

Call for Panels  
NIG Annual Work Conference 2017

**Ethnography in Public Administration**

**Panel chairs:** Thomas Schillemans, Merlijn van Hulst, Olga Verschuren, Lianne Visser

The NIG Panel Ethnography in Public Administration aims to give center stage to the broad scope and added value of ethnographic research in public administration. Although still a minority, ethnographic research seems to be gaining ground in the discipline. In particular, young researchers increasingly choose an in-depth, qualitative ethnographic approach to understand the administrative, organizational, and social world.

Experiencing the field of study first hand, talking to actors, shadowing them, and/or observing their interactions, ethnographers move beyond the obvious to explore the world of meaning and investigate the implicit and unspoken. The particular sensitivity and combination of methods ethnographers adopt, can provide rich insights into (administrative) life. Ethnographers develop a keen eye for the extra-ordinary in the ordinary, for what is stable and what is moving. They aim at deciphering an understanding that is embedded in the social, cultural, and/or temporal context of the phenomena studied.

Ethnographers in public administration study the different levels of administrative life, focusing either on representatives, public managers, policy makers, street-level workers, citizens on the receiving end, or the interactions between them (Yanow 1996; van Hulst 2008; Rhodes 2011). Research focuses on daily practices of actors in the field or on particular processes, typically zooming in on the sense-making, framing or storytelling they engage in.

There are many different ways of conducting fieldwork, analyzing empirical data, and presenting findings (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea 2013). Even if some ethnographers in public administration still conduct fieldwork at one site over a long period, the practices of doing fieldwork have also been innovated. Ethnographic fieldwork offers the possibility to both produce trustworthy accounts of what happens in practice and contribute to actionable knowledge, for both scholars and practitioners.

Ethnographic public administration is exiting, relevant, and appreciated. Yet, too often it occurs in a vacuum. There is a need to reflect, to exchange, to inspire, and to learn from each other. This new panel seeks to bring together ethnographic researchers in the field with the aim to enhance the ethnographic practice and strengthen its place in the discipline. The panel welcomes the variety and wide scope of ethnographic research in public administration, including the different methods, “light” and “heavy” versions of ethnography, fairly pragmatic insights and more theoretic learnings, and on the wide range of topics. We invite both methodological papers and empirical papers with an ethnographic or ethnographically inspired approach, signaling the added value of such an outlook when studying phenomena in public administration.

The panel assumes an overarching perspective in relation to NIG's four subthemes of Multi-level governance and Europe, Multi-actor governance in complexity, Political institutions and democracy, and Public Management. That is, papers can be related to either of the subthemes and are linked by their ethnographic approach.

### References

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