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Charles Darwin University

## Ethnography and policy

### Knowledge production as negotiating multiplicity in landscapes of policy practice

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## Ethnography and policy: Knowledge production as negotiating multiplicity in landscapes of policy practice

Natalie Gill  
Michaela Spencer, Northern Institute, CDU.

### INTRO slide



Hello, thanks for having us. There are two of us presenting today - myself Natalie Gill coming in from Bristol UK, and Michaela who is coming in from the Northern Territory of Australia, where she lives and works on the traditional lands of the Larrakia people. I'll speak to the text, and Michaela will control the slides and read the stories.

In this presentation we will be drawing on our experience as STS researchers with an interest in policy landscapes and how they get done in practice. Asking: how can we teach **ethnographic story** for policy research in a way that does not collapse multiplicities but instead engenders an ethnographic sensibility that allows **embodied intervention in real-time**?

**The setting** for this is an Ethnography and Policy research unit taught to students based in northern Australia. These students are enrolled in a Masters of Public Policy, some of whom are government bureaucrats, working in remote Aboriginal communities.

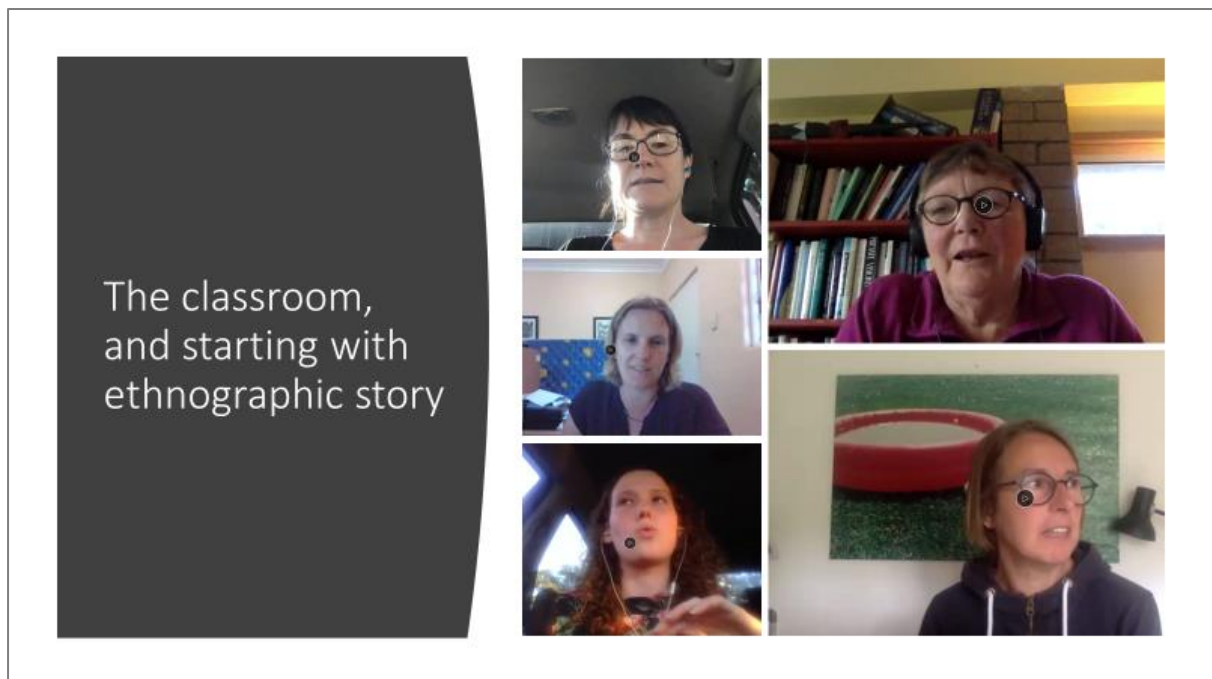
There were three of us on the lecturing team, myself, Michaela and Helen Verran. The unit emerged out of a collaboration between myself and the Ground Up research approach of Michaela and Helen, working in the Northern Territory, Australia. The name 'Ground Up' points to epistemic tensions arising between policy practices of the nation state and governance arrangements within local Aboriginal cosmologies, where knowledge is expressed as the single entity of 'people-place'.

The students we have been teaching in this unit have - in small ways - also been grappling with these epistemic tensions. Perhaps most significantly in relation to their own multiple positioning - as students learning about policy research, as well as working in government and other jobs on the ground, working within the same policy landscapes they are also studying.

So to add some context to our approach when thinking about policy

- **we align** ourselves with scholarship in STS that understands policy as distributed and enacted in practices. When we talk of practices, we are indexing the mundane and everyday doings of policy. And we are highlighting the **performativity** of those mundane daily practices.
- we don't make a distinction between policy on the ground and policy research and see **ethnographic story for policy research** as part of the distributed practices of the doings of policy.
- and so, we think of policy practices as **knowledge work** and knowing as situated, embodied, and embedded in practices.
- We are committed to the idea that our worlds could be otherwise and we want to find ways of intervening in a “knowingful doing of the present” (Verran, 2021, p.7).

## SLIDE 2 - [CLASSROOM]



**So to shift slightly** - This slide shows the classroom. This was an online course and Michaela was in Darwin, Helen in Melbourne, I was in the UK, and the students were in various places in the Northern Territories, sometimes in their cars on the way home from work as you can see in the slide.

Initially We asked the students to contribute ethnographic stories that we would then work with throughout the unit.

- we wanted to move from a **representational mode** of doing ethnographic story to a mode that **acknowledges the entangled nature of knower in the text**
- we wanted a way of **re-presenting the story** that maintains the partial and relational nature of the specific moment that is being written about.
- and we wanted to find a way of emboldening the students to craft ethnographic stories for policy research in a way that makes a difference for the people and places that they work with.

**For us** this raises the question of how this ethos can be taught and might travel. For this reason, in this presentation we are delving back into our experiences in a classroom context

**SLIDE 3 - introduces the typology and says something about its agential nature**



Typology

- Tensions
- Located subjects
- Materialities
- Figures

As a way of intervening in the split between knower and the world and between sociality and materiality we developed a typology: tensions, located subjects, materialities, and figures - this typology is born out of ways of knowing in STS and has emerged here as different modalities of the sociomaterial. We mobilised the typology as both **features of the policy landscape** and **companion concepts** for our students as they revisited their stories.

We hoped that the typology would allow the students to **interrupt the world** as shaped in and by institutional epistemics and give space for re-versioning their stories in ways that would acknowledge their situatedness and ways that do not make assumptions about the shape of the nation-state.

**SLIDE 4: Student stories**





## Student story...

A woman was living in a tent with three children, her husband and a one-year-old baby. They cooked from an electric frying pan which was connected to a long extension lead. She was a sufferer of Rheumatic Heart disease, and her husband was diabetic, two conditions which are complicated by overcrowded living arrangements. The living conditions were her family's safest option after a fight in the over-crowded house she had been living in. She had spoken to the community housing team at her local council and to the clinic, all who had written to support her plight to find emergency housing.

Two days earlier, she had been visited by a social worker, who agreed she was a good mother, so the children would stay in her care, but that they had exhausted all options to temporarily house her and her family. She had been busy lining up in a long queue to get a birth certificate while the birth extract team were in town, a bank statement, and other documents filled out so she could apply for a house.

The outcome of these efforts was a letter that went to the tenant whose house was beside the patch of dirt her tent sat on. It read from a template and said that Northern Territory housing had just been made aware that there was a safety concern at the lot number. Could the tenant please remove: an extension cord leading to an offsite electric frypan.

I received this letter in my Outlook inbox, in an office hundreds of kilometres away from the family. Though I didn't like it, it was my job to pass the letter onto the Community Housing Officer who would be the one to deliver it to the woman.

— CDU student and local council officer

In writing about her experience of working as a council housing officer in a remote NT aboriginal community, one student shared the following story

A woman was living in a tent with three children, her husband and a one-year-old baby. They cooked from an electric frying pan which was connected to a long extension lead. She was a sufferer of Rheumatic Heart disease, and her husband was diabetic, two conditions which are complicated by overcrowded living arrangements. These living conditions were her family's safest option after a fight in the over-crowded house she had been living in. She had spoken to the community housing team at her **local council** and to the clinic, all who had written to support her plight to find emergency housing.


Two days earlier, she had been visited by a **social worker**, who agreed she was a good mother, so the children would stay in her care, but that they had exhausted all options to temporarily house her and her family.

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The outcome of these efforts was a letter that went to the tenant whose house was beside the patch of dirt her tent sat on. It read from a template and said **that Northern Territory housing** had just been made aware that there was a safety concern at the lot number. Could the tenant please remove: an extension cord leading to an offsite electric frypan.

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## SLIDE 5: Re-telling the stories



Re-telling the stories

- Tensions
- Located Subjects
- Figures
- Materialities

### Tensions and Located subjects

In the story there are glimpses of the way homelessness as a policy problem is not static, but shifts in relation to health and safety, to health, to citizenship, and to the figure of the good mother. Each of these aspects of the landscape include different concepts, histories, subjectivities and problematisations. They are not separate from each other but neither are they commensurable.

Initially the author felt the jostling policy contexts as **tensions** but was unable to say anything about them that did not collapse these tensions either into her failure or the failure of the situation. Neither option put her in the landscape - and this separation of ethnographer and text made it difficult to revitalise parts of the landscape not visible at first sight. Attending to her **located subjectivity** was a way of seeing her response **as an effect** of particular intersecting policy landscapes and **embodied ways of knowing**.

Understanding her response as a feature of the policy landscape was a way of denying the separations implicit in institutional logics. She was able to re-present the tensions as an effect of the policy multiplicities and the way different versions of the policy figure (an unsafe householder in the context of housing policy, a homeless person in the context of living in a tent, a good mother in the context of social services) come into or go out of focus with the presentation of the letter. Finding ways to tell stories that hold these tensions helped with understanding how policy is playing out on the ground.

### Figures

Looking for **figures** in the story became a way of revealing the assumptions about the character of the problems that policy seeks to address - in this case the shape of the problem of homelessness - and how it gives rise to specific figures. In the context of policy research these figures get taken up


by the bureaucrat as policy objects or objects of governance and a policy bureaucrat may embody those ways of knowing and reproduce them in their ethnographic data.

**Looking for figures enacted in place and retold in the story** gave the students a way of loosening up the landscape and revitalising different relations which in turn allowed them to produce ethnographic story that shifted the collectives that are brought to presence in a particular problematisation.

### **Materialities**

An example of this shifting collective can be seen when the re-versioned ethnographic story includes **materialities as actors**. This allowed this author to produce new and surprising aspects of the story that were not at all present in the original vignette.

### **SLIDE 6**



Re-telling the stories

She is not the only tent dweller – in [her community], building is complicated; the bodies of loved ones are buried in yards, behind later-erected fence lines, along the coast. It is complicated because no one knows exactly where there are bones. On the beach, sometimes strong currents wash the sand away and uncover long-ago burial grounds. Because of this, plans for new houses are stagnated, though many houses are so grossly overcrowded

– CDU student and local council officer

In a second version of the story, the student also included this:

She is not the only tent dweller – in [her community], building is complicated; the bodies of loved ones are buried in yards, behind later-erected fence lines, along the coast. It is complicated because no one knows exactly where there are bones. On the beach, sometimes strong currents wash the sand away and uncover long-ago burial grounds. Because of this, plans for new houses are stagnated, though many houses are grossly overcrowded.

This revealed latent aspects of the policy landscape that were also shaping housing policy but not present in the institutional narratives. The story **adds in** a people and place that aren't present in the original story, opening up the policy landscape for re-appraisal, and shifting the collective that coalesces around the problematisation. In this way the ethnographic story remains connected to the

tension and has creative agency as it remakes the ethnographer and re-shapes the landscape of policy.

## SLIDE 7



The slide is titled "Intervening with/in policy landscapes" and features a list of two bullet points. The background is a photograph of a dirt road in a rural, semi-arid landscape under a cloudy sky.

### Intervening with/in policy landscapes

- Working an emergent epistemic practice that remakes the ethnographer and the text
- Mobilising the typology as companion intervening within modes of the sociomaterial

**to sum up:** In working with ethnographic story in these complex policy landscapes, and mobilising a working typology, we have reached towards ways that student-researchers can work with their own embodied participation in the configuring networks of policy practice to generate research accounts which do not abstract or step away from the situations of their involvement, but nonetheless produce robust policy data, and generative research outcomes.

Looking back at what happened in the classroom, and ways we found of working, it was important to produce a heuristic that did not require a bifurcation between sociality and materiality, between ethnographer and text.

Mobilising the typology as a **companion in writing ethnographic story for policy research** helped the student-researchers to **resist the split** and so **both experience and meaning making** could be present and remain situated within the situations of the student's lived and academic experience, enabling meaningful intervention within lively, heterogeneous and quite particular realities in real time.

**END**