

Ethnographic Research in Gendered Organizations: The Case of the Westminster Parliament

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doi:10.1017/S1743923X14000476

Anthropologists and new institutionalist scholars studying politics share an interest in rules, norms, and power. The former tend to agree more closely with those researchers who rely on inductive empiricism rather than deductive research methods, take an historical perspective, and treat ambiguities as part of the study rather than an inconvenience. As Olivier de Sardan argues, those institutionalist approaches that tend to rely on abstract, predetermined structures contrast with the way anthropologists see social norms as emerging out of interaction between people in specific contexts (2014, 288).

I use the term “organizations” merely to describe the boundaries of what I am studying (as opposed to families, communities or nations) but neither organizations nor institutions as explanatory concepts. Institutional approaches depict “institutions” as sets of rules and norms that exist within and between organizations, but since this is too narrow as an explanatory theory from my perspective and some versions of these approaches downplay heterogeneity, individual agency, and contradictions — all in my view vital for explaining change and dynamism — I rely on a broader theory of social action and interaction rooted in culture and power. When explaining what goes on within and between organizations, I analyze culture rather than institutions because it conveys a broader meaning, encompassing not only rules and norms, but also power, values, rituals, symbolism, and practices. Since rules and norms do not shape behavior on their own, as Bourdieu (1977) argues, but only in conjunction with other aspects of culture, institutionalism makes too many prior assumptions.

When studying a geographically, organizationally or culturally defined group, anthropologists often turn to ethnography for its rigour, depth, and emphasis on connections. Ethnography is a methodological approach to studying social worlds.¹ It is distinct from other social

My research in the House of Lords was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, while the Commons study was made possible by a Leverhulme Research Fellowship. My thanks are due to the following for their helpful comments: Georgina Waylen, Fiona Mackay, Jill Irvine, and Cindy Rosenthal.

1. For a succinct summary about how anthropologists use ethnography, see <http://www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/methods/ethnography/index.shtml> (accessed May 1, 2014).

science approaches partly because theory and method are intimately bound up rather than separated into distinct processes or consecutive stages and partly because the starting point is the perspective of informants. In this piece I use my own research on one organization — the UK houses of Parliament — to show how an ethnographic approach can yield interesting insights for feminist political scientists aiming to understand how legislatures are gendered. My own theoretical starting point reflects current thinking in anthropology of politics (Crewe and Axelby 2013), but also feminist anthropology (e.g., see Moore 1994). Since gender — in the sense of socially and politically constructed differences and relationships between men and women — always emerges in any rigorous study of culture and power, gender became an important theme in both my ethnographies of the Westminster Parliament.

Between 1998 and 2000, I immersed myself in the House of Lords (the upper house of the UK Parliament), watching the way debate and law making was ritualized, investigating the gaps and contradictions between ethos, rules, and practices, and seeing how these related to formal and informal (including gendered) hierarchies. Between 2011 and 2014, I did something similar in the House of Commons (the lower house) but focused on women and men MPs' work in Parliament and constituencies, why it varies between members, and how it is changing. Immersion consisted of four main methods: (1) formal interviews (in the Lords with 121 peers and 58 staff, and in the Commons with 44 MPs, 24 former MPs, and 41 others, with peers/MPs chosen to be roughly representative in terms of gender, length of service, party, and position) with a checklist of themes to discuss; (2) textual analysis and observation of the chambers, committees, meetings, and media reports; (3) interaction with members, staff, journalists, and visitors in corridors, eating places, and at functions; and (4) case studies. For example, in the Commons I compiled case studies about a by-election, seven constituencies (including 32 "surgery" meetings with constituents), and the passage of one bill.

Like all ethnographers, I used different methods depending upon the specific research question so that they emerged in an iterative way as the research progressed. In the interactive rather than observational mode, the art of interpretative questioning was key. The questions tended to be focused and open. To get beneath the surface and make sense of multiple views, a researcher has to continually ask, Why is she saying that? because, like anyone else, a politician's statements are produced by their specific social context and a mix of cultural values, pressures,

ideologies, norms, emotions, and aspirations. As well as asking about people's idealized versions about what they were supposed to do, or probing their representations of themselves, I observed their everyday practices and interaction. This kind of open-ended inquiry means that ethnographers can investigate what is of greatest sociopolitical significance to their informants and can then more easily analyse *why* patterns exist, persist, or change.

In the example of my ethnographies, almost all peers (members of the House of Lords), male and female, produced consistent statements about a shared ethos shaping relations between peers, while MPs were far more variable and gendered in their statements about ethos, both as a whole group but even within parties. Nearly all peers claim that the House of Lords is egalitarian, and when watching them, it became apparent that women thrive in debates where courtly manners reign and aggression is deemed unsuitable behavior for a peer, even if other hierarchies are in play (Crewe 2005).

The Commons could not be more of a contrast. In the more ambitious and competitive House, there is no ethos of equality or even shared ethos. Most men reported that they relish performing in the Chamber during the gladiatorial battles (such as Prime Minister's Questions or debates on controversial bills), heckling their opponents and cheering their allies, while women tend to say they prefer the calmer, more deliberative debates. Shaw's research shows that, although speaking time in the Chamber and "giving way" is roughly equal between men and women, women make fewer illegal interventions and participate less in collective speech (2000, 412). Women's behavior puts them at a disadvantage, given the importance of getting noticed as an MP by showing loyalty to your side and opposing the other side with vigor. As Childs puts it, "acting in a feminised way within an institution characterised by masculinised modes of behaviour may limit one's effect" (2004, 10).

Other rituals and meeting spaces evoke contrasting gendered interaction. In the more deliberative meetings — the less visible select committees, during Backbench Business Committee discussions or when chairing all-party parliamentary groups — women and men participate as equals, according to both MPs and officials. Based on observing male and female MPs in seven constituencies, I found that they also handle their representative roles differently. Within increasingly demanding constituencies, nearly all MPs hold surgeries where they advise constituents with severe problems and hand the case to their staff to take up with local or national government. Labour MP Paul Flynn

writes tellingly, “The MP should be the living embodiment of the constituency, tirelessly promoting and defending the territory with the ferocity of a mother protecting her offspring” (2012, 138). The only MPs I could find who never attend surgeries seemed to be men in safe seats. Women MPs appeared particularly confident in surgery meetings including during intensely emotional conversations with constituents.

Women MPs experience inequality in certain sites but in differentiated ways. It is even harder to be taken seriously if you are a *young* woman; experience makes you wise, it is assumed by MPs, and youth is associated with naivety. One of the youngest women MPs told me, “MPs tend to think you’re rubbish if you are young.”² Older women MPs tend to feel less intimidated by Commons machismo but have told me that their chances for promotion are lower than those of younger women because the leaders are getting younger and they have a tendency to surround themselves with people like them. Women MPs from working-class backgrounds report that they get more seriously denigrated by the press than more privileged women. MPs with dependents deal with greater pressure on their time and money, especially if their constituency is outside London and they have no other source of income.

What about relationships between MPs? Women MPs in all parties observed that when they are outnumbered by men in meetings, then various exclusion mechanisms come into play. A woman can make a point that is ignored but when repeated by a man (especially if senior) gets the response, “That is brilliant!” MPs tend to refer to the ideas voiced by male MPs, especially prominent ones, which reinforces the impression that they have the best ideas. Lobby journalists, among whom men are also overrepresented, are drawn to interview male MPs. Both women and men reporters tend to refer to the male MPs as cerebral, clever, and promising or, on the flip side, sometimes badly behaved, while they dwell on women’s character flaws, clothes, and shoes. The values expressed in cyberspace, where anonymity is easy, can be misogynous and sometimes violent.

So by taking an ethnographic approach and comparing different houses of parliament as well as different aspects of MPs’ work and arenas, it is possible to get a detailed picture of their interrelated experiences, some examples of which I provide in this essay. This is important for accounting for gendered differences because it avoids reductionist explanations that focus on one part of the work or one group of women.

2. Interview with MP, July 5, 2012.

I agree with Acker that organizations are never gender neutral and that gendering processes can involve (a) gender division of labor reinforced by symbols and images, (b) male dominance in interaction, (c) logics and assumptions that marginalize women (1990). Nonetheless, I conclude that Acker's argument applies clearly to some sites in the House of Commons but not to the House of Lords.

What about the possibility that the variation in rules and norms in each House account for the differences, which would be consistent with new institutionalist theory? This makes some sense. The ethos of egalitarianism and the norms that prohibit aggression create a Lords Chamber within which women thrive. In contrast, the competitive ethos of the Commons and the adversarial aggression in debate favor men. But that is only part of the story. A fuller and more significant explanation derived from doing ethnographic research would consider the relationship between the two Houses and between MPs and wider society as well. The Lords' main role of revising legislation and holding more junior positions in government limits their political power in relation to the Commons. In contrast, those who rise to the top of the Commons reach positions of considerable power over others, and they, with whips and those that support them on the backbenches, respond to the other side with aggression in the most visible public rituals in a bid to communicate their own strength and the weakness of their opponents. Men and women MPs are reproducing a competitive culture because their relationships with other MPs in their party and with the outside world, mediated by TV/radio/press/web, demand and expect it. Women play a part in creating and maintaining this competitive culture, but for many of them the aggressive expression of it during the more confrontational and politically important rituals (such as Prime Minister's Question Time) is alienating. It conflicts with their sense of appropriate feminine behaviour. The pressure to behave in ways that are perceived as macho put women, and a minority of men, at a disadvantage in the political events that get the greatest public attention. In less visible sites — constituency surgeries, for example, where MPs help constituents in collaborative and nurturing ways — it is women MPs who tend to excel. Surgery meetings often involve discussion of intensely personal, emotional and painful matters and the women MPs seemed more at ease in this role than male MPs. But this work, like much women's labour in the domestic domain, is under-valued. Furthermore, as Judith Butler puts it, "performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing

it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all" (1988: 528). So gender inequality and difference in the UK Parliament are found in culturally constructed ideas about what it means to be feminine and masculine, the way gender is performed by both women and men, and power relations between and within the House of Lords and House of Commons and the outside world.

Ethnographic methods could be valuable for feminist scholars of political institutions in encouraging them to pay more attention to their own assumptions and their informants' cultural specificity and context, to diversity between informants and within social groups, and to social change. Universal models should be treated with caution, as rules are embedded within the specific cultural meaning making and social relations in that particular place, time, and organization. Gendered differences may be universal, but the forms they take are endlessly varied.

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