

## EXPERIMENTAL COLLABORATIONS

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# EXPERIMENTAL COLLABORATIONS

Ethnography through Fieldwork Devices

*Edited by*  
*Adolfo Estalella and Tomás Sánchez Criado*



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## The 'Research Traineeship'

### The Ups and Downs of Para-siting Ethnography

*Maria Schiller*

#### Introduction

In my training as a social anthropologist, participant observation was taught as the core methodology of social anthropology. In seminars, I learned about fieldwork, where researchers assumed that their interlocutors have different intellectual capacities to abstract and reflect than the anthropologist. However, these assumptions about the less powerful and silent subject have become increasingly criticized over the past years, culminating in new ideas about the directionality and the character of fieldwork relations.

My fieldwork as a 'research trainee' in municipal organizations in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Leeds in 2009–10 was an experiment for conceiving my role and my relationship with local officials in a less closed-ended way and for being open to different possible roles of researcher and researched, as well as for engaging with some of the obstacles to collaboration. Local officials today increasingly have an academic background and thus often have similar analytical capabilities to the ethnographer. In addition, their tasks are no longer only technical but often knowledge-based and creative. The capacities of my interlocutors open new possibilities of reflexive conversations about the issues at stake in a particular field. However, I will also show that, despite the similar capacities of my interlocutors, their roles and our relationships were far from uniform across the field sites. I will argue that we need a differentiated understanding of the

contemporary anthropological field, which takes into account the organizational culture, individual self-conceptions of interlocutors and their position of power.

Being open to different relationships that emerged, and addressing my pre-conceptions of fieldwork relations, provided some challenges. In some instances, I caught myself trying to keep some distance or being unsure how close I could get to my interlocutors. As I was developing some more personal connections and becoming friends with some local officials, I also gained information about their private lives. Spending some time together during lunch breaks or free time in the evening and at the weekend, I was not only learning about professional issues, but also about problems with children, about separations from one's partner, about physical and psychological illnesses and burn-out, about issues with neighbours and about being an expat in the city. In a few situations, I also was open with them about my personal life, exchanging on my own career plans, future dreams, and personal situation. However, combining fieldwork and friendship was an 'ambivalent experience' (Coffey 1999) for me:

I really enjoyed telling a little bit about my partner and family over lunch. As I was talking, I realized how draining this somewhat alien status as a participant observer within the team was. However, I also worried to what degree it was legitimate to discuss my personal affairs with them. How far can I be 'a professional researcher', while at the same time having a more personal relation with my research subjects? To strike this balance to date seems very difficult to me. (Fieldwork journal extract, Antwerp)

In one research relationship with one officer, who was pursuing an MA degree in tandem with his job, I also felt too much closeness was hampering my agenda of doing research. Being interested in my expertise as someone who had just written a PhD thesis, he repeatedly tried to entangle me in social science discussions, and asked me whether I would be willing to discuss his MA thesis ideas with me. I was somewhat surprised, as I had not expected to find myself discussing sociological theories or methodological approaches with my research subjects. In this case, it was not me trying to become closer to them, but the other way round, and my feelings were ambiguous. Although I enjoyed the discussion, I felt this was at some point coming too close, and I realized that this activity, while pleasant, did not serve the purpose of my research. I needed some distance and I tried to limit this exchange to a few instances. It however also made me reflect on the capacities of my research subjects – and the collaborative potential of ethnography in contemporary organizations.

The following chapter engages with the evolving relationships and moments of collaboration between researcher and researched as an important element of the epistemic knowledge production in research fields, where interlocutors share similar capacities as the researchers. Introducing the research traineeship, I will argue that this method allows experimentation with para-ethnography, and engagement with the specific conditions for 'studying up' and 'sideways'.

### **From Participant Observation to Para-ethnography**

As an undergraduate student of social anthropology, I learned that the ethnographic method has much to offer. Much of the existing literature and many of the anthropological methods of teaching reverberate the iconic work of Bronislaw Malinowski on fieldwork and 'participant observation' (Malinowski 1922). Ethnography, so the general argument goes, allows access to the mundane everyday knowledge and provides a sense of the polyphony in, and a rich description of, the field (Bate 1997: 1166), and it is meant to offer 'a new sort of truth' (ibid.: 1168). It communicates an impression of truly having 'been there' and the intense familiarity with the subjects and their ways of knowing (ibid.: 1163). Ethnography implies being intensely involved in the field over a period of time (Watson 2011: 206–7). It is self-immersed, longitudinal and reflexive (Bate 1997: 1151). It includes doing fieldwork, in which one tries to 'penetrate another form of life' and 'grasp the native's point of view', involving a variety of methods, such as participant observation, interviews, attending meetings, and document research (ibid.: 1152). The advantage of not only conducting interviews but also participant observation is evident, as Watson (2011: 211) argued. Participant observation is a research practice in which the investigator joins the group, community or organization being studied, as either a full or partial member, and participates in or observes activities, asks questions, takes part in conversations, and reads relevant documents (ibid.: 206). It is about getting close to human actions and social interactions in order to allow the making of more general statements about organizations and identities (ibid.: 205). Overall, this delineation very much reflects mainstream definitions of the method, which was also part of my own socialization as an anthropologist.

Since the 1980s, however, we also witness the re-evaluation of some of these traditional conceptions of participant observation and 'the anthropological subject'. Anthropologists often elect to study

not only exotic others of faraway lands, but oddly familiar domestic others who might be cohorts at work or neighbours (Hirsch and Gellner 2002: 3). As some have argued, the context of a globalized and interconnected world, and of professionalized, expertise-based groups, provides a different context that calls for new ethnographic practices. Laura Nader (1974) for instance suggested 'studying up' in order to engage with people in power, with resources and privileges. Nader's approach aimed to understand social stratification and the linkages between different layers of society. The method of 'studying sideways', developed by Ulf Hannerz (1992), seeks to bring into view the peers of anthropologists, who work in related areas of expertise, and to discuss their professional networks. 'Shadowing' can then be a useful anthropological technique, as it allows one to closely follow individuals as they move within and outside of their organizations (Czarniawska-Joerges 1992). Moreover, Shore and Wright's (1997) proposition to 'study through' and to follow policy processes allows an analysis of the definition of problems and the decision making of policies. In the course of the chapter, I will show how these different dynamics of studying up, through and sideways have become relevant in the different field sites.

Interlocutors who have similar capacities to researchers provide different challenges as well as opportunities for relationships of the researcher and the researched, as Holmes and Marcus (2008) as well as Hannerz (1992) have argued. In the words of Holmes and Marcus, we are dealing with counterparts rather than 'others' – who differ from us in many ways but share broadly the same world of representations with us, and the same curiosity and predicament about constituting the social in our affinities (Holmes and Marcus 2005: 250). This differs decisively from conceptions of an anthropologist's research subjects as being less powerful and formally silent (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 85), and it diverges from the anthropologist's aim of getting as close as possible to the 'native's point of view' (*ibid.*: 92).

Observing these changed characteristics of the anthropologist's interlocutors, Holmes and Marcus posit the opportunity of collaboration between researcher and researched. Collaboration, according to Marcus, means 'to integrate the analytical capacities of our subjects to define the issues at stake in our projects and the means by which we explore them' (Holmes and Marcus 2008: 86). In order to capture this new reality, they developed the concept of 'para-site' or 'para-ethnography'. According to Holmes and Marcus, 'the para-ethnographic experiment is both to ask for and perform a kind of shared conceptual labour with our collaborator-subjects at key

moments in ongoing projects of ethnographic research' (ibid.: 97). However, Holmes and Marcus have not provided much qualification when and how para-ethnography is possible, or with what results. By demonstrating the variety of responses to my presence as a research trainee in the three local state organizations, I argue that we need a differentiated conception of the 'para-site', as not all research sites provide the same opportunities for collaboration. I delineate the specificities of different research sites and the conditions that allow more or less collaboration.

### **The Research Traineeship**

In my study, I investigated whether local administrative practices<sup>1</sup> in European cities reflect the purported shift of multiculturalism, a discourse that was quite dominant in the European political and public sphere in the first decade of the millennium. I was interested in how local state administrations and diversity officers in their everyday work appropriated and interpreted this new policy concept of diversity. To carry out participant observation in local administrations I made some particular choices in the ways in which I conceived my role and my relationship with my interlocutors, which I discuss below.

When preparing for my possible research stay in diversity departments of municipal authorities, one of my informants referred to it as 'a sort of traineeship, but for doing research'. This is how the notion of research traineeship emerged. Framing my stay as a 'kind of' traineeship made it intelligible to the officials who needed to approve my stay. It allowed them to translate my presence into something they were familiar with. Giving my stay a label that made sense to the officials was important. Adding the word 'research' made it clear that my purpose was primarily that of conducting research.

Given the rather closed character of bureaucratic organizations, my first challenge was to get access as a researcher. I established a first contact by way of approaching officials at international city network<sup>2</sup> events and through interviews. In these interactions, I enquired about the possibility of a research stay within the unit, and offered to carry out a small project in return. After I had discussed the general possibility of a research stay, I submitted a written research proposal to the head of unit, including the proposed length of stay (4–8 weeks in each city; the research took place in 2010–11), a short outline of my broad research interests and the purpose of the stay. The proposal

announced my intended participation in the everyday work of the diversity unit, the carrying out of interviews with different team members, the idea of accompanying them to meetings and other activities, and the project in return. We also agreed on the allocation of one of the team members as a central intermediary with whom I could have a scheduled meeting once a week (even though in practice these meetings took on a more informal character in all cities). In two of the cities, this was the officer I had initially interviewed, and with whom I had already established rapport.

Once in the field, I spent 36–40 hours a week with the officers and participated in their everyday rituals and routines, such as making tea in the Leeds office, walking to the coffee machine in Amsterdam, and having collective canteen lunches in Antwerp. Just as outlined in the various handbooks on the ethnographic method (see, for example, Hauser-Schäublin 2003), I took part in meetings, all kinds of interactions in the open plan office, the representational activities of officers at public events, and the coordination activities with political representatives in my role as a participant observer. I also followed some of the officers whenever they invited me to come along or agreed that I could come along. I was ‘shadowing’ (Czarniawska 2007) them not in the sense of following each of their steps, but I tried to be present and take all opportunities that came up for accompanying individual officers. Given that my desk, in all three cities, was in the open office space, it was easy to be around and ‘hang out’. It also allowed access to relevant documents through the computer system and shared folders, which I collected and analysed. I furthermore conducted problem-centred, semi-standardized interviews (Mayring 2002; Flick 2009) with nearly all team members. They provided the space and time for more in-depth initial conversations and allowed me to get to know each of them more individually. Canteen lunches and staff outings provided the space to interact outside of ‘working hours’ in a more casual atmosphere. As I became acquainted with the individual team members, some of them invited me to birthday parties, to after-work dinners and to weekend outings.

The weekly regular meetings with my main intermediaries turned out to be important moments of reflection on my observations. In Antwerp, these meetings would often happen over lunch, for example. In Amsterdam, my main intermediary and I usually met in the room of the coffee machine or by way of having walks along the canals around the block of the office. Moreover, in Leeds these regular ‘intervisions’ took place over lunches and during a weekend hike to which my intermediary had invited me. These meetings allowed me



to collect additional explanations for things I had observed but not quite understood, and also to ask for additional contacts within the organization.

The project in return also became an important element of my research traineeships. I had defined them in collaboration with the head of unit and my main intermediary in the unit. The objective was to make my outsider perspective fruitful for them also, and to tailor a project that addressed a need or interest of the unit at the time. What I had not anticipated was that these projects would become crucial for gaining further insights into the position of the diversity unit within the municipal departmental structure, their relationships with local NGOs, and the atmosphere and internal cleavages within the teams. In the case of Antwerp, I carried out research on how other administrative departments perceived the diversity unit, which informed the reorientation of the unit's work focus. This meant that I could interview managers at different levels of the organization. In Amsterdam, I assessed the perception of the merger of two units into the diversity unit among unit members, and discussed my reflections in a general team meeting at the end of the research traineeship. Furthermore, I was involved in setting up forms of cooperation between the diversity units in Amsterdam and Rotterdam. In Leeds, I evaluated the perception of the municipality's reporting requirements by municipal NGOs and service providers. My report informed the future definition of relationships and requirements between municipality and local organizations.

This insider position and my conduct of projects 'in return', raise numerous questions about my position vis-à-vis my interlocutors and the ways in which we can characterize the emerging roles and relationships in fieldwork in contemporary Western organizations. As I will argue, my research traineeships turned out to be fundamentally different to classic participant observations, due to the specific conditions of contemporary local state organizations, and the capacities of the more strategic officials in these organizations. I can identify two crucial issues, which I wish to spend some time reflecting upon in the following section: the first is the way in which local officials positioned themselves vis-à-vis the researcher; the second is the interpretation of my role as a 'research trainee' in practice, and the possibilities for epistemic knowledge production in such a position. Analysing some of the unexpected situations and my often ad hoc responses to them, allows me to critically re-evaluate widely shared assumptions about participant observations and to think about the potential of collaboration in such 'para-sites'.

## Local Officials as Para-ethnographers

In my research, many of the local officials interviewed pointed out that they had a social science degree and/or had worked in research before. They therefore said that they had a good idea of what ethnography was about, or what to expect in an interview. At the same time, these officials were also conscious and outspoken about their role as implementers of diversity policies and state power. Their role differed from mine, as one interlocutor emphasized. In his view, researchers can analyse the state and critically assess the ways in which the state develops its power through discourses and institutions, and by entertaining strategic relationships with some societal actors.

When interviewing public officers, some of them actively intervened in my research. For instance, one interviewee from the very outset reacted to each of my interview questions by querying the question and why I had asked it. This officer then made suggestions on how I could rephrase my question in order for her to give me what she thought would be a more interesting answer. Later in the interview, she told me about her own initial career as a sociologist, and I realized that her interventions were meant to signal to me her own expertise. In the case of another official, he asked me at the outset of our interview how my own research would improve the situation of ethnic minorities. He was strongly committed to challenging ethnic discrimination and was involved in many immigrant networks. When I answered by emphasizing possible indirect yet positive policy effects of social science research, but also conceding some of its limits, he challenged whether I had set the aim of my research high enough. He was convinced that research should have direct effects on the life chances of ethnic minorities.

My interlocutors clearly had the disposition and the motivation to inform my research. By aligning their own role (from official to researcher) in making suggestions for my potential engagement, the officials tried to 'participate sideways', emphasizing what we had in common rather than what differentiated us. This negotiation of our respective roles allowed for potential collaboration.

As we can see from some of these examples, local state organizations have an increasingly educated, internationally connected and mobile workforce, whose work is often strategic and evidence-based. This also means the interlocutors themselves have the capacity to reflect and analyse their situation in modern organizations, which facilitates challenging the old, highly problematic assumption in



much anthropology about anthropologists' view of their own superiority. Their interlocutors in such a conception lack the capacity to abstract from their role and position.

Ethnographic research in state organizations and with bureaucrats provides an interesting case for discussing the conception of the relationship between ethnographer and interlocutor. If state officials and ethnographers have similar capacities, then we can expect a more direct influence from our interlocutors on the knowledge production, but we can also expect some ethical issues, as co-optation with government agendas.

### **Opportunities for Collaboration as a Research Trainee**

Defining my fieldwork in terms of a 'research traineeship' facilitated my access to the field, but it also informed the knowledge production when I was in the field. My self-representation as a research trainee incorporated the idea of presenting me as an acceptable incompetent, as some handbooks on conducting ethnography suggest. 'When studying an unfamiliar setting, the ethnographer is necessarily a novice. Moreover, wherever possible they must put themselves into the position of being an "acceptable incompetent"' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 79). Interlocutors often ascribe researchers a role, as Hirsch and Gellner remind us, and often it is the role of a student: 'It may be, however, despite the ethnographer's attempts to explain him- or herself, he or she continues to be slotted into the easily understood category of student, a role sufficiently close to the researcher's that it can conveniently be accepted; in many cases, of course, researchers actually are students' (Hirsch and Gellner 2002: 6).

The notion of research traineeship implies the ascription of a student category. However, since it is also a broad and vague concept, it also allows for some flexibility and open-endedness in terms of what role I would acquire. Sometimes trainees can achieve a more instrumental role in an organization, while at other times they remain mere observers and/or may even become a nuisance. My role in the field not only depended on the ways in which I presented myself, but also on the role that my interlocutors allowed me to play. Rather than knowing beforehand whether I would study up, down or sideways, the research traineeship left it up to the interaction with the diversity officers, and together we would define my role. After the first day in the field in Leeds, I wrote the following in my fieldwork journal:

The team head, who was clearly leading the meeting and who did most of the talking, brought up my presence at the very start. She asked every team member to give a short introduction of themselves. Yet she did not provide a space for me to present myself. I felt unsure whether or not I should speak, which would have meant interrupting her. Why didn't she provide that space? Did she think that I am not comfortable speaking in front of everyone? Should I have interrupted her?

I was clearly being slotted into the category of a student in Leeds, which was how diversity officers in Leeds made sense of my presence, as my fieldwork journal entry documents. On my first day in Leeds, my interlocutors gave me a day-by-day plan that they had compiled for me, which outlined what meetings and events I could participate in during my stay. Of course, there was still some leeway: I could organize the interviews with team members and my activities as I saw fit. I was first amazed and pleased by the amount of preparation that they had done for me and thought this was a great service and very helpful. Yet, I also realized that it was predefining where I was supposed to go and where they did not welcome my presence. This limitation became evident when, one afternoon, everyone in the team seemed to leave for a meeting that was not on my itinerary, without inviting me to come along. In my field journal, I noted:

In the afternoon, suddenly everyone seemed to head to a meeting in the small meeting room. I was unsure if I could go there as well, as the meeting was not on my itinerary. When I approached the team head to ask if I could come along, she responded that they would be talking about something that they would prefer me not to take part in. Of course, I accepted, and I think that it is good that she was very clear about this preference. I am also glad that I asked, and did not just walk along, which could have resulted in a very awkward situation. I guess I could have anticipated this answer, but still, being left behind in the now empty open-plan office, I found it hard to deal with the feeling of exclusion that crept in. It made me reflect on the fact that my inclusion in the team is temporary and partial. These moments of exclusion, when the team protects some areas of knowledge and demarcates the boundary against me as an outsider, are intelligible but tricky to deal with.

It was an advantage that they perceived me as a student, legitimizing my presence in the team, and facilitating my access to meetings and the organization of interview – but it also felt limiting. It made it very difficult to create a situation where reciprocity was possible: I was given information because I was meant to learn, but I was not supposed to investigate too much into what was preconceived as non-relevant information for me. When the head of team introduced me

without giving me the chance to speak for myself, I felt this undermined my agency and created a hierarchy, putting me into a position of 'studying up'. Excluding me from the meeting reflected a strategy keeping me at a certain safe distance, making sure the researcher does not come too close or become too intrusive. As a result, I often felt in Leeds that I was perceived more as a student than a researcher. It therefore was difficult to access information that diversity officers had not planned to offer to me.

While this creation of a hierarchy between the officials and me, as the student, was present in the Leeds fieldwork, in Antwerp I felt from the very beginning that the officials accepted me as a temporary colleague. My main intermediary there was crucial in allowing me to attain this role, as she had recently completed her PhD and she was interested in engaging with her own organization from a researcher's perspective. The team respected her, and once she had introduced me to them, it was easy to build up relationships with the other team members. The feeling of sharing a similar mind-set and of being met with some trust from the outset clearly provided a very easy starting point for my research, and gave me access to many insider stories in the field. In one of the team meetings, the head of the team initiated a group exercise in interviewing. As some of the team members frequently had to interview people as part of their job and had reported some uncertainty as to how best to do this, they formed several working groups for the exercise and assigned me to one of these groups. It struck me that none of the team members mentioned my role as a researcher or the fact that I may have had some more experience with interviewing; instead, they accepted me as one of them. Therefore, I gave feedback to team members and received feedback from them, just as if I had been a member of the team. So in the case of Antwerp I could research sideways, and the interviewing exercise demonstrated a window of opportunity for exchanging information and feedback.

Their acceptance of me as a temporary colleague was not without challenges, however. Towards the end of my stay, the head of team asked me whether I would be willing to present my findings from my project to a high-level manager of the city administration, as he was in the process of deciding over the unit's future reorganization. I had interviewed many senior officials about their perception of the unit by then and had heard some positive and some not so positive accounts of the diversity unit and its importance for the local organization. My project and its findings had suddenly acquired central strategic value, as plans to reorganize the unit arose. The fact that the team asked me to present to their manager on such a sensitive

question, without having an idea of my findings, demonstrated again that they saw me as a sort of insider and as someone to trust. I became very conscious of the weight of my words. Should I be talking as a researcher, who presents whatever the findings were? Alternatively, should I be talking as someone from the team, taking the interests of my temporary colleagues into account? I could resolve my conflict by first presenting my findings to some of the team members, to see their reaction to my assessment, and only then deliver my presentation to the manager. While everything worked out well, it became clear to me that combining different roles could create some conflicts of loyalty, as my presentation could potentially have worked to the detriment of the unit.<sup>3</sup>

In Amsterdam, my interlocutors defined my role again very differently. In my first conversation with my main intermediary, he drew a clear boundary between the logic of being an official and that of a researcher. He repeatedly posited a fundamental difference in the aim of our work: while researchers could always question underlying paradigms, policy officials needed to decide on the nature of problems and then come up with some possible solutions. He also was very critical of initiatives in which research and policy link up. This boundary making was a constant element in our interactions over the following weeks, and I sensed that slotting me into the category of 'researcher' was an important way for him to negotiate my presence. In his view, I was not of too much use to him in terms of getting work done, but I was pleasant to chat with and could bring in an outsider perspective. My chance of getting a role was thus limited to becoming a welcome addition to the social interactions he had at work. I was at first somewhat puzzled by what I felt was a rather delimiting view on our respective roles, but as long as it did not prevent him from interacting with me, I could accept this stark differentiation. I conceive this as 'studying across', given the emphasis of dialogue based on similar capacities but across different roles and work logics. However, at the end of my research stay, there was one situation when my ascribed role was destabilized and a window of opportunity for studying sideways occurred. I had presented some of my initial findings from the project, in return for which I had interviewed different team members on their impression of the team dynamic after a merger of two separate units. After the presentation, I wrote the following in my field journal:

He emphasized that my presentation had given him a lot of food for thought. He said he was impressed by the depth of my understanding of

what is at play in the unit. Suddenly he seemed to understand what my research was about, and he acknowledged that I had been able to capture their reality in a way that, being 'inside', they often felt hard to capture. However, when responding that I was glad and thankful for his feedback, he was quick to emphasize that of course this is not going to contribute directly to their work. It was only interesting from a broader perspective. So he immediately returned to his clear separation of the logics of policy work and research, a paradigm that I think has strongly informed the way he has perceived my role. It can also be seen as an exercise of power, that he wanted to keep control of what he sees as his professional boundaries, which I guess is fair enough.

But at the end of our conversation, he did suggest that maybe we could together conceptualize a workshop at an international conference of researchers and practitioners they were organizing. Even though we never implemented this idea, a short window of opportunity had opened for a potential collaboration.

From these experiences, I can identify three findings on the potential of going beyond participant observation and entering into a more collaborative mode of ethnographic work in para-sites.

My first finding is that officials adjusted their own roles when they saw fit. My interlocutors shifted, for instance, from their role as an official into the role of a researcher or a role of an activist. The performance of these different roles highlights a practice of consciously shifting positionalities as research subjects in order to inform the research in specific ways. It opened a window of opportunity for collaboration as fellow researchers or fellow activists.

My second finding is that I was not necessarily free to define my role in the field, but that I was ascribed a role. Thus, the concept of a research traineeship allowed the definition of my role and relationships to become an interactive and flexible process. A different category was foregrounded in each of the cities: as 'student', I was studying up in Leeds; as 'temporary colleague' I was studying sideways in Antwerp; and as 'researcher' I was studying across in Amsterdam. There were some moments when the dominance of one category was destabilized, as I have demonstrated with the example in Amsterdam. The three field sites thus provided very different opportunities for collaboration due to the different roles my interlocutors allowed me to play in each of these sites.

My third finding is that with my 'research traineeships' in the professionalized context of municipal organizations, I embarked on a 'fieldwork experiment', since I conceived of the openness of my roles and relationships in the field as an element of my research design. I

have been reflecting on this experimental character of my fieldwork, trying to make sense of my experiences and interactions. Through the research traineeship, I was able to make the ascription of different roles an element of what I observed. Indeed, the ways that my interlocutors slotted me into one or other category became an important aspect of my findings. The ways in which my main intermediaries made sense of my role and assigned me roles revealed important information about their self-conception as bureaucrats, their own power positions and local organizational cultures.

In Antwerp, where I acquired the role of a temporary colleague, my intermediary had a very similar background to my own, having recently completed a PhD at a British university, and also had a strong understanding of what I was doing and why I was asking certain questions. As such, she was very much a 'peer'.

In Amsterdam, my intermediary was a more senior official, who had worked as a manager in the arts sector before joining the city a few years ago. At the time of my research he was operating in a climate of strong pressures on the department from politicians. He clearly emphasized the differences between us, highlighting the freedom of researchers to keep asking questions without needing to provide practical answers. Our relationship shifted over the course of the fieldwork, from studying across to studying sideways, and back again to studying across.

In Leeds, the relationship with my intermediary was again different, as I had acquired the role of a student in the field, and so was studying up. The case of Leeds stuck out with the clear hierarchies within the city council, which I saw reflected in our relationship.

### **Differentiated Para-sites**

The research traineeship revealed to me the shared analytical capacities with my interlocutors, who could easily themselves switch into the logic of a researcher and were eager to inform my own research from their individual perspectives. However, the potential to collaborate differed across para-sites.

In my fieldwork, I was able to collaborate in some situations. This was the case when I sat together with my interlocutors to discuss the possible project of return that I could carry out for them. I experienced other moments of collaboration when I exercised interview techniques with my interlocutors and provided feedback on the position of the diversity units in Antwerp, and when being invited to



conceive of a workshop in Amsterdam. However, I have also shown that the different contexts of diversity departments in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Leeds provided different para-sites and different positions that I was able to take vis-à-vis my interlocutors, sometimes defining our relationship in more collaborative terms, and on other occasions confining my research to a more conventional participant observation. The research traineeship method allowed me to experiment with my role as a researcher, and my interlocutors actively negotiated my role in the research.

My experiment of research traineeships in state organizations can serve to develop the nuances of the notion of para-sites and para-ethnography. While Holmes and Marcus's proposal of para-ethnography suggests that the optimal way to do fieldwork in expert sites is by collaborating, my fieldwork demonstrates the possibility that collaboration also depends on our interlocutors, and the possibilities may differ from one context to another. The 'research traineeship' illustrates the opportunities and challenges of para-sites, as sometimes I was studying up, sometimes across and sometimes sideways in the diversity departments. As I have shown above, collaboration was more complicated when my interlocutors made a clear differentiation between our respective roles, as was the case in Amsterdam and Leeds. Collaboration was most likely when I was able to study sideways, as was the case in the interactions with my interlocutors in Antwerp.

I suggested that research traineeships have some potential for defining an ethnographic stay in the field of modern organizations in ways that go beyond classic conceptions of participant observation. They are an experiment that provides a rather open and flexible self-definition of the role of the researcher, and leaves the interpretation of the researcher's relationships to the interactions in the field. The process of being ascribed a role in the field was itself an important element of my observations, and I found that I was often unable to determine whether I would study up, down or sideways. As I have illustrated with my own research experience in municipal organizations, interlocutors in modern organizations perceive us as learners, as allies, or as people to be kept at distance – in short, they take part in shaping our role and position in the field. Thus the researcher defines the role he or she wants to play in the field. By carrying out a 'research traineeship' one can leave one's own role sufficiently open and access and study state bureaucracies, which have rarely been studied from within, and tease out some moments when collaboration with local officials becomes possible.

I started out from the question of what we could learn from contemporary ethnographies for the methodology of participant observation. Based on my own experiences of conducting participant observation in local state organizations, I can confirm that interlocutors in large modern organizations often have the capacity to make abstractions, to analyse and reflect. However, the three diversity departments in Leeds, Amsterdam and Antwerp provided decisively different para-sites, and my interlocutors differed in their positioning towards me and in their ascription of my role. This difference was due to the particularities of the position, image and way of working of these departments, as well as the individual self-images of diversity officers. This finding allows us to call for a differentiated understanding of para-sites, as officials with similar training and capacities did not all necessarily allow for cooperation. In order to arrive at a more nuanced concept of para-ethnography we need to take into account the different self-conceptions of our interlocutors, their different positions within organizational hierarchies, and the different organizational cultures in different field sites.

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## Notes

1. City administrations installed diversity officers to implement newly introduced local diversity policies. This included the management of a range of projects, liaising with local civil society initiatives as well as with local politicians, and the administration of subsidy schemes.



2. I established these links by way of a traineeship at the Council of Europe, where I could attend several meetings of the Intercultural Cities Network, as well as through participation at meetings of the Eurocities Working Group on Integration.
3. This feeling of double loyalty is reminiscent of conceptions of 'anthropologists as spies' (Boas 1919).

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