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# Studying Diplomatic Practices Through The Lens Of Direct Observation

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## Abstract

In the discussed case, the author explains his chosen method of direct observation for examining the practices of French diplomats. Influenced by the Practice Theory, the author is convinced that International Relations scholars have to undertake more ethnographic fieldwork for the analysis of foreign policy and international relations. This case study explains how the scholar obtained access to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, how he worked inside the institution, and the kind of material he has been able to collect during his observation.

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## Learning Outcomes

By the end of this case, students should be able to

- Study the daily practices of foreign policy agents to understand the structure of international relations
  - Study international relations not only as outcomes but as processes and relations
  - Study the interpretative approach of social sciences driven by qualitative methods
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## Practice Theory and Diplomacy

Diplomatic studies owe a significant part of their renewal of the early 2000s to the contribution made by sociology and anthropology to the study of international relations. In an article published in 2002, the Norwegian scholar, Iver B. Neumann, invited theorists of international relations to lessen the abstract analyses written on sovereignty, norms, and power, and rather concentrate upon the practices of agents as well as discourses on the practices (Neumann, 2002). Ten years later, the publication of Neumann's (2012) book *At Home With Diplomats: Inside a European Foreign Ministry* contributed to restore the practices of diplomats in the understanding of International Relations. On the basis of an ethnographic work inside the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Neumann asked the crucial question: How do daily and routinized diplomatic practices affect the position of the State in international relations and also contribute, in the vein of the English School of International Relations, to the emergence of an international society?

Neumann's plea for a new sociology of diplomatic practices took place in the larger movement in social sciences, which aimed to restore the social practices of agents. Authors, such as Neumann (2002, 2012), Adler Nissen (2015), and Pouliot and Cornut (2015), assumed that understanding structural elements of international relations (as institutions, norms, and global order) requires tracing in detail the methodology of how agents develop practices. Institutions in particular can never be reduced to *ex nihilo* creations that exist just to facilitate collective action or to reduce transaction costs, as neorealist scholars in International Relations often think. Institutions are a result of historical processes, which always engage specific agents.

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With regard to method, Practice Theory invites the scholar in International Relations to become an ethnographer who observes the practices of agents in their daily environment through qualitative work and interprets the social meaning of these practices, which include discourses. Ontologically, Practice Theory considers that the scholar can discover causality in social sciences only through observation followed by interpretation of the agents' practices.

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## Getting Access to the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs

In the vein of Practice Theory, I decided to launch a research project on the practices of French diplomats in 2013. My main objective was to understand how the French State behaves as a diplomatic actor in observing the practices of French diplomats at work. How does one acquire empirical data for such a research? An option is to conduct semi-structured interviews. I have had a long experience of interviewing French higher civil servants for previously authored books. I would have employed this approach again for the analysis of practices of French diplomats, but I realized that there existed a necessity of undertaking some direct observation within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Quai d'Orsay. How does one obtain permission? I was hesitant regarding the choice of the best strategy for getting access to the ministry. One of the possibilities was to contact the highest civil servant of the ministry, the Secretary General. But would he accept to support the intrusion of a scholar in the daily life of colleagues that he is supposed to protect? The other possibility was to directly ask the Minister of Foreign Affairs himself, Laurent Fabius, who had been appointed a year ago and held no actual experience of the Quai d'Orsay when he joined. A quick positive answer was received: Minister Fabius accepted my request to observe meetings in the ministry for the year 2014. The details of my enrollment had to be discussed and arranged with the Head of the Private Office. In an administration governed by a strict principle of hierarchy, a "yes" from the minister and his Private Office meant in principle that bureaucrats (the career diplomats) would not oppose. But as soon as I got the "green light" from Minister Fabius, I asked the Secretary General of the Ministry for an appointment. For the research to proceed, I thought it was very important for career diplomats to not consider this as a bypass by an intrusive professor who was recommended by the higher political authority. I explained my project to the Secretary General in detail insisting upon the fact that my objective was to write an evidently different book on Quai d'Orsay from the ones journalists have published so far. My book was to be driven by the methods of social science and I believe such messages to be of extreme importance for building trust with the career diplomats who are not accustomed to be transformed into research objects. I also provided him with the affirmation that everything observed shall be used for the book, but agents would never be quoted by their names.

Another reason I was able to obtain access to the Quai d'Orsay was because I was not a complete stranger to the French diplomats. Having 20 years' worth of regular publications on French foreign and European policies (including columns in the newspapers), personal contacts with ambassadors, and institutional affiliation to Sciences Po proved to be huge impetus in helping me get access. Being known and trusted by the State administration you want to study is crucial for the access of an academic ethnographer. It makes often the work of senior academics easier than junior colleagues.

## Which Types of Meetings to Observe?

We agreed with the Head of the Private Office that I would conduct my inquiry from January 2014 to August 2014. Our negotiations allowed me to have access to three types of meetings in the central administration of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs during this period.

- The meetings of the Private Office, where the advisors of the minister discuss the most sensitive issues on the agenda of French foreign policy. It is in these meetings that I heard the most confidential stories, for instance, how to deal with the opposition to Bashar El Assad's regime in Syria and whether France should sell or not to Russia the two helicopter carriers that were ordered by President Vladimir Putin during the Sarkozy's Presidency. I could observe and take notes on all the arguments in favor and against the sale that ended with a decision to cancel the contract.
- The meetings of the Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay with the directors, which take place every day at 9:00 a.m. in the office of the Secretary General. The objective of this daily meeting is to make sure that all the high-ranking diplomats of the ministry agree on what will be communicated by the Spokesperson outside the ministry.
- The Conference of Ambassadors which takes place every year during the last days of the month of August. In the 2014 meeting, I got the permission to follow all the debates (including internal seminars), and not only the plenary sessions where external guests (think tankers, journalists, businessmen) are invited to follow open speeches.

After observing 30 hr of meetings inside the central administration, I asked the Head of the Private Office for the opportunity to do also fieldwork in French embassies abroad, one in Europe and one outside Europe. I got the permission to spend 1 week in the French Embassy in Poland (Warsaw) in June 2015 and 1 week in the French Embassy in Senegal (Dakar) in December 2015. In both cases, the Ambassadors and the Heads of Chancery accepted to involve me in all their internal meetings. I also got the permission to organize interviews with the senior civil servants of the embassies, except the representatives of the French intelligence services (Direction Générale des Services Extérieurs, DGSE) who were not allowed to speak with me. DGSE people attend the embassy meetings but, contrary to their other colleagues around the table, they never mention anything about their work. It remains for the ethnographer a question mark about the role of intelligence service agents based in embassies. What are they really doing? French diplomats often declare that DGSE people are there to bridge the link between their headquarters in Paris and the intelligence services in the country of residence. To summarize it shortly: Spies speak to spies and that's it!

In *Ethnographie du Quai d'Orsay. Les pratiques des diplomates français*, published in January 2017, I decided to avoid the term "participatory observation" to describe my research method (Lequesne, 2017). I spoke about "direct observation," because I decided to adopt a low profile which consisted of me never taking part in any of the debates in the meetings I attended, both in Paris and embassies abroad. I would just sit in the room, observe, and take notes. We agreed with the chairperson that he or she would very briefly introduce

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me with a banal sentence, such as “Welcome our guest, Professor Christian Lequesne from Sciences Po, who will share our meeting today.” But my silence was strategic. It was necessary to create an atmosphere wherein the participants would be able to largely overlook my presence. For the same reason, I also decided to adopt their dress code: a dark suit with a blue or white shirt and a tie. To minimize the impact of his or her presence in an institution, the ethnographer must look alike the mainstream and never appear an “exotic bird.” Although it was often difficult for me not to participate in the debates on topics I was well versed in as a scholar. Several times, I was tempted to intervene, especially in small format meetings taking place in embassies. But I resisted. If the ethnographer takes part to the game he is observing, there is a huge risk of getting biased findings.

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## Taking Notes About What?

During my fieldwork, I not only took notes of the facts presented in the meetings but also a lot of my written notes concern my own interpretation of the context and atmosphere. The main value added of direct observation, compared with semi-structured interviews, is the privilege to see agents moving in their material environment. Diplomacy, as any social activity, takes place in specific sites: meeting rooms of the ministry, the office of the Secretary General of the ministry, the office of the ambassador, and so on. When the scholar has the possibility to see how the diplomats are moving in their daily sites, he immediately gets a chance to better understand the social meanings of their practices. I will render two examples to illustrate this remark.

The first example has to do with the bureaucratic power existing within the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. When I attended the 9 o'clock meeting in the Secretary General's Office, I was able to observe how people were sitting around the table. In the middle was seated the Secretary General of the ministry. Next to him were the Political Director, the European Union (EU) Director, and the Director for Northern Africa and Middle East. The other directors had more peripheral seats. This placement was not by chance but reflected a particular scale of power inside the Quai d'Orsay. It helped the ethnographer to understand which foreign policy issue provides more bureaucratic power inside the institution.

My second example concerns bureaucratic power in an embassy. During a meeting in Warsaw, the Head of the Nuclear Section, an engineer from the French *Commissariat à l'Energie Atomique* (CEA), took the floor. He started explaining in detail the technical specificities of the nuclear technologies that the French state-owned company AREVA wanted to sell to the Polish government. After 10 minutes of statement, the Head of Chancery—a career diplomat—interrupted his colleague and declared: “But all these details are not the issue. Our interest is to sell the French nuclear technology to the Poles. What are the political implications of what you are describing?” The CEA engineer was destabilized and upset. In such a situation, the ethnographer immediately understands that, in French embassies, the added value of career diplomats on their colleagues from other ministries consists in mastering the language of politics.

All these elements can only be understood if the scholar is present at the sites where diplomats are actually practicing diplomacy.

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It is also important for the scholar not to limit his or her observation to the formal meetings he or she is invited to attend. Pre-meetings in corridors always make for some noteworthy conversations, because agents are not in representation and speak without restriction. Again, I will take two examples:

First example: Before the 9 o'clock meeting with the Secretary General of the ministry, all directors are waiting in an antechamber where armchairs, sofas, and newspapers are available. The atmosphere was friendly and informal. As a guest, I had to respect the waiting ritual, which gave me the possibility to have informal conversations with the directors. One morning, I saw a director browsing each page of the daily newspaper *Le Figaro* as he was looking for something specific. It was in March 2014, at the peak of the crisis with Russia about Ukraine. I decided to engage in the conversation humor: "What is the free press telling us about the great French diplomacy today?" The director looked at me and declared: "I had some conversations off with *Le Figaro* yesterday and I try to find if they have reproduced what I told them." In a minute, I got a concrete example about how Quai d'Orsay's directors are undertaking public diplomacy with respect to the French press. According to the ministerial procedures, only the Quai d'Orsay's Spokesperson can have direct contacts with journalists, but in reality, directors have their profoundly connected networks and use them to support their positions.

Second example: It concerns the relationships between the French career diplomats and the French President of the Republic. Compared with most EU heads of state and government, the French President keeps huge powers under the Fifth Republic in the control of foreign policy. He also appoints ambassadors. French diplomats spend their career making sure that their practices do not hurt the President of the Republic and his direct advisors. It is a tradition during the yearly Ambassadors' Meeting that the President invites all ambassadors to attend a speech on the priorities of the French foreign policy at the Elysée Palace, followed by a cocktail. In 2014, I observed that invitations were distributed to each ambassador a day before President Hollande delivered his speech. One ambassador did not get his invitation. He was in complete panic and asked a junior agent of the Quai d'Orsay: "Does it mean something? Am I still ambassador?" The agent checked his computer and told him: "Sorry Sir, you are on the list and this is just a mistake!" A huge sigh of relief could be heard. During those 5 minutes of panic, the French ambassador thought that he must have done something wrong from the viewpoint of the Elysée Palace and maybe he was sacked. This episode prominently demonstrated to the ethnographer the institution to whom the political power belongs to in France when diplomacy is concerned.

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## How to Use the Material?

The deal I had with the Head of the Private Office was that I could use all material coming from my observation as long as I did not mention the names of the people. People knew that I was observing them from the perspective of writing a book. Contrary to Canada and other countries, French universities have no specific code of ethics for the conduct and use of interviews and participatory observation. I consider that as a

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mistake. In the absence of a code of ethics, the ethnographer, who reaches the stage of writing, must mobilize his or her common sense to make sure that nobody ends up being in a precarious situation after the book is published. In my research, I not only decided to not mention the names of diplomats I observed but also to be cautious about mentioning some specific facts. Coming back to a previous example, I did not mention explicitly in the book which policy issue the director was looking for in the newspaper *Le Figaro*. If I did it, it could have revealed the name of the director. The footnotes in the book are deliberately simple: "Direct participation Quai d'Orsay, followed by a date." I did not get any complaint from the Quai d'Orsay when the book was published. One diplomat even told me, "Colleagues and I liked the way you kept your sources anonymous." I must admit that it was a permanent juggling.

I never asked permission in advance to write such paragraph or sentence, except in one case. I was analyzing the misfortune of a university professor who tried to become a career diplomat and did not succeed, because the career diplomats did not let him enter the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The case is rather unique and well known among specialists of the French diplomacy. For this reason, I decided to send an email asking the person if the paragraph I wrote about him was not offensive. Maybe I wanted to protect myself in my own milieu, academia. My colleague's reply came in the comment: "what you are writing is absolutely correct regarding the facts!" It meant that he did not necessarily share my interpretation of these facts, but this remains the author's responsibility.

Such respect for the specifications agreed before the start of the research is crucial for any ethnographer who gets the permission to investigate an institution from inside. The scholar must never forget that the institution trusts him or her and that he or she ought not to betray this trust. However, the ethnographer must never practice deference and self-censorship. The objective is neither to make an apology of the institution the ethnographer analyzes nor to denigrate it. The ethnographer's work consists of delivering his or her "truth" based on solid empirical evidence and a methodology which is explicit in nature.

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## Conclusion

I attempted to summarize in this case study the method I used in a recent inquiry to understand the behavior of the French State in diplomacy (the macro level) through the practice of French diplomats (the micro level). There is a huge space to pursue observation of diplomatic practices to understand diplomacy and more generally international relations, despite the obstacle of having access to institutions. Numerous works referring to Practice Theory limit themselves to interviews from outside the institutions, as Samuel Faure and I wrote in a comment of Pouliot's work published in 2018 in the Canadian journal *Etudes Internationales* (Faure & Lequesne, 2017). Direct observation must be used more to understand the structure of diplomacy. But penetrating institutions still ruled by the principle of secrecy remains a challenge for the scholar.

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## Exercises and Discussion Questions



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1. What material can you get from direct observation that you cannot get with semi-structured interviews?
  2. Which kind of notes do you have to take when you are observing meetings between actors?
  3. What does it mean catching the social meaning of the practices you are observing?
  4. Why shall the ethnographer keep a distance from the actors during direct observation? Which traps shall be avoided?
  5. How to be successful in getting access to institutions you want to observe?
  6. What kind of agreement (formal or informal) does the scholar have to establish with the institution he or she is studying?
  7. How to restore the material you have observed in a manuscript?
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## Further Reading

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