3.5

RESEARCHING PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES IN PRACTICE

A pedagogic-ethnographic approach

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Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of a pedagogic-ethnographic approach, gives practical examples and discusses how and why this approach can be useful in planning research, especially to study professions.¹

A pedagogic-ethnographic approach offers insights and results contributing to an understanding of practice, rather than linear explanations and unidirectional cause-effect relations. This goes quite well with planning studies, as practice and performance are central (e.g., Flyvbjerg 1998; Forester 1989; Healey 1992, 1997). The approach emphasises a description of social conditions and cultural frames from an everyday perspective. This considers the way meaning is shaped, individually and in interaction with others, and can, among other things, contribute to an understanding of how day-to-day practices are developed and maintained. Furthermore, the approach involves the ones studied – that is, they are not passive objects to be studied but rather co-researchers. It is in this sense that the approach is pedagogic – through the interaction with and involvement of the practitioners.

As planning by nature is multidisciplinary, complex and political, studies of planning practice in general have to recognise the ones involved in doing planning. This may be planners, experts and politicians, but also citizens, organizations, business and other private actors. To what extent and depth we study these, as well as what groups we include in our studies, might vary with the aim. Even if we are more focused on the outcome than the process itself, it is not possible to fully neglect the ones taking part in the planning. Therefore we also need a repertoire of suitable methods to involve people as subjects in our studies. Their experiences and knowledge of their practices are of foremost importance for the researchers’ understanding. Here I will use the role of professionals in planning and the implications of their differing professional perspectives as examples of how this research approach can be used and what kinds of results it could generate. The practical examples are based on Swedish research on how sustainable development is integrated in planning practice (e.g., Håkansson 2005, 2006; Dovlén & Håkansson 2002; Håkansson & Asplund 2003).
To study professional roles and planning practice

In my example the research questions address how professions act and interact in practice, based on preconditions such as their professional culture, when dealing with sustainable development in the frame of planning. In the project, culture was used as a metaphor for describing professional groups, where the individuals have a number of conceptions and experiences shaping their professional culture. When cultures are brought to light, it gives professionals an opportunity to reflect on their own role and on assumptions not normally found at a conscious level in their profession. Through self-reflection there is a possibility of changing or maintaining this role, and thereby practice. Making the everyday life of practice visible forms the basis for defining and developing terms that make it possible to talk about what is done (Schön 1983; Forester 1999). Also things like the relation to the context, the roles of others and the interaction between different perspectives and understanding can be discussed and reflected on. What is beneficial is this elucidation, this creation of meaning, which is an incentive to change, if needed. This is quite consistent with the pedagogic-ethnographic approach, aiming to identify principles and highlight and present different phenomena.  

The pedagogic-ethnographic approach

The pedagogic-ethnographic approach was originally developed mainly in the context of educational science (Qvarsell 1996) with an aim to study learning processes and processes of change in society rather than traditional educational contexts. The focus of studies could, for example, be on patterns of power and practice or interaction between groups. This makes it close to the purpose of many planning studies and offers a frame for these kinds of inquiries.  

The intellectual roots reach back to semiotics and pragmatism as well as ethnography and social anthropology. The approach includes the communicative aspects of actions and views humans as intentional, directed and meaning-creating, through social interaction. A critical perspective on practice, combined with a reflective method, offers possibilities to study as well the context as the actions and thereby the essence of practice.  

Research within the approach does not start with a hypothesis or a fixed theoretical framework, but rather in wonder in the face of different phenomena. In planning research, this can, for example, be curiosity about why a planning process turned out in a specific way, or how planners shape their action space (Grange 2013). Looking for the unexpected or surprising from the researchers’ perspective in material and generating new knowledge constitute the core of the approach, including a continual questioning of what is taken for granted. The researcher’s frame of reference – that is, the researcher’s experiences and knowledge in the area – and a formulation of what is expected in such situations serve as the starting point. When something unexpected is encountered, a reformulation of the original conception and development of the theoretical framework are required in order for the observation to be understood. At the same time, concepts are developed. Concepts included in the initial formulation are reformulated and new concepts are created. We can say that we create labels to describe what we see. The work is carried forward in a converging process. This is often referred to as abduction. The results can be described as making everyday thinking more precise, with the aim to make the world understandable. Abduction can shortly be seen as an alternation between empirical data and theoretical development, as a wave through the research.  

Pedagogic-ethnography can be both descriptive and explanatory. As for the explanatory part, it is not, however, a case of causal explanations but of retroductive explanations. It means the
results cannot be used to talk about what will happen in a similar situation, but to instead answer the question of why something happened, and bring about a creation of meaning, a construction made by the researcher to explain conditions and events (Qvarsell 1996) with a focus on comprehensiveness. The aim is to understand, discover and interpret.

The research outcome can be described as building a bridge between phenomena that are being studied, by formulating possible relations between them, and capturing qualities – or rather creating qualities (Löfberg 1994). Researchers are working not to find comprehensive laws but instead to identify principles, abstract concepts or empirically based relations in the empirical material. These serve as tools for opening up and revealing new phenomena or aspects, rather than as a system for explaining individual factors. Qualities are created and phenomena are given names, and in the interplay between research and practice, artefacts like norms, values, documents and so on are created. Both directly applicable knowledge and a more general production of knowledge that identifies relations and aspects are developed. The basic ground in this kind of research entails asking what something means and reveals meaning of phenomena rather than a truth.

Even though the study is carried out in a specific place and with certain individuals, these are chosen as being representative of a more universal phenomenon – that is, the specific entity studied has a relation to the general, which is similar to what Flyvbjerg (2001) and others note about research by producing examples, making it possible for us to understand. Human understanding is organized by always understanding something by something else, making analogies to the known.

To summarise, studies that are carried out using a pedagogic-ethnographic approach can be described as converging. They start out broad and open-minded in order to later focus on core categories and develop concepts and theories. The starting point is an idea about a phenomenon or area that is interesting and then the research process proceeds to the gathering of data in as unbiased way as possible. Categories and patterns are then derived from this material, forming the basis of theoretical development and further data gathering. There is an interaction between data gathering and the development of theories. Ideally, the gathering of data, processing data, analysis and theory building take place simultaneously. As the research progresses, the focus can change, but not without limits. It is important that the initial phase makes clear the area of interest and, based on this, determines the perspective. The research process and the outcome include interpretative understanding – creating meaning, aiming to gain a more in-depth understanding of the individuals’ experiences. Some illustrations will be given ahead about how to prepare, perform and process such a study. The following sections thus address research strategies and methods, the role of the researcher and the interaction between research and practice.

**Multi-strategies and methods for empirical work**

A research approach is a strategy that helps the researcher answer the question that is posed and curiosity and an appreciation of usefulness, determines the choice of approaches and methods. Shifting between different perspectives, approaches and techniques helps to increase the quality of the results and thereby provide a deeper understanding.

In a pedagogic-ethnographic approach, as in most approaches, a variety of methods for data collection can be used and combined, due to the research question. Especially methods in the category often labelled qualitative methods are used. As qualitative research is focused on understanding a phenomenon in its sociocultural context, the methods used need to help us to grasp
people’s perspectives, stories, experiences and valuations, and also to focus action and interaction. Suitable methods to use when studying professions and planning practice are interviews, focus groups and observations. Also text analysis as discourse analysis can be useful, but will not be further discussed in this chapter.  

**Preparation**

As preparation different document studies might be useful – for example, as a way to learn more about context, key issues, organization and involved actors. Thereby a pre-understanding of the conditions at hand arise, which can be used in planning how to perform the study and also serve as a mental backdrop during interviews and other interactions in the research and the analysing phase. But also the opposite strategy, “going naked out in the wild”, could be used; starting to collect data by, for example, interviews and observations without any more in-depth preparations, influenced by a grounded theory approach. Also here document studies might be used in later stages to complement and validate made interpretations. Anyhow, there will always be a preparation stage – choosing where to go, whom to start to talk with and what the basic research interest is. And note that we will always have some preconceptions about the order of the world. Both strategies can anyhow be equally beneficial, depending on the situation and the more precise research question.

**Interviews**

Interviews can be seen as one central method when we want to know more about professional perspectives, work experiences and people’s assumptions. The aim of the interviews can be manifold, both gathering basic information as preparation and receiving a full and in-depth description. The length of an interview varies from as short as half an hour to several hours, and sometimes interviews are repeated with one and the same person, spread over a lengthier period of time.

The interview situation can be seen as highly interactive as it is a conversation between two or more people. During the interview, meaning is created and contested. For this purpose, what Kvale (1996) calls qualitative research interviews are most suitable. The interview can be entirely open or semi-structured. The point of not making it fully structured, with a fixed set of questions, is to allow new and unexpected themes, emanating from the interviewee’s own experiences, to arise. There could be a validating process during the interview as the interviewer repeats his or her interpretation of what the interviewee relates. Generally, we use some kind of interview guide, covering some themes or areas that we are interested to know more about, given the initial research question. As an interview gives the opportunity to return to a theme several times with follow-up questions, it is possible to check whether the material is in agreement with how the interviewee sees it (Kvale 1996). Anyhow, it is of importance to let new themes arise during the interview. In the interview situation, it is therefore important to listen actively and to be curious about the person and the story told. Another prerequisite is to create a trusting relationship within the conversation. Choosing a place where the interviewee can relax is vital.

**Example**

A sub-study consisted of biographies of three well-established environmental professionals with documented experiences and interest in taking part in planning at local
level. Interviews were used to grasp their experiences and views of their professional life. Life stories give insight into both life processes of people and their interaction with other individuals and groups, as well as the situations they face in society and in work-life and choices they made. In this specific case, the interviews were held in the respective person’s workplace, and the basic question was “Tell me how you ended up in this work position?” Depending on the direction of the story, complementing questions about choices and his or her experiences of planning were posed, complemented by follow-up questions related to facts and storylines to make sure the interviewer understood them in line with how the interviewee saw them. Themes revealed in the interviews relate to motives for work-life changes and stories about their view of the planners in relation to his or her own professional role and assumptions of planning as an activity, its aim and its outcome.

When the final texts were finished, people were given the opportunity to read and comment on the use of their stories and quotations. The material was thus validated during the interviews through questions related to the researcher’s interpretations of the given account, and also by providing the chance to comment on the final use and interpretations of the gathered material, which also is in line with ethical considerations about how to use the material.

Focus groups

Focus groups can be characterised as group interviews, where the interactive processes are even stronger due to the dynamic among the persons taking part. In other words, the interviewees can reflect both on their own account and perspectives as well on the other persons’ utterances, and develop their understanding and standpoints during the interview based on the common communicative process. In general, questions are not used, but rather a theme common to the interviewees. The theme can be a common project or role, or a question with relevance for the interviewees. The session can be organized, for example, by inviting people with similar experiences and roles, or people with differing backgrounds but a common task. A strength of focus groups is that the different perspectives of those taking part and their experiences can be brought up for discussion and be reflected on by the group in a process where meaning is created. The researcher acts as discussion leader, giving everybody the equal right to speak and creating an atmosphere of trust and openness. The session can be taped or video recorded. Several books are available on how to stage focus groups for different purposes; see, for example, Barbour and Kitzinger (1999).

Example

Two types of focus groups were used. In the first case, a study of four municipalities, professionals working with comprehensive planning in the same municipality took part together and discussed how they work with environmental issues in planning. The discussion focused on both their actual work and possible alternative ways to perform the planning process to better integrate environmental considerations. The importance of communication and the partly stereotypical views they have of their respective competences and their differing assumptions on the value of planning were brought up by the participants during the half-day the discussion took place. In the second case, focus groups were performed with planners, environmental professionals and politicians, one group at a time, all from different municipalities. Here the
overarching theme was sustainable development in planning and their own role in this work. Differences in organizational and geographical conditions were discussed. The discussions also allowed reflections on their own role in relation to other professions or groups, defining their own area of skills. In both cases, the respective group understandings of planning as an activity per se were brought up, and the group was asked whether planning is the best arena for sustainable development work, showing a taken-for-granted view of the planners about what planning is, differing from the other groups. In these studies, the validation of the analysis was made during the focus group by asking questions and by giving the participants opportunity to individually comment on the written text summarising the results. In a later study (Asplund et al. 2010) a feedback seminar was used. In the first step focus groups were carried out separately with regional development competencies and officials working with environmental and social issues in the same regional organization. The next step was a gathered focus group session, where the initial results from the first round were presented and discussed among the participants. The aim was three-fold: validation of the material, a new layer of empirical material to be included in the analysis and, not least important, an arena for common reflection and further discussion of the existing organization and content of the work.

**Observations**

Observations can be made in different ways, being directed to a specific situation in time or a single, well-defined phenomenon, comprehending a wider context or following a process over time. Participant observations, ranging from taking part in a few meetings to following a process in depth over long time, can be used to closer follow acting and interacting. Here the context and the preconditions given can be observed and connected to actions and choices. Czarniawska (2007) uses the term shadowing to emphasise that today field studies need to be done “on the move” due to the increased mobility and geographical and social fragmentation of social life. As the researcher is present on site, it could lead to adjustments from the actors, but in general this is not a problem. Nevertheless, there is a vast literature on these issues, not least on the frame of action research. An example with connection to pedagogic-ethnography is Westlander (2006).

**Processing data**

The analytical stage is an ongoing process in parallel with the empirical work. In general it includes thematic ordering of the collected material, whether it is text, transcribed interviews or filmed meetings. By repeatedly reading and listening to the material, combined with notes from the actual occurrence, themes can be discerned and further processed. In the analysis, unexpected as well as repeated themes are of interest to capture. The research interest will guide the reading and thematic work. It could be beneficial to have more people working with the material in several steps. Interpretation of what is seen, and its meaning, will differ depending on their experience and expectations. The degree of intersubjectivity increases when more people are working with the material and when there is a clear account given of the interpretative routes taken, showing what choices were made and what alternative interpretative possibilities were considered (Gustavsson 1996). The aim of the interpretative work is to find the most well-founded and least contradictory interpretation in the material. There are no correct interpretations, but that does not mean that all interpretations are possible. Interpretations can
also be better or worse in understanding the phenomenon in question. In the interpretative work, the researcher makes possible interpretations of the object studied, and the number of interpretations is limited by such factors as the way the question is formulated (what is studied) and likelihood, for instance, of physical conditions.

The role of the researcher

The researcher needs a will and ability to critically reflect reality, and to dare to see other aspects of it. An open attitude is required to see other aspects than the expected. There is a strong emphasis on the importance of shifting between different perspectives, and raising the level of awareness about the perspective and understanding the researcher is actually working from (Qvarsell 1996). The critical reflection also includes openness and flexibility, and a certain amount of creativity to be able to see different aspects of the studied phenomena and the context. The role of being someone from “outside” and to some extent neutral in relation to the studied process and situation is in itself helpful for creating mental room for reflection for the ones studied.

The researcher also needs a will and ability to listen to what is said and what is not said. The researcher is intrinsically linked to those being studied. The results can never be separated from the researcher, who is involved and takes part in the process the entire time.

The researcher’s own experience also constitutes an interpretative framework. Without this, interpretation is not possible; this understanding has also led the researcher to the questions and aims for the research. The researcher’s own experience makes it possible to understand the observed (Gustavsson 1996). It can thus be an advantage if the researcher has personal experience of the phenomena studied, as it makes it easier to “read” situations. This means also a use of language in line with the ones taking part in the study, helping to understand what happens but also to create trust and make oneself understood. A risk might be that the researcher has the same assumptions as the ones in the study and thereby misses phenomena that a person with other references would see. But in general the familiarity with the area brings more benefits than pitfalls.

It thus becomes central to articulate one’s own perspective and knowledge interest, when reporting results, to make it clear from what point of view the research is performed. During the research process it is furthermore essential to reflect upon one’s own reactions and assumptions that might bias the interpretations. Asplund (1983) advocates a method in which researchers confronting a phenomenon ask themselves the question “Why then?” in order to challenge what is taken for granted. In this way, the researcher’s perspectives might almost certainly change and develop during a study, which also can be reflected on in relation to the results.

The interaction between research and practice

In the approach, the ones studied are not seen as objects to be observed and mapped. Instead they are perceived as subjects and co-researchers (Skantze & Asplund 1999). This is in line with the assumption that humans are intentional and create meaning when acting and interacting with others. Hereby the research process itself brings direct value to practice by being a base for reflection over practice – its routines, values, aims and so on. Methods such as interviews and focus groups are essential in this process as they can allow the practitioner and researcher to interact in a co-production of meaning and understanding. The interpretations and translations
the researcher contributes in the research process offer the practitioner a way to see his or her own practice from outside and reflect more deeply.

Accordingly, the research does not give direct instruction to practice/practitioners about how to act, change or so forth. Instead an intermediate space is needed, where a dialogue between practice and research can take place. The function of research is to show alternative stories and descriptions of practice. When someone demonstrates another way of seeing things, it becomes possible to see it for oneself, at least when the person providing the account is seen as trustworthy. The decisions of what action to take need to be taken in the actual practice, based on context, conditions and expertise at hand. In short, the practitioners are experts in their field and thereby the ones to act. The researchers can provide a chance for reflection and mutual learning processes to take place.

**What we can learn about planning practice with a pedagogic-ethnographic approach**

The pedagogic–ethnographic approach is suitable if we aim to grasp experiences and how people involved in the planning process make interpretations of the situations they face, how they understand their own and others’ roles in the process, how problems are formulated from different points of view and so on – that is, how the ones involved shape meaning in the process. It can be used for understanding groups as well as individuals. We can also discuss the context and preconditions of organizations, cultures, traditions, power relations and so forth.

When researching professional roles as well as processes in planning practice, the researcher can be seen as a “planning therapist” when the researcher is asking about work-life and thereby creating an incentive for reflection and room for talking about what professionals do, which is something that most professionals rarely have time for. The researcher’s presence legitimizes reflecting on one’s own work situations, routines, methods, perspectives and values.

With this approach we will not get any linear explanations that predict coming events and the probability of a certain cause-effect relation. Instead we gain an in-depth understanding of context and practices, which can function as a base for reflection as well as an example for understanding what happens in planning practice.

**Notes**

1. The chapter is mainly built on Håkansson (2005); it is summarised in English in Håkansson (2006).
2. A phenomenon is used to label the occurrences studied and can include facts, events, experiences and so forth.
3. Semiotics, “the study of signs”. Signs can be as well physical as social, including, for example, language, art, myths and solid artefacts, such as buildings. The roots go back to several disciplines, such as culture studies (Roland Barthes), linguistics (Ferdinand de Saussure), anthropology (Claude Levi–Strauss) and psychoanalysis (Jacques Lacan).
4. Pragmatism deals with the linking of practice and theory. The roots go back to the 1870s in the US, with writers such as Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead. For example, Forester (1999) and Healey (1997) have discussed the relation of pragmatism to planning theory.
5. Ethnography encompasses the study of human societies, through field studies where the researcher usually lives with the ones studied for a longer period. A pioneer is Margaret Mead, with studies in the 1920s.
6. Social anthropology is the study of social behaviour, social organization and social life from a holistic perspective, usually with field studies. SA shares its background and many features with ethnography. A pioneer in both is Bronislaw Malinowski. Other central names are Claude-Levi Strauss and Clifford Geertz.
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7  This is anyhow not exclusive for studies in this approach or studies of social phenomena. It is, for example, in line with descriptions of the work at the Cern laboratory with large experiments in physics. Most of the time is spent on observing activities in the accelerator, looking for the unexpected. When deviations are observed, a calculation is made if it is within the current theoretical framework or if adjustments are to be considered.
8  Here practice is used for the studied practices – for example, planning – but research in itself is of course also a practice.
9  Books on discourse analysis can be found from different disciplines and with diverse objectives and ways of doing the analysis. Related to planning, MacCallum (2009) gives an introduction to critical discourse analysis and how it can be used in the practice of participatory planning.
10  Introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The approach includes generating knowledge by observations, not starting with existing theoretical models and literature.
11  Intersubjectivity means here an agreement on the meaning, in accordance with several people's understanding of the material, which in turn increases the quality of the result.
12  Here it is understood as the interventions by the researcher into the situation of planning, making the ones involved reflect on their actions. Gunder and Hillier (2007) instead see planning in itself as a form of therapeutics.

References


