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CHAPTER 1

Direct Observation

Kari De Pryck and Svenja Rauch[1]

Anthropologists suggest examining written material issued by or negotiated within international organizations (IOs) as "assemblages of discourses and practices, following their trajectories and histories" (Müller 2013: 8). Observation of multilateral negotiation processes, international conferences, and summits reveals how international agreements are being crafted and allows exploring the complex settings in which these processes take place. The method thus provides unique insights into the dynamics of multilateralism, generating a wealth of research data. While scholars tend to distinguish between direct (passive) and participant (active) observation, we focus in this chapter on the former (see chapter 2—*Participant Observation*).

What?

Participant and direct observation share many advantages and challenges, yet there is a fine line between the two methods: direct observers closely watch the plot unfolding from their seats in the audience or "behind the screen," whereas participant observers actively contribute to shaping the process. Direct observers may also use techniques such as "shadowing" by following the everyday life of actors (Czarniawska 2007). While participant observers have specific tasks to perform and responsibilities to assume, direct observers do not attempt to influence the international processes that they are studying and focus primarily on their research interests.

1. The views expressed herein are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

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Various authors highlight the contribution of ethnographic methods to the study of IOs. Focusing on the World Conservation Congress, MacDonald, for example, explores the role of meetings in negotiating organizational order. Kamau, Chasek, and O'Connor (2018) also highlight the "cast of characters" of and the "use of process and drama" in international negotiations. Similarly, Müller's fieldwork at the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (2011) examines the role of the organization in the construction of its discourse on agricultural biotechnology. The direct observation of international deliberations is thus critical "to witness meaning as it is being made, challenged, transformed and translated" (2010: 259). These studies share the ambition to reveal the practices, interactions, relationships, and networks thereof that underpin the work of IOs as well as the reports, decisions, agreements, and ultimately the norms that they produce. Anthropologists have "explored the headquarters of [international] organizations, analyzed the mechanisms of governance in daily practice, and followed the construction of an institutional identity in images and language" (Müller 2013: 4). Observing the "culture of negotiation" and consensus formation within IOs, with each of them constituting a "microcosmos" in its own right, allows us to reveal the interests and power dynamics that underpin these organizations (Abélès 2011: 20).

Direct observation, first, relates to *settings* (see box a—*Observing spatial practices*), i.e., the physical environment and the complex organizational culture in which international meetings take place. Different temporal and spatial dynamics can be observed, e.g., at the headquarters of IOs and in their regional or subregional hubs, or at international conferences that are hosted in different countries (Cragg and Mahony 2014; Worrall 2021; Verlin 2021). Second, direct observation allows identifying and tracking the main *actors* in the negotiation processes as they unfold. Different key players may determine the outcome of the negotiations at different stages, thereby gradually shaping their outcome. Weiss et al. (2009: 1) point to the interactions of three main groups of actors within the United Nations: member state representatives, international civil servants, and the "third UN" encompassing civil society organizations, academia, and other nongovernmental stakeholder groups. Third, and most importantly, direct observation generates data on the *practices* within an organization that are shaped through the interactions between different actors and their interests, and which are embedded in both the physical and cultural settings of the meeting venues as well as the overall geopolitical context.

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Why?

Müller highlights that organizational anthropologists "most of the time, [. . .] did not find their most precious materials in the official transcripts of sessions. They gleaned them in chance encounters [. . .], spontaneous interactions and by careful observation" (2013: 4). Direct observation thus allows closely watching how international processes unfold, examining the "give and take" of negotiations, rather than merely analyzing their outcomes. Complementing text-based analysis, direct observation can make "written documents speak by following the production of highly formalized and often opaque texts" (Müller 2013: 4). Such dynamics can hardly be accessed remotely and include observations on how negotiators and bureaucrats "work" the room, how actors interact both in different types of sessions—plenaries, breakout sessions, coordination meetings, side events, and encounters in the hallways. Being a passive observer of the process instead of an active participant allows us to identify the dynamics that shape a given text or decision, without having to acknowledge one's role in its production.

While intuitive observations may seem trivial, they support the analytical research work in capturing the atmosphere in the room, e.g., increasing political pressure during late night sessions and toward the end of the meeting. The various types of observation—during formal meetings and "floating observations" outside the negotiation room—reveal practices and rules within IOs and therefore prove valuable to put actors' behavior into perspective and to contextualize certain findings. Observing these "micro-social processes" generates valuable data on the "workings, networks, mechanisms of power and symbolic relations" and the "logics that guide [. . .] interactions" (Müller 2013: 4) between individuals. Focusing on people and their interactions, as well as on the settings and the rules in which they are embedded, provides "original bodies of knowledge" (Kubik 2009: 42) on the transactions within IOs and reveals the role of the "human" and "non-human" factors in multilateral entities.

Direct observation further facilitates the identification of potential interview partners. While a list of interviewees may have been established before the start of the observation period, a physical presence provides the opportunity to reconsider and extend the list of actors who appear to play an active role in the negotiations. The findings gathered through direct observation may also prove critical to complement interview data and contrast the perceptions that different actors may share about a given situation.

Lastly, direct observation allows benefiting from opportunities that may arise

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over the course of the observation period, such as other meetings being held back-to-back with the conference that the researcher has set out to study and/or linkages with multilateral processes or debates taking place in other fora. Being open to "ethnographic surprises" (Bayard de Volo 2009) and ready to embrace them can further shape the research project as data is being collected.

How?

Several elements should be considered when preparing for direct observation. First, depending on the research topic, the researcher needs to identify the most relevant site to observe: the assembly of an IO's member states? Its secretariat? A specific program or department? A field mission? An international summit? This question illustrates the "multi-sitedness" (Marcus 1995) of the international fieldwork, in that practices are rarely restricted to single situations but always extend to a multiplicity of sites (geographical, temporal, and social).

Second, researchers often do not choose the fieldwork, but the fieldwork chooses them. Because the timing is not always right and because financial constraints and language barriers come into play, the choice of the fieldwork is often contingent on finding the right occasion. Access can be obtained through personal contact with an insider and/or through an official request. It can be unlimited or conditioned. Conditions may take various forms: access can be limited in time and space (e.g., bound to specific meetings and rooms) and the data collection and communication can be subject to internal review and approval. While individual research (e.g., pursued in the context of a doctoral project) may slip through the net, collective projects are often bound to the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding. One should thus keep in mind that the process of getting access is time consuming and should be anticipated.

Third, new questions arise during fieldwork because IOs and summits are "sprawling" phenomena. Various meetings and conferences generally take place at the same time, forcing the researcher to select and prioritize certain venues over others (sometimes based on gut feeling). For instance, when attending an international summit, negotiations take place in plenaries and parallel sessions and sometimes even in the corridors and during lunches. Side events have also become increasingly interesting moments of deliberation. It thus often takes time to get accustomed to the configuration of international institutions and to identify the most relevant sites of observation.

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Fourth, the process of data collection/generation also requires reflection. Researchers generally use note-taking devices (e.g., a notebook or a computer) to "write as much of what transpires as possible" (Fine 2015: 533). Direct observation is a learning process through which the data intuitively reveals the most important (and sometimes unexpected) issues. Researchers may want to take notes and pictures of the material arrangements of the conference, the procedures guiding the unfolding of the event, the motivations that lead actors to agree or disagree, and the comments gleaned during breaks and the researcher's own impressions of the process. While it can be relevant to write down verbatims, the speed through which deliberations generally occur makes it difficult to be exhaustive. When discussions extend through the night, the concentration of the researcher also rapidly decreases, and breaks are required. Direct observation thus remains an experience of learning by doing, which shapes the questions that researchers seek to answer. Reflecting on the researcher's own role in IOs is critical in this regard.

What Challenges?

A few challenges have already been mentioned: the choice of the site, the conditions of access, and the selection of the important issues to record. We can add another three, pertaining to the analysis of the data gathered through observation.

First, because direct observation produces data about activities that usually take place behind closed doors (and sometimes even in secret settings), researchers must deal carefully with data collection and disclosure. In this context, IOs and universities increasingly ask researchers to provide information on data protection, to ensure that the identity of the individuals that are included in their studies will not be displayed without their consent. When investigating multilateral negotiations, researchers must also carefully treat any information that could impede on the process. A technique that is commonly used to circumvent these challenges is to complement findings from direct observation with other data, including interviews, personal accounts (such as biographies and books), official documents, and meeting records and webcasts (see part 2—*Interviewing*, and chapter 20—*Interviews and Observations*).[2] When working on global environmental negotiations, for instance, a particularly relevant source of information are the reports

2. http://webtv.un.org/ (accessed July 31, 2020).

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of the Earth Negotiations Bulletin, produced by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD).[3] IISD releases daily or weekly summaries of major multilateral negotiations on the environment and on sustainable development, providing relatively neutral records on the ongoing deliberations.

Second, direct observation is often criticized for being biased by the researcher's subjectivities and for providing an incomplete picture due to the wide range of factors to examine. While these critiques should not be a reason to discard this method—all kinds of knowledge are "situated"—the robustness of the findings can be increased by either complementing direct observation with other methods or by conducting collaborative event ethnography (CEE). CEE is an increasingly popular method that involves a group of researchers in the ethnographic coverage of an international event. By working collaboratively as a group, researchers can "better cover the multiple sites at, and thus make better sense of, a meeting" (Brosius and Campbell 2010: 247). Concretely, this means collaborating to cover events, share observations, and think through emerging questions and conclusions. CEE has for instance been used to cover "transnational mega-events" such as the Fourth World Conservation Congress in Barcelona in 2008 (Brosius and Campbell 2010) or the Twenty-First Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Climate Change in Paris in 2015 (Aykut et al. 2017).

Third, a last challenge pertains to the personal relationships that may develop between researchers and actors in the field. While proximity can be informative (one often learns more by listening to actors informally commenting about their work), it can also affect the research process. For instance, Bourrier (2017), in her work on the World Health Organization's response to the H1N1 and Ebola crises, recognized that she underestimated interviewees' emphasis on intraorganizational struggles to protect them and safeguard her access to the organization.

To Go Further

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