PERFORMING POLICY – PERFORMING AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY: FLEXIBILITY, AGENCY AND EMOTIONS IN POLICY AND ITS ANALYSIS
William Shakespeare
As You Like It

All the (policy) world’s a stage
And all the men and women merely (flexible) players
A dialectic of theory-methods-findings

Orthodox policy analysis
Uses ‘objective’, linear, input-output methods to analyse policy as rational, logical, and stable, with most if not all of what policy is able to be captured in a (2x2) matrix

Discursive policy analysis
Uses ‘scientific’ discourse and/or other content analysis methods to analyse policy as texts, with most if not all of what policy is able to be captured through a (series of) textual reinterpretation(s)
What if...

... policy is complex, contested, contradictory, changing, multiple, mobile, messy, morphing, unstable, uncertain, unpredictable, fluid, dynamic, ambiguous, ... and, above all, flexible, agentic, emotion-charged, and performative.
A turn to Ethnography?

- A loose assemblage of approaches, even a sensibility, not A Method
- Origins in anthropology but increasingly utilised in sociology, political science and policy analysis
- Contains within it “the capacity to be surprised”
- “A layered and evocative presentation of located aspects of the human condition from the inside” (Willis and Trondman)
Policy ethnography...

- Multi-sited, multi-level, trans-scalar even para-sited
- Theoretically-informed, reflexive, and multi-voiced
- Positioned (not an account “from above or from nowhere”)
- Studying up, down, sideways and through
- ‘Bending and blending’ – ‘hunting and gathering’
- Presenting ‘plausible provocations’ not objective, verifiable truths
Auto-ethnography...

- Often seen as self-indulgent, relativistic, pseudo-fictional praxis ("enough about you, let’s talk about me some more")
- Using, not denying, one’s own direct involvement, situational intuition, embodied participation and emotional reactions
- “Aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience”
- A work of translation from ‘policy practice’ to ‘(critical) policy research’
Critical policy ethnography... (or intuition is not enough)

- Reveals conjunctural changes and structural characteristics of policy interventions
- Renders political questions which are presented as technical
- Explores power relations including the power to silence
- Involves a commitment to an ethics of translation and ‘talking back’
- Seeks to expand “new spaces of opportunity”
So do you want to be a policy (auto-) ethnographer...
...or Judith Butler meets Erving Goffmann and they find they get on better than anyone expected - performance as practice not the expression of essentialised identities.

Policy is a performance of ‘expanded theatricality’ with roles, scripts, improvisations, occurring both front- and back-stage.

Performativity refers to the repetition of a prior authoritative set of practices.

The categories and roles of policy are produced in performance and are much less stable than is often thought.
Keywords II: Flexible Agency...

- Policy Flexians (Wedel) make their own history, sometimes just as they please; under self-selected circumstances (apologies to Marx)

- Bringing agency back in to policy analysis but “there is no agency in general” (Foucault) – multiple and contradictory forces can lead to ‘unreliable’ agents

- Emerging group of ‘strategic brokers’, ‘boundary spanners’, ‘intermediaries’, ‘translators’, ‘transactors’ who “connect, facilitate or smooth the passage between diverse actors in a chain” and are located ‘in-between’

- Flexians transcend taken-for-granted roles and responsibilities, normalised institutional constraints, and traditional standards of accountability
Keywords III: Emotions...

- Policies involve relationships and actions which are saturated with emotions – need an affective more than an effective turn.
- Bodily intensities: feelings, emotions and passions are rarely addressed in accounts of policy and its making.
- ‘Structures of feeling’ (Williams) involve feelings as thoughts and thoughts as feelings (emotions are NOT irrational and pre-social).
- The ‘emotional habitus’ of policy - a sense of “what and how to feel” (Gould) is frequently disrupted.
Small Groups (30 minutes)

**Group 1: Performance**

**Group 2: Flexible agency**

**Group 3: Emotions**

i. Does the concept help in understanding policy? What might be some of the problems with the concept?

ii. Can you think of examples from your own experience which show the importance of the concept in policy making?

iii. How might you operationalise the concept in researching policy? Are there any other methods than the ethnographic in which the concept could be operationalised?

**Feedback (max 10 minutes):** Try to agree on i. and iii. and choose one interesting example from your discussions under ii.