality is that perceived benefits and rewards can attend the most neutral of research activities. Nevertheless, Mukhtarov sought to maintain an independent academic profile.

Assumed identities. A major dilemma that Mukhtarov encountered was the tension between being an independent researcher on one hand and a confidante and a colleague of the staff of the GAP-RDA on the other. These roles clashed at times. Having spent six weeks at GAP-RDA, and a number of years prior to that in correspondence with key gatekeepers of the project, Mukhtarov developed close kinship with some employees and gatekeepers. As a result, Mukhtarov found himself with two allegiances—his first to his academic research and second to those employees who had shared information and given him much time, and without whose helpful attitude, the research would have been impossible. As Mukhtarov withdrew from fieldwork into his deskwork, to tell a critical story of the project felt like an act of betrayal. Eventually, Mukhtarov communicated the findings to his colleagues in GAP-RDA in Ankara and Şanlıurfa over email, in English. Despite Mukhtarov's fears that his study could be seen as an egoistic act of betrayal for the sake of personal career advancement, no signs of dissatisfaction were evident, including subsequent contact by the field assistant. However, the concern with self-censorship due to personal loyalty was a serious issue at the time of writing the study.

Policy translation at the Shenzhen Sino-Dutch Low Carbon City

Case background and research engagement

From 2009 to 2010 on, the South-Eastern Chinese mega-city of Shenzhen (about 12 million inhabitants and bordering Hong Kong) has set itself the task of developing a "Low Carbon City" in its Longgang district, a neighborhood, the ecological performance of which is specifically expressed through reduction of carbon emissions.

De Jong has personally been a key advisor in the planning phase of this project. He had been developing personal networks with politicians and civil servants in Shenzhen since 2007. One of them was Professor Jie Tang, an economist at both Peking University and Harbin Institute of Technology and, most importantly, the Chairman of Shenzhen's City Congress when de Jong met him. They became good intellectual friends over lunches and dinners. In 2009, Tang was elected Vice-Mayor, but continued to see de Jong and his former academic colleagues, in spite of his other demands. Hearing about their wish to act as advisors to the Shenzhen government, Tang catapulted de Jong and his team for meetings in front of various high-level civil servants.

From June 2010 until March 2011, de Jong and the other members of the research team labored extensively to produce a 150-page report on how to generate an industrial transition for the specific neighborhood and turn it into a so-called ECO-2-ZONE where economic interventions would help generate an ecological zone by making it more knowledge-intensive

and attractive to national and international cosmopolitan high-workers (De Jong et al., 2013a). The Shenzhen City government, the Standing Committee of the Communist party in the city as well as the leadership of the Longgang district government (level directly below the city) enthusiastically welcomed this report. Soon after, their ideas, along with those developed by designated civil servants, were promoted to the National Development and Reform Committee (NDRC), a sort of national “super-ministry” in Beijing, which is also in charge of the national program on Low Carbon Cities. The NDRC decided to make Shenzhen one of the nation’s eight demonstration zones for Low Carbon Cities. Vice-Mayor Tang made it clear to the Sino-Dutch research team and the Dutch Consulate-General in Guangzhou that he wanted this to become an official Government-to-Government (G2G)-project between China/Shenzhen and the Netherlands.

Subsequently, numerous official workshops and visits of Shenzhen officials to the Netherlands and vice versa ensued. In some cases, Dutch participants in these workshops also commented on more detailed draft plans made by the Shenzhen government and its Chinese consultants. However, the actual results of this collaboration were rather limited. Only relatively general statements about the contours of the cooperation and good intentions ensued such as businesses signing few contracts. The Dutch civil servants who were initially invited to support De Jong’s team began to see the opportunities and increasingly identified themselves with the project, including making crucial decisions as to its future, which the research team could not always agree with. The result was a growing dissensus on the Dutch side that hampered effective operations. On the other hand, the City of Shenzhen certainly did not make it easy for Dutch players to obtain lucrative business arrangements from the project. Although construction of the Low Carbon City had begun, to what extent it will really be an environmental achievement remains to be seen. The Dutch commitment and involvement remains limited, certainly in comparison with what De Jong and his colleagues originally had envisioned (De Jong et al., 2013a, 2013b).

Four categories of consideration in ethics and politics of policy translation

Actors and their composition. Dealing with limitations in language capabilities was a key consideration. Many Chinese senior policy officials involved in the project were uncomfortable with communicating in English and had limited experience in dealing with foreign research teams. Since De Jong and his fellow researchers did not speak sufficient Mandarin, consequently they had to rely on their own Chinese PhD students and on representatives of their Chinese partner university in handling administrative practicalities, translation, and “reading” unknown local circumstances. This arrangement worked quite well and served as the basis for developing a close comradeship between the leaders of the Dutch and Chinese research teams. However, weaknesses in this emerging friendship became apparent when the first research briefing was to be delivered (and presented) to the client. When discussing the conditions for the consultancy task, the client had demanded a first report after just one month. De Jong had declared this an unworkable condition given the amount of evidence to be collected. However, his Chinese partner indicated that he would take care of this difficulty and there would be no need to worry. This issue was subsequently put aside and the contract was signed. After one month, the Chinese research leader indeed submitted a first rather shallow draft report without consulting De Jong. This not only infuriated De Jong but also raised concerns about reputational damage, following a question from a junior employee of the client asking “Is this really your work?” Only later did de Jong learn that his Chinese partner had secretly tried to save their project by

passing the first inevitable official reporting hurdle, allowing the Dutch team to gain time for more thorough investigation. This episode led to a temporary breach of trust, which was later restored after direct conversation. The mutual understanding that ensued, however, paved the way for more enthusiastic engagement and a richer comradery afterwards. Clearly, assumptions regarding the actors and their roles had not been adequately explored, resulting in counterproductive interactions.

Defining questions, approach, research methods, access, and language. De Jong and his research team were free to pose the research questions, collect evidence, and formulate suggestions, as they wanted. However, it was soon obvious that this freedom meant no more than teasing out the wishes of the client. If they did not receive any reaction after sending a manuscript, it was understood as a lack of interest or endorsement of what the researchers were doing, implicitly causing them to reconsider where they had gone wrong. On the other hand, a quick reaction with a number of suggestions for improvement implied they were headed in the right direction. Access to relevant data and information was complicated. Much of the required data did not exist. For existing data, Chinese policy-makers were reluctant to share data until De Jong and colleagues contacted the department heads. The team also collected vital information during official meetings with provincial and city leaders, while more sensitive issues appeared on the table during informal lunches and dinners with the Vice-Mayor and Vice Director of Shenzhen General Office and befriended architects in the city.

Distribution of benefits and rewards. The Chinese client benefited considerably from the project, since they welcomed an international report on the future of a deprived neighborhood and obtained approval from Beijing to turn it into a nationally recognized demonstration zone on Low Carbon City development. A massive Sino-Dutch Government-to-Government collaboration was established further lifting its prestige. Both research teams had the costs for the research project covered and both acquired some local fame. The leader of the Chinese team acquainted himself with many important leaders and was often interviewed by local media. For the Dutch team, a busy period of gathering support from Dutch government ministries and co-organizing workshops in The Hague and Shenzhen led to little real additional benefit. However, the experience of the Dutch team began to diverge substantially as De Jong and his team felt increasingly marginalized by the Dutch government officials who began to take control of the project when they realized that, as public servants, they enjoyed higher status in China than they did in the Netherlands. This marginalization also resulted in Dutch research team losing the opportunity to obtain new research contracts for follow-up work. As their role shifted from lead researchers to mere contributors within a Dutch government delegation, they eventually lost touch with the policy development they had instigated. Content-wise, the Chinese client selectively picked concepts from the research report without embracing the integrated vision for urban development De Jong had proposed. De Jong was delighted to see some ideas adopted, but disappointed that the new developments would not “really be eco.” His experiences inspired him to write a number of publications (De Jong, 2013; De Jong et al., 2013a, 2013b) and give many presentations on the topic and developed a new research line on eco-cities to none of which the Chinese client objected, even if there were critical notes in them. The fact that they were written in English and appeared in academic journals simply made them innocuous. Nothing was ever agreed regarding anonymity. Although some of the people involved do appear by name in the articles, this has never been a sensitive issue.

Assumed identities. Being an outsider connected with a famous university contributed to the credibility of the Dutch research team and allowed its members more independent judgment than Chinese researchers can afford. Nonetheless, open criticism could easily damage the relationship with Chinese officials who might easily suspect little understanding of local political culture and context on the part of the Dutch team. A basic attitude of respectful curiosity took the team a long way in navigating this challenge, understanding the context better, and gaining access to Chinese sources. Yet, at times sensitivities could appear when De Jong was too frank in his opinions with officials he did not yet know well, thereby transgressing local norms.

While their attitude vis-à-vis the Chinese client cannot be described as one of overt environmental advocacy, the Dutch team did remain committed to “true” eco-city development by preferring to turn brownfield areas into eco-neighborhoods rather than building new towns in green areas, even if this was financially less attractive. Informally, the Dutch team was allowed to raise such points and criticize choices made by the client, but they would not vent such issues in meetings or interviews to avoid embarrassment. The Chinese client would even accept criticism raised informally, but then give the current level of Chinese developmental progress as a disclaimer: “we are not ready for this yet; at a later stage of development, we will learn more from you.” De Jong and his team were comfortable with the role as advisor, and their hope was that they would have impact on the choices their political clients made. These negotiated roles that, over time, became clarified beyond initial assumptions resulted in rewarding research contributions.

Summary and implications for future research

In response to the growing need of ethnographic studies of the cross-border movement of planning and policy ideas and practices, the political and ethical challenges of such research need to be acknowledged and elaborated upon in the academic communities for planning and public policy. In this article, we have selected two cases that differ in the challenges faced in part due to issues of positionality. Positionality is a critical concept that requires the attention of researchers as part of the self-reflexivity that helps to support and maintain the integrity of the research. By selecting two different cases, oriented toward different types of challenges, we show that the four categories are effective in prompting necessary reflection for dealing with ethical dilemmas that arise in ethnographic research on policy translation, regardless of one’s particular positionality. Moreover, we have attempted to illustrate and systematize the challenges stemming from the politics and ethics involved in the ethnography of policy translation by presenting two vignettes of our own research experience based on personal observation and infused with “ethnographic sensitivity” (Kubik, 2009). We propose that researchers in planning and public policy dealing with the ethnography of policy translation attend to four categories of consideration in designing and conducting fieldwork that are likely to give rise to political challenges and ethical dilemmas—(1) actors and their composition, (2) defining research questions, theoretical approach, research methods, access to information and language of communication and reporting, (3) distribution of benefits and rewards, and (4) assumed identities of the researcher.

Mukhtarov experienced tensions between independently implementing his research plan, on one hand, and depending on his respondents’ help to collect evidence, on the other. Furthermore, Mukhtarov felt loyalty and gratitude to the people who helped him in the field, which was at odds with the necessity to expose and criticize the project where they had worked. De Jong and his colleagues obtained a unique opportunity to make a difference with regard to eco-city development in a leading Chinese city, but felt forced to make trade-offs

between their independent judgment on what they thought was ecologically sustainable against the imperative of respecting the primacy of economic growth permeating Chinese decision-making on urban development. They also had to accept that Dutch public servants took over the lead in a Sino-Dutch project De Jong had initiated and that he subsequently met with the limited political power academic advisors can exert in the decision-making processes.

All four categories of consideration mentioned above have to do with shifting roles of a researcher and the need for reflexivity and positionality in research design and implementation. The norms of reflexivity and positionality become particularly important for a researcher who wishes to remain transparent, honest, yet effective and focused. As Sultana (2007: 383) writes “being reflexive is important in situating the research and knowledge production so that ethical commitments can be maintained.” Klotzbucher (2014), in the context of his fieldwork in China, also argues that researchers may need to be “obedient” and go with what the governments or clients want, but they at the very least need to be reflexive about their choices and the silences, or the policy options which could have been put in place otherwise and produce “policies otherwise” (Clarke et al., 2015). One may indeed envision the notion of “policies otherwise” with a normative charge to it, that of uncovering, problematizing, and offering counter-hegemonic narratives (Gould, 2004; Mukhtarov, 2016; Rojas, 2007).

As mentioned above, we acknowledge that we developed this checklist after our fieldwork based on a retrospective interpretation of the events in which we participated. We did therefore not intentionally use these points for preparation or on-the-spot understanding of emerging difficulties. However, we suggest that knowing about the importance of these four categories of consideration in advance would contribute to the preparedness of researchers in facing these challenges and dilemmas with a coherent set of strategies, and possibly, resulting in fewer frictions with colleagues or informants. Our goal with this paper is not to provide a “how-to” guide for researchers, but rather to raise points for reflection for individual situations and to facilitate the process of preparation and foresight.

We call the attention of researchers to four categories of consideration in an exercise of reflexivity and positionality in research design and fieldwork, two methodological approaches that are widely discussed in the methodology literature (Gould, 2004; Pachirat, 2009; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012). Reflexivity urges critical researchers to navigate dilemmas and challenges between the worlds of “codified” research ethics articulated within the Institutional Review Boards, and one’s own sense of justice and appropriateness (Fujii, 2012; Pierce, 2012). In other words, reflexivity is about being transparent about possible impacts of researcher’s values, worldview, and ideas on her particular knowledge claims. Positionality, in turn, refers to the need to find a responsible and serviceable way to situate oneself and must make the researcher aware of the impacts one’s own demographic features and relationships developed in the field has on the process of knowledge production (Gould, 2004: 271; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012: 67–68). We feel that reflexivity and positionality are necessary and important and will help navigate the ethical and political challenges in the ethnography of policy translation (Fournier and Grey, 2000); in other words, being reflexive and positionally conscious may, in general, be a necessity for an ethnographer. It is however unlikely that reflexivity and positionality are sufficient to prompt and resolve the ethical dilemmas and the political precariousness of one’s work as such. Nevertheless, these concepts are crucial to maintaining research integrity in the face of ethical challenges. We suggest that paying ex-ante attention to the four categories suggested above adds practical flesh and bone to reflexivity and positionality as mentioned above by making the dilemmas and issues to be addressed more tangible.

This paper contributes to the limited literature engaging with the subject of the ethics and politics of ethnography, specifically studying policy mobilities and translation. This is a relatively new subject for the urban planning and public policy audiences and we hope to draw attention to these issues and stimulate more research and sharing of research experiences.

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