

Positionality and scale

Methodological issues in the ethnography of aid

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This concluding essay explores the contours of the ethnography analysis of aid and tries to identify some of the resources and tensions, intellectual and practical, which define this research program. The main objective of this volume has been to establish aidnography as a specific kind of intellectual-political enterprise defined by specific tensions of a discursive and methodological nature. The central argument here is that the multi-level, multi-sited nature of an aid relationship obliges us to think carefully about the methodological implications of scale for an approach which privileges first-hand evidence. A second, subsidiary, point concerns the difficulties of critically engaging with sets of practices that are predicated on a platform of moral virtue, but at the same time reproduce harsh social, economic and political asymmetries.

This meditation comprises two main sections. The first section examines the current state of ethnography as an intellectual base for the study of aid. The second section identifies methodological tensions within aidnography – related

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to issues of *positionality* and *scale* – that emerge from the experience of ethnographic fieldwork in the domain of development policies and practices. The overall aim of this introduction is to prime the reader's attention to subtleties of argument and approach in an emerging aidnographic literature, as evinced in the preceding contributions, and to proffer some conceptual distinctions in the hope that these might stimulate further research and debate.

The plural of ethnography

'Ethnography' is experiencing a renaissance in social science writing that cuts across conventional disciplinary boundaries. Despite vigorous attempts to defend anthropology's ownership of ethnography cum Malinowskian canon (e.g., Englund & Leach 2000), ethnography abounds in myriad connotations across the title pages of social science journals, from gender studies to sociology, from geography to organizational analysis. The ethnography of aid (Crewe & Harrison 1998) and closely related development ethnographies² are vivid examples of the current popularity of invoking ethnography in ways and places Malinowski never considered.

The pluralization of ethnography is perhaps an inevitable consequence of the post-structuralist turn that transformed mainstream social science in the 1980s. The reaction against structuralism (and the positivist epistemology that it invoked) was expressed in a reassertion of culturally embedded agency as the subject of social action (Ortner 1984), and the rejection of value-neutrality and objectivism as core scientific ideals (Bernstein 1991). Rather than introduce a new paradigm of social scientific analysis, the post-modern reaction to the rigidities of structuralism created space for experimentation with, and cross-fertilization of, non-conventional methodologies, especially those that privilege agency over structure, experience over theory, and diversity over uniformity. Ethnography was an obvious candidate for post-structuralist embracement.

² For some examples, see Apthorpe & Gasper 1996, Arce & Long 2000, Escobar 1995, Grammig 2002, Li 1999, Long 2001, Mosse 2003, Olivier de Sardan 2004, Pigg 1992, Porter & Thompson 1995, Sirrat & Grillo 1997, Sivaramakrishnan 1999, Upphoff 1992.

The post-modern turn in social theory enhanced the attractiveness of ethnography in two, somewhat contradictory ways. On the one hand, the post-structuralist deconstruction of universalist meta-narratives (modernization, development) rescued relativism from the methodological rubbish heap of positivist social science. The documentation of narratives and social logics that contradict the triumphalist self-image of Eurocentric modernity took on intrinsic merit for post-modern discourse – ethnographers have been doing this since Malinowski. On the other hand, the (perceived) commonsensical empiricism of the ethnographic approach became a popular refuge for researchers who were relieved to be unbridled from the strictures of positivism, and yet were uncomfortable with the (perceived) anything-goes frivolity of post-modernist methodologies. To put it another way, many scholars look to ethnography for a means to critical, even counter-hegemonic, perspectives on modernity that are grounded in an epistemology of first-hand experience.

These trends have boosted ethnography's currency in mainstream social science, but have also generated discontent within anthropology. A major item of contention – already alluded to in the introductory essay above – relates to the emerging field of 'global ethnography' that explicitly calls into question the conventional notion of the ethnographic 'field' as a specific, geographically delimited site.

Mainstream ethnographers – the self-styled guardians of Malinowskian orthodoxy – tend to argue that ethnography must be based on extended submergence into social life at a specific 'locality.' Within this vision, method is antecedent to theory. Englund and Leach (2000, p. 227), for example, contend that sociological theory (the 'meta-narrative of modernity') undermines the authority of 'the ethnographer's interlocutors... in producing an understanding of their life-worlds.' Heterodox anthropologists and sociologists, including proponents of 'global ethnography' on the other hand, enthusiastically embrace rich theorization and the empirical pursuit of hybrid and delocalized processes and phenomena. Such scholars adapt ethnography to

the study of, among other things, the state, public policy processes and democratization (Trouillot 2001, Paley 2002, Ferguson & Gupta 2002, Shore & Wright 1997); virtual communities and cyberspace (Escobar 1994); and transnational social movements (Riles 2000).

In spite of vigorous disclaimers from critics like Appadurai (1995) and Gupta (2000), locality continues to be an important organizing concept for ethnographic method. Equating physical 'locality' with field 'site' poses, however, specific methodological problems for the ethnographic analysis of aid relations. Disputes couched in defense of methodological orthodoxy are not helpful when trying to think clearly about such dilemmas. There is no way around the debate, however. Whether one sees oneself as an ethnographer proper, or as a sociologist (political scientist, policy analyst, historian) integrating elements of the ethnographic toolbox within a broader methodological palette, the issue of identifying, delimiting and theorizing the research context – one's field – is at the core of research strategy and design.

Indeed, doing aidnography implies, first and foremost, the identification of a site where one expects to engage with actors whose social relations and experience can provide new insights into one's particular, theoretically grounded, research problem. Once socially engaged, ethnography implies tuning in to the rhythms, vernaculars and mundane practices characteristic of one's site. One tunes in, of course, with senses honed by past experience and literary precedents – it is hardly possible to study aid, for example, without reference to debates about post-coloniality, power, agency or modernity that have dominated the study of 'development' over the past decade. Yet, in essence, ethnography is a form of hunting and gathering. One collects whatever bits of information that come one's way and which appear, at the moment of encounter, to be relevant to one's concerns. The element of surprise is always at the core of the ethnographic inquiry. One surprising bit of information begets further data related to it. In other words, subsequent gathering is very path dependent, strongly affected by the contingent properties of the research process. The thought, then, that one could predetermine either the most compelling themes or the crucial methodological

decisions of an ethnographic study with any degree of finality is anathema to the ethnographic endeavor. But it does not follow that good ethnography eschews the theorization of the research context.

Ethnographers are commonly obsessed with the mechanisms by which the 'commonsensical' understandings of compelling social concepts and principles become established, or challenged, in the course of routine social transactions. From this follows the epistemological pillar upon which virtually all ethnography rests, irrespective of the internal divisions already noted. Ethnographers largely agree that in order to grasp the contested nature of social meaning, one must patiently and systematically observe how specific definitions compete in everyday social transactions – in speech and in texts, in ritual and performative settings, in the exchange of goods and services, in the banal and routine interactions of social actors in the front and backstage spaces of everyday life. While the close reading of secondary sources – and above all of 'development texts' – is of vital importance, what makes ethnography ethnographic is the privileging a certain kind of *evidence*: First-hand, rich and disaggregated, embedded in processes of contiguous social inter- and transaction over time.

This principle creates problems for the ethnographic study of processes that transcend spatially delimited localities, such as development aid. As Englund and Leach (*ibid.*, p. 238) note, an 'intimate knowledge of a particular setting, through which flow many currents, provides a standpoint from which to address issues of scale in a way that generalizing perspectives do not.' The main point then is of how to define the setting, or site, of empirical inquiry in a way that is compatible with the ethnographic demands of rich contextualization, while not losing sight of the translocal and multiscale forces and processes that mold localized relations and awareness. Both theorization and theoretical reflexivity are needed, and in equal measure, when defining one's research interest, and when identifying one's site. There is no intrinsic reason why problematizations of 'modernity' or 'globality' should not, when relevant to the knowledge interest at hand, be part of such reflection. The question of scale, as well as finding a way of positioning

oneself socially, spatially and ethically, become central problems, both practically and epistemologically.

Aidnographic tensions

Aidnography is a research programme in formation – there is certainly no clear or conventional methodological platform. Researchers have largely come to the ethnography of aid along one of three paths: One trajectory is that of non-anthropologists working in development studies who have become disenchanted with the weakly contextualized analyses of much contemporary political science, international relations or geography. They turn to ethnography for a richer class of evidence. (Book contributor Rita Abrahamsen might fall in this category.) A second path is taken by scholars (of anthropology, history, social policy or international relations) who have found their fields suddenly awash with, or subsumed by, aid and who are attracted to the empirical tangibility of ethnographic study as a practical means of grasping the complex and often opaque practices of ‘development.’ (Of the authors included in this volume, Janine Wedel and Paul Stubbs might probably fall in this group.) A third path to aidnography is trodden by development scholar-practitioners in need of a pause for reflection and by academic/activist-consultants who have emerged from a pragmatic engagement with aid/development with more questions than answers. (This last path is probably the route traveled by the majority of the contributors to this volume.)

These different paths to aidnography are reflected in different conceptions of, and approaches to, the research programme. Some look to ethnographic evidence in the hope of discerning a deeper understanding of how to better do ‘development.’ Others are attracted to ethnography by virtue of its potential for non-normative engagement. Pragmatics aside, one can also discern two distinct analytical strategies: Some argue that aid is most accessible via the world of discourse and rhetoric, via the concepts and formulations (‘policy’) through which ‘governmental’ power is expressed. Aid rhetoric can be and is studied for its ‘narrative structures’ (Abrahamssen, Marcussen & Bergendorff,

Gasper, el Ghaziri herein; also Roe 1999), as well as for its aesthetics (see Riles 2000, also Gould & Ojanen 2003).

But the essays included here indicate that aid is also conducive to more conventional empirical strategies: the analysis of social relations; of encounters; of patrons, brokers and clients; of bureaucratic roles and procedures; as well as of events and processes situated in contiguous time and space (Arvidson, Bagić, El Ghaziri, Stubbs, Wedel). And while aid's delocalised, trans-scalar nature poses similar methodological problems to both sets of aidnographers, it is those of us relying on first-hand evidence for our analyses who are most easily befuddled by the unconventionality of the object.³

This brings us to the 'constitutive tensions' of aidnography. For the purposes of this discussion, I understand positionality as relating primarily to the agency of the ethnographer, while scale is a structural element of the 'field.' Recognizing the need to situate agency within structure, the methodological commentary that follows is organized around distinctions related to positionality, with scalar issues embedded therein. In the conclusion, I attempt to sum up comments on scale with an eye to practical methodological choices confronting the researcher.

Positionality

Positionality refers to the need for finding a serviceable and responsible way of situating oneself in 'the field', and is a threshold issue in all ethnography. In practice, positionality is not *a* problem, but serves as conceptual shorthand for a range of social, cognitive and ethical-political issues at the core of the ethnographic endeavor. The specific ways in which positionality is

³The choice to work off secondary data is one strategy for dealing with the methodological dilemmas related to positionality and scale and the analysis of 'development texts' provides crucial insights into the rhetorical practices of the interpretative communities (Fish 1980) that formulate and implement policies. Still, as argued above, textual analysis must be complemented with first-hand, ethnographic, experience of how this rhetoric is performed in social context.

problematic naturally depends on the nature of one's site and on the possible points of entry into the field.

With respect to aidnography, it may be useful to distinguish between three dimensions of positionality: spatial, social, and normative. To a great extent these three aspects overlap – the border between the social and the spatial is (as we have seen) impossible to fix, while normative concerns permeate all aspects of aid relationships. By the same token, issues of scale transects questions of socio-spatial positionality in countless ways. Each of these themes could be dwelt on at length. This is not possible in this connection, and the following remarks are merely a rough sketch of issues aidnographers confront when positioning themselves in the field.

Spatial positionality

The core of the problem of positioning oneself ethnographically within the multi-dimensional space of an aid relationship is in the discrepancy between the very circumscribed physical dimensions of the individual body, and the expansive scale of the social/economic/political/ideological configuration under study. In order to think about this problem of spatial positionality it may be helpful to make a heuristic distinction between notions of *level*, *site*, *locality* and (social) *context*.

Aid relationships are characterized by processes (chains of events) and flows (of ideas and material things). The specific processes and flows that make up the interactions and transactions of an aid relationship (between donor and recipient, among various actors in recipient society, within and among donor organizations, and so on) might be considered for these purposes as the ethnographic *site*. Any site (the spatially diffuse 'field' of the ethnographic study) comprises a totality of *localities* linked together by the process/flows of the relationship. These specific localities are generally physically discrete places (an aid agency or government office; a school, clinic or agricultural field trial; an MP's living room in her home constituency, or a community meeting), and most of the primary ethnographic data we assemble in the course of our research derives from our physical presence at such localities.

Localities are points of convergence of various actors and interests as well as of the *contexts* in which they are embedded. In this connection a context might be thought of as a bundle of historical/cultural or material/political facts and perceptions informing the interests of any given actor. Naturally the ethnographer brings her own context to play at the locality of observation/participation. (We return to the importance of context below.)

Ethnographic sites have a spatial structure, which might be thought of as the way that the flows and processes of the aid relationship link different *levels* of the site. Levels are defined by hierarchies of power and authority, though this is only one dimension. They are also defined by reference to spatio-administrative subsidiarity (as in grassroots, regional, national, transnational, global), although fixation on bureaucratic self-portrayal may conceal more interesting modes of vertical stratification.⁴ Levels might be thought of as encompassing a number of different qualities. *Resolution* is one way of thinking about levels (e.g., Santos 1987). This refers to how actions and transactions at different levels of a site will have consequences at different geographical scales. Actors at different levels are also enabled and constrained by different sets of *imperatives* (rights and obligations, rewards and sanctions). Distinct levels of a site can also be identified by reference to differences in the rules, roles, vernaculars, and legitimizing narratives/protocols pertaining in routine transactions. A pivotal ethnographic problem is to understand the extent to which these normative-rhetorical elements are (in)commensurable between levels and localities: Do actors at different corners of the site value the same things; are they pursuing the same sorts of goals; do they conceptualize their strategic choices in the same terms?

The main practical methodological issue at stake in spatial positionality is of identifying the dimensions and structure of one's site, which will seldom be a self-evident, discrete physical locality. Indeed, the boundaries and spatial dynamics of an ethnographic site are theoretically informed heuristic constructions, not ontological facts, and the dimensions and contours of the

⁴ Cf., Bayart's (1993) remarks about the reciprocal assimilation of elites.

site will often evolve in the course of fieldwork – as new localities prove relevant and one is drawn to particular flows and processes between levels and localities. There is obviously no formula for identifying a site for fieldwork. What is obvious, however, is the need for incessant theoretical reflection about one's spatial positionality, a process of reflection informed not simply or primarily by spatial concepts (like those discussed here), but one which draws on a rich and evolving theorization of the intellectual problem guiding the empirical investigation.

A second critical issue concerns how one deals with incommensurability between localities and levels. The notion of 'partnership' that legitimizes a strategic alliance between a transnational private aid agency and the World Bank around the 'monitoring of civil society participation in the formulation of Poverty Reduction Strategies,' to take one example, is embedded in quite different social contexts, perceptions and judgments than an identical rhetoric evoked to frame the relationship between a sub-national outpost of the same agency (a District-level office) and civic groups active in a small number of rural Tanzanian communities.⁵ Ethnography's disciplinary forte has conventionally been in unraveling the socio-cultural and normative dynamics of such hermeneutic disjunctures *at a given locality*. Ethnographers evoke discrete or competing contextual logics to explain the ways in which actors negotiate and localize (or recontextualize) tangential concepts like 'development' or 'participation' at the interface between colliding life-worlds (e.g., Long 2001). It seems to me that the above problem of trans-scalar incommensurability is of another order. Indeed, there would seem to be nothing of substance linking the two localities – Washington and a rural corner of Tanzania – besides the nominal translocal presence of the private aid agency (nominal in the sense that there may be no observable operational links between the actors at global HQ and those at the sub-national organizational outpost). Understanding the disjuncture between levels may be central to grasping the logic of the aid relationship, and this can only be accomplished

⁵ Gould & Ojanen (2003) elaborate on this illustration.

through a combination of careful empirical observation and (once again) theoretical reflection.

In most instances, an individual ethnographer cannot presume to cover all corners of one's hypothetical site. Should one attempt to 'sample' a 'representative' number of localities at different levels? The notion of sampling is linked to a logic of quantitative investigation which presumes a large degree of homogeneity across levels and localities. The spatio-social dynamics of an aid relationship are anything but homogenous and far more important than statistical representativeness is to ensure the significance of one's data. Significance naturally depends on the theme of the study, but in the world of aid relations, I would claim, the theme of *power* is generally a good indicator of significance. With this theme we are already engaged in a consideration of the problems of social positionality. Wedel's discussion of 'studying through' (herein; see also Shore & Wright 1997, p. 14) abounds with useful insights into these issues.

Social positionality

The problem of social positionality reveals itself, in the first instance, as a question of access. As 'professional strangers', anthropologists are always dependent on the hospitality and probity of their informants. Access to the specific localities of one's site implies establishing trust between ethnographer and the subjects of one's inquiry. Such trust, however genuine, is provisional and constructed. Ethnography is explicitly predicated on an attempt to bracket judgmentalism in the analysis of 'alien' cultural practices. Yet, aid folk and their purported partners are often culturally of the same background as the ethnographer, or aspire to the ethnographers' imputed cultural norms; indeed the border between development practitioner and development ethnographer is uncommonly fluid (cf. Stubbs, this volume). What's more, the ways in which aid practitioners justify their actions are grounded in many of the same assumptions about facticity and rationality – the legacy of the European Enlightenment – that legitimize the vocation of social science.

Ethnographers, irrespective of their views on post-modernity, generally challenge these assumptions. Furthermore, many of us are drawn to ethnography precisely because it promises a means of transcending the strictures of one's received cultural habitus. The lived experience of another cultural context reveals things about our humanity that help bracket irritating features of our own cultures, or traumatic incidents of our upbringing. Still, at least for the northerner, direct engagement with 'development' and its explicit 'meta-narratives of modernity' – not to mention the blatant discrepancies of wealth, health and education characteristic of Southern economies – confronts us in uncomfortable ways with the highly provisional disjuncture between the promise of ethnographic detachment and the realities of our privileged social context. The study of aid and aid relations thus poses special problems of social (and normative) positionality. Two specific issues already suggest themselves: power and trust.

Power

Aid is, among other things, an exercise of power. This is true of aid as (policy) discourse and as practice (Apthorpe 1996). The power of aid is seldom directly coercive – diminishingly so in the era of 'partnership' and 'ownership', but operates in what the foucauldians denote a 'disciplinary' mode (Escobar 1995, Rose 1999). The disciplinary effects of aid work through routine practices of 'naming and framing' (Apthorpe 1996) and 'ordering', (Mosse 2003), by which normative notions of inadequacy/improvability and lack/entitlement disseminate throughout, and legitimize, the aid relationship. The effects of such disciplinary power, as Foucault claimed, are both repressive and empowering (Cruikshank 1999). One important power effect of aid is to foment 'developmental subjectivities' – perceptions according to which the development enterprise and the relations it engenders appear natural, inevitable and desirable.

Anthropologists are embedded in, and often act as vehicles of, the disciplinary power of aid; sometimes intentionally (as when contributing to an exercise of 'evaluation' or of 'local capacity-building'), but more often involuntarily or unwittingly. Ironically, while most inhabitants of the site will be acutely aware

of this, a romantic self-image of non-judgmental detachment can tend to obscure this basic truth. These social facts have normative implications (below), but also practical methodological consequences.

The (Northern) ethnographer will generally have better innate access to aid circles than to the life-worlds of the 'target' population. Aid managers are drawn to the ethnographer's expertise (see below) and many welcome an opportunity to see themselves through the eyes of an attentive outsider. In terms of data generation, it can be very productive to exploit this access option, but one should also be aware of the concomitant costs and limitations. Sharing the lived experience of the aid manager allows one to grasp the paradox of aid's power effects – how the 'will to empower' (Cruikshank 1999) of the developmental endeavor can and does lead to unintended disciplinary and repressive outcomes. The downside of this is that excessive intimacy with donors and their 'meta-narrative' can lead to a flattening of one's perception of non-donor actors into a one-dimensional category of 'recipients,' denying them both authority and agency outside the means and ends of 'development.' In other words, to invoke Englund and Leach's more general point, there can be epistemological costs associated with allowing the meta-narrative of development to frame one's ethnography.

Trust

The call for ethnographies of aid highlights a tension between the basic requirements of mutual trust and accountability upon which ethnography is predicated, and the skepticism that drives the ethnographic inquiry. While individual actors within development agencies may not intentionally misrepresent their aims and interests, the way that these agencies portray their aims and activities in the aggregate diverges markedly from the observable outcomes of aid. Aid organisations justify their use of public funds (and private donations) through reference to presumed virtuous outcomes of development. And yet, one could argue (e.g., Easterly 2002, Hancock 1990) the most significant achievement of decades of aid has not been 'development,' but the institutionalization of a self-referential aid industry and the professionalization of a managerial elite responsible for its maintenance.

There is, indeed, little reason for potential interlocutors to trust an ethnographer of aid. Anthropologists often identify with the marginalized and disenfranchised in their field sites – the roots of this are in anthropology's colonial origins, when 'liberal' anthropologists justified their participation in colonial regimes of repression by seeking to provide a voice to the colonized vis-à-vis the colonial administration (cf. Asad 1973, Escobar 1995). Under conditions of post-coloniality, the involvement of social scientists in development projects – as experts in participatory technologies – is rationalized on a similar basis.

There may be utilitarian grounds for employing professional interlopers to mediate between developers and their clients, and the anthropologist is often easily and incrementally pulled into such a role. The ethnographer will often have a better understanding of the recipients's social context than the development practitioner, and bridging the cognitive gap between donor and recipient can win points of trust with both constituencies. One needs to consider, however, the extent to which the role of the broker (who has a stake in the success of her mediations) is compatible with that of the analyst. What risks, both social and cognitive, inhere in playing the double agent in one's research site? What skills, personal and professional, are required to transcend the contradictions of these two roles, especially given the increasing length and complexity of the chains of actors and institutions through which aid monies and concepts travel (e.g., Stubbs and Wedel, this volume)?

This characterization may make the issue of social positionality seem like a simple question of choice. In practice, entering into the social transactions required to engage the cooperation of knowledgeable interlocutors almost inevitably engenders expectations of reciprocity or responsibility toward them. This is true regardless of whether they are donors or clients. Indeed, arguments for moral responsibility to one's informants are incontrovertible. In addition, extended fieldwork tends to confer on the ethnographer special 'expertise' about one's ethnographic site and its populations. It is virtually impossible not to be drawn into developmental projects targeted at one's site in some capacity, be this assessor, advocate, broker or confident. Some see this as a

benefit of academic professionalization – the expertise of ethnographic experience confers an enhanced capacity to ‘do good’ (Fisher 1997). Reflecting on this dilemma takes us into the realm of normative positionality.

Normative positionality

The discourse of development is intrinsically normative: It is predicated on the improvability of people and their institutions; it prescribes what people, governments and aid managers *ought* to do (be more efficient, participatory, pro-poor, accountable); and about the need for more and better development. The bulk of the massive literature of development is about some combination of these normative claims. What’s more, development agencies devote immense efforts into advocacy on behalf of their own legitimacy (and of shares of national budgets). For the social scientist, the foundational normativity of aid and of aid discourse is an ethnographic fact. We are not primarily concerned with the validity of the claims – Is aid good or bad? Are its recipes for the improvement of social institutions true or false? Should more or less money be allocated to development cooperation? Rather, an ethnographic perspective seeks to document and theorize the mechanisms and practices by which the normative claims of development agents – anyone claiming to speak authoritatively on behalf of an agency or project – are generated, legitimized and contested within aid relationships.

This is not to imply that aidnography is or could be ‘value-free.’ Ethnographies of aid are driven by complex and contradictory motives. One can be deeply sceptical about the virtuous and self-congratulatory rhetoric of aid agencies, and yet feel compelled to defend the very principles donors invoke to justify their budgets and interventions, such as global equity and human solidarity. Such ambivalence can be productive – one can use it to the advantage of generating new and insightful knowledge – or it can be paralyzing. How one deals with normative positionality – and above all with the way one relates to the normative rhetoric of development agents – can be decisive for the success of the research venture as a whole. This section offers some very provisional observations about the production of development narratives as it confronts the ethnographer.

Front- and backstage narrative

It is characteristic of the opaque and quasi-diplomatic nature of the aid domain that aid managers are deeply embedded in an organizational context that exerts powerful limits on the contours of both their speech and actions. One could say that these organizational cultures are actors in their own right – the structures of sanction and incentive are such that one often finds little variation in how individual employees portray their collective mission in an official setting. It is only by extended observation – providing an opportunity to assess discrepancies among different renditions of official accounts as well as between rhetoric and performance, that one can begin to patch together a fuller picture of what each actor/agency is actually doing.

Many come, as I have suggested, to the ethnographic study of aid out of an intrinsic skepticism about the official narratives of aid; aid-folk express similar ambivalence about the rhetorical embellishment of the contexts they work in. This ambivalence is nurtured, among other things, by awareness of systemic discrepancies between the stated goals and observable outcomes of development interventions. Skepticism is also fueled by the many contradictions inherent to the practice of aid – such as the intense inter- and intra-organizational, and often highly personalized, politics characteristic of the aid domain, or the grossly unequal levels of compensation for domestic and foreign development expertise.

Whatever the source of ambivalence, it translates into disparate frontstage and backstage performances of the rationalities at work in rendering aid as a legitimate enterprise. This bifurcation of narrative into front- and backstage versions is neither new, nor unique to the world of aid, of course (Goffman 1959). It may be especially pronounced among aid-folk, however, due to the audacity of the claims to virtue that frame the vocation.

There are at least two distinct versions of the frontstage/backstage distinction. In one frontstage situation, the informant expresses firm commitment to the 'mission statement' of the project/organization (poverty reduction, good governance, capacity building, human rights, etc); while backstage, she

reveals her suspicions that other agendas may determine the ways that aid work in practice (a will to control/discipline the recipient; ambition and careerism; the imperative to disburse credits; a need to assert national, cultural, moral or racial superiority; etc.). Another version reflects tensions between developers and clients. In this case, front stage performance reaffirms the official rhetoric of partnership and trust between donor and recipient, while backstage narratives reveal deep suspicions about the partners' true motives or commitment, and so on.

The extent to which one gains access to backstage renditions is often an indication of the depth of the fieldwork. Glimpses of the backstage regions of the site promise an opportunity to analyze the mechanisms and practices through which the subjectivities of donorship – and the claims of virtuous action through which the aid is legitimized – are produced and maintained. In my experience, however, such glimpses are relatively rare. For the most part, aid agents live firmly within and reproduce an overarching organizational narrative that frames their professional existence. Yet the individual performances of the normative rhetoric of aid and development are not uniform. Positioning oneself with respect to the empirical discourses of aid in the field requires, above all, making sense of the minute inconsistencies and variations among actor renditions. Are they simply the expression of a unique individual sensibility, or can one discern more structural tensions at play? To come to terms with these questions, and in order to interpret discrepancies in narrative data, we need to understand the mechanisms which produce individual versions of an 'official' narrative.

Official narratives

All aid agencies produce 'policy frameworks' and 'mission statements' on a regular basis. Such normative frames are not 'realistic', nor are they meant to be. Rather than defining achievable goals and the operational means to pursue them, the normative narratives of aid agencies legitimize their operations as

well as their access to public resources.⁶ The organizational cultures of aid agencies (as well as those of 'partner' organizations on the recipient end of the aid relationship) thus need to incorporate various mechanisms by which contradictions between lofty aims and modest outcomes are rationalized. These mechanisms shelter individual staff from normative dissonance in their institutional environments and allow them to get on with their jobs.

Rhetorical innovations are generally introduced in the upper echelons of the organization. Aggregate narrative orderings (strategic means and ends) filter down gradually to the 'front-line', the point of implementation where these strategic aims are supposed to produce specific results. During this process of filtering down, narrative elements are localised, and in the process take on different, and differently contextualized, meanings. Senior managers (at different levels) actively seek to craft these narratives, and yet the rhetoric is never completely under anyone's control. The endless and repetitive articulation, incorporation and self-insertion in the organizational narrative by individual staff along the chain from senior management to frontline operatives (re-)produces and (re)creates multiple 'official' versions of the narrative. In some respects, depending on the coherence of the story and the complexity of the organization it is meant to permeate, the narrative and its various elements takes on a life of its own.

At the same time, the aid domain (and most ethnographic sites) encompass a multiplicity of competing aid agencies, each with their own narratives and mechanisms for rationalizing normative dissonance. Competition among agencies for political space, allies and clients is also reflected in varying localizations of normative rhetoric. Stories, vocabularies and justifications bleed into one another, introducing an added element of disjuncture between the upstream strategic rhetoric and the concrete narratives performed in both front- and backstage spaces.

⁶ An incessant sequence of mission statements also provides a mechanism of distinguishing organizations from their competitors, as well as for distancing an organization from past failures or reputational blemishes.

That individual actors manage the dissonance between normative claims and reality is an achievement of the organizational setup, facilitated by ‘arts of government’ at different levels. Personnel management is central to the governmental mechanisms through which credibility of aid narratives are maintained. One important managerial mechanism works through material incentives at the individual level. Material incentives (reinforced and amplified through instruments like ‘result-oriented assessment’) are keyed to immediate outputs in strictly delimited routine tasks. Such management techniques keep things small and immediate. This ‘immediacy’ is reflected in and directly linked to the organizational context in which actors embed themselves, and not to the wider realm of reality invoked in grand policy proclamations. Aid workers are rewarded for prompt and precise reporting, for keeping to deadlines, for finalizing high-volume credit agreements, for accessing privileged information about competitors or partners – not, in other words, for alleviating poverty, enhancing governance or promoting human rights.

There is, then, a primary disjuncture between the small, fragmented, localized narrative elements, backed up by concrete incentives (always keyed to a set of retreating principles/practices) that make up ones immediate reality; and the broad, aggregating innovations emanating from above. In addition to incentive mechanisms, two parallel management practices cushion aid agency staff from the effects of normative dissonance within the organization. One is staff rotation. It is highly unusual for the same staff member to initiate and finalize a development project. One’s desk portfolio is a compilation of diverse, and diversely conceived, projects in various stages of operation. Aid agency staff rotate at 2-3 year intervals between HQ and country offices, and among missions in different countries: No sooner do you become familiar with the modalities and context of these various endeavors than you are on transfer to another posting. One is simply not confronted in familiar and tangible terms with the mismatch between aspirations and results. Subcontracting and short – term contracts add to this.

Aid agencies are also in a constant state of administrative reorganization. These bureaucratic exercises are motivated less by dissatisfaction with results (a taboo topic for official debate within the organization), as by perceived inadequacies of the managerial system. The current trend of integrating development aid departments more firmly within the administrative structure of the national foreign ministry is a prime example. A site of intense power struggles between and within aid agencies and their supervising ministries, the substantive outcome of this trend has been to deprofessionalize the corps of staff managing development issues. As a result of these reforms, an aid agency manager is no longer expected to be capable of assessing the 'development impact' of a given project or activity, nor of knowing the extent to which her specific performance is compatible with the organization's qualitative goals.⁷ Organizational narratives are similarly in flux. A new overarching policy framework is introduced at roughly five-year intervals. Typically, policy frameworks differ only slightly from their immediate predecessors and the overall impression of continuity is promoted. Thus, while operational modalities, preferred instruments and stated goals may change significantly over time, old and new policies co-exist in semi-autonomous enclaves and layers.⁸ Longterm projects and programmes that are periodically redesigned under successive policy regimes retain elements of earlier phases and formulations: incentive structures, styles and hierarchies of management, subcontracting arrangements, monitoring procedures, etc (see Mosse 2003 for an example).

Coming to terms with scale

Scalar issues of transect and permeate the preceding remarks on positionality. What methodological guidelines can be drawn about how to approach the trans-scalar character of the aid domain ethnographically? As noted earlier on, the point of departure for approaching scale as a methodological problem is

⁷ While also subordinating 'development' concerns to those of security and, in many instances, commerce

⁸ The situation is quite similar to the state of legal pluralism anthropologists have documented in many African contexts: individuals can choose among traditional, colonial and post-colonial norms to justify an action depending on their specific demands and the prevailing context (e.g., Lund 1998).

naturally grounded in the physical scale of individual human agency. Our scope for understanding is subject to restrictions imposed by the limits of our sensory capabilities, the fragility of memory, as well as by the mortality of our bodies. The range of things we can know first hand – the time-space coordinates we can physically occupy, much less learn to know well, within the scope of a research project or a lifetime – is extremely narrow. This is one reason why socio-spatial positionality is a pivotal point of epistemological reflection for ethnography. In these concluding remarks, I try and highlight the importance of scale as an ‘ontological’ issue. This implies accepting the fact that aid is comprised of multi-sited, multi-level, trans-scalar flows and processes and then inquiring into the implications of this for defining, collecting, organizing and interpreting ethnographic data. These issues are addressed by many of the contributors to this volume, and my comments are a reflection on those more detailed and better contextualized discussions.

Perhaps the key methodological insight of the above is that a jump in scale is not just about a readjustment of the quantitative index of resolution. Different languages, rhetoric, ideals, justifications and rationalities circulate at different scales, at different levels of an organization, for example. What can pass for a compelling principle at headquarters quickly becomes a euphemism subsuming (and masking) a range of local and localizing practices and rationalities at the grassroots. ‘Participation’ in Oxford or Washington is not participation in Masasi District in rural Tanzania. By the same token, seemingly similar data, evidence, gathered at different sites in different scalar contexts, will not necessarily be commensurate. Transscalar observation implies a ‘translating device’ for making data accumulated at different sites, and at localities within a site, mutually comprehensible. This is most difficult when different individuals make observations at different sites.

Looking at the contributions to this volume, one can discern several tentative attempts to identify and operationalize an analytical frame as a translation device in the above sense. Here the boundary between theory and method becomes exceptionally fuzzy. What is needed, our contributors are suggesting, are interpretive frameworks that can provide conceptual tools for interrelating

events and observations at different levels of an ethnographic site. I think we can identify four such strategies:

The first methodological option might be called **collapsing scale**. This implies focusing exclusively on the 'human' scale of social action. It involves bracketing hierarchical variables of status, power, and mobility, and looking especially at the interests, imperatives and strategies of individual actors irrespective of their socio-spatial position. The actions of a senior manager are as much a product of the prevailing structure of incentives as is the behavior of a local partner in the field. This mode of analysis relies heavily on the game metaphor of social transaction and, like different varieties of game theory, tends to individualize agency. It can have the normative appeal of demystifying the powerful – bringing them down to the level of the man in the street – but only at the analytical cost of bracketing structural forces and more aggregated processes. In different ways Paul Stubbs and Malin Arvidsen grapple with these issues in their chapters.

A second approach focuses on the explicit political uses of scale and resonates with recent debates concerning the **politics of scale** (Smith 1992). These debates have stressed the commonsensical fact that 'scale' (level of resolution) is never an 'ontological' given; rather, the scale of analysis (and that invoked in policy discourse) is always a social construction. The 'social construction of scale' (Marston 2000) should be understood as 'a political process'; indeed, 'scale-making is not only a rhetorical practice; its consequences are inscribed in, and are the outcomes of, both everyday life and macro-level social structures' (ibid., p. 221). Each in their own way, the contributions of Aida Bagic and Nisrine El Ghaziri both deal with scale as a political resource, Where El Ghaziri emphasizes how international aid agencies use scale to control a negotiation, Bagic points to strategies by which local actors act to 'de-scale' interventions, and to keep them 'legible' and manageable for their purported beneficiaries.

A third style of analysis might be termed **trans-scalar tracking**. This approach adapts the extended case method developed by the Manchesterian

anthropologists (Gluckman van Velsen, etc). Beginning with a specific 'critical event', this approach entails tracing the paths and networks of actors and agencies 'across levels and processes.' Janine Wedel's contribution herein illustrates this very powerful (if demanding) approach.⁹

The three preceding styles of analysis can be combined with very different theoretical concerns. The fourth approach is based on the specific theorization of social power associated with Foucault's notion of **governmentality**. An approach to aid as governmentality sidesteps the issue of scale by focusing on the aid domain as a matrix of narratives and subjectivities. The main concern is a rather narrow one of 'the conduct of conduct' – the analysis of how aid relations provide a context for disciplinary practices (Foucault, in Burchell 1991; Dean 1999). Donors are generally seen as the arbiters of discipline over recipients, but there is no reason why this analytical asymmetry could not be reversed. The main point is to provide a framework for analyzing the construction of authority (via various arts of government) across levels, and for understanding the subjectivities associated with such discipline. Judging by the empirical results, this style of analysis appears most conducive to narrative analysis: the deconstruction of policy texts and discourse, be these primary or secondary accounts. Of the contributors to the current volume, Abrahamsen, Gasper and Marcussen/Bergendorff all toy with this perspective to varying degrees.

These options are not mutually exclusive, and different styles can possibly be mixed to good effect. But whatever the approach or methodological mix, one must still resolve the dilemma of the scale at which interpretation is exercised. The incommensurability of concepts and rationalities at different levels and localities presents another set of challenges for the *perspective* of the analytical narrative through which the results of the study are recounted. We are back, once again, to the question of theorization, and of the generalizing concepts through which the research problem is defined. Certainly there is no one theoretical vocabulary versatile enough to encompass all aidnographic

⁹ Erica Bornstein's (2003) work on the international private development agency World Vision provides another productive example of this way of dealing with scale.

data (and the highlighting of a governmentality framework in the above was not meant to suggest that it could play the role of a universal translation device). But it is just as certain that the situational intuition and embodied knowledge of the ethnographer are inadequate tools for situating aidnographic observations in a broader social, political and economic context.

Final reflections

There is wide consensus among the authors herein that aid and development cannot be understood unless situated in a transscalar canvas of social relations, interests and imperatives. An ethnography that cannot ‘jump scale’ can become the hostage of ‘situated knowledge,’ and of partial truths. Should ethnography rely on Economics or International Relations to put together the pieces of the puzzle – subcontract out the theorizing function with which to make more ‘aggregate’ sense of its local data? Or can ethnographic inquiry participate in theory building that transcends the physical limits of sites and scales? To fail to grasp the wider context of one’s site, that is, to succumb to localized narratives of development, can render the aidnographer complicit in legitimising the ‘unintended consequences’ of aid (such as prolonged dependency, depoliticization and deresponsibilization), and can lead to paralyzing cynicism.

What, if any, kind of ethnography can do justice to the overall organization of development? What are its foundational premises, its methodological practices? How can the demands of globally articulated phenomena like aid and development be reflected in the way that ethnographic study is organized and taught? The essays in this volume may not have provided unequivocal solutions to these perennial queries. I hope, nonetheless, that readers for whom close readings of, and intimate encounters with, the narratives and practices of aid have been disquieting experiences will have found in these pages useful tools for reflection.

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