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Moving Towards Spatially Conscious Methods for Studying Geographically Dispersed People and Institutions

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Thinking With Transnational Institutional Ethnography: Moving Towards Spatially Conscious Methods for Studying Geographically Dispersed People and Institutions

Rachel Fishberg[1]

Abstract

Institutional ethnography (IE) is a valuable ontological approach for investigating the coordination of social relations, both locally and trans-locally. However, much of the work utilizing IE remains within the confines of a local or national empirical field. This means there are limited accounts of IE exploring geographically dispersed institutions that cross borders and span regions. This paper makes the case for critically thinking and building on Transnational Institutional Ethnography (TIE). In it, I argue that TIE requires adapting the methodological toolbox of IE to deal with expanded geographic space and diverse bodily locations. By drawing on empirical work exploring scholarly participation in the European Union Framework Programs for research, tensions are illustrated that surfaced while working with TIE. In this discussion, I examine the ways in which interpreting an empirical field as a transnational institution, constituted of geographically dispersed people and organizations, caused a re-examination of the methods in IE to acknowledge institutional experiences shaped by diverse material surroundings and differing geopolitical locations. The paper argues that working with spatially conscious methods in TIE contributes positively to both fieldwork and analysis.

Keywords

transnational institutional ethnography, epistemic status of nations, standpoint, text, interview, European Union research, qualitative methods

Introduction

Institutional Ethnography (IE) as an ontological point of departure is useful for exploring how individuals' 'ways of knowing and doing' are shaped within politico-bureaucratic systems of organization and administration. The approach was formulated by sociologist Dorothy Smith, with an explicit reliance on feminist standpoint epistemology as a means to ask questions from the perspectives and concerns of people who are located distinctively in institutional processes. IE and its associated methodological toolbox are intended to ground the inquiry in everyday practices with the aim of exploring the local actualities of daily work, and how it becomes coordinated by trans local processes (Smith, 2005).

Although a growing body of work utilizing IE continually adapts and transforms in concert with emerging methodological and epistemological conversations, the approach has been primarily used to study institutions which are locally or nationally concentrated, employing national borders as intuitive boundaries to the field of inquiry. During the 2020

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Institutional Ethnography business meeting for the Society of Social Problems at Work, Dorothy Smith, made a rallying appeal to practitioners of IE, saying "We do not lack the capacity in Institutional Ethnography to explore aspects of global organization as it is being brought into being by actual peoples work […] we are caught up in aspects of organization that are international and we don't fully understand how they are put together, how they enter into our lives and how they shape them […] We can discover aspects of how people organize [globally], and we should not hold back" (Edlinguist Solutions, 2020).

Smith was emphasizing that the ontological approach of IE has the built-in potential for investigating transnational ruling relations, although many examples tend not to articulate this scope. In principle, it was an invitation to consider leaning into IE as a valuable approach for exploring how large-scale international and global processes can organize and be organized by the everyday work of people.

In this article I offer an illustrative acknowledgment of Smith's invitation to think differently with and about IE. In it, I advocate for IE as a point of departure to conceptualize and study institutions which are neither physically centralized nor nationally bound. Subsequently, I promote building up and framing transnational institutional ethnography (TIE) as an expansion of a more commonly favored approach to IE that tendentially confines inquiries to the national scale.

The article is an opportunity to question if TIE is simply IE of an institution that is geographically dispersed, or if a geospatial shift to both an empirical field and the locations in which people are embedded require aspects of IE's methodological elements to be reconsidered. The contribution with this paper is thus twofold. Primarily, I offer an account of working with TIE as a tool for sense making in a complex geographically dispersed social landscape. Additionally, the article contributes to the theoretical and analytical discussion of TIE by using empirical material to show that spatially conscious methods for studying transnational institutions can lead to more nuanced and fruitful analytical dimensions during and after fieldwork.

The discussion takes shape in relation to multi-sited empirical research carried out over a 2-year period. During this time, I studied collaborative practices and the development of three large-scale transnational, and multidisciplinary social science projects funded under the 'European Framework Programs'. The programs, established in 1984 and more recently known as Horizon 2020 or currently Horizon Europe, are the European Commission's primary tool for science funding. I position the Framework Programs to be a transnational institution for knowledge production, considering each project and its corresponding consortium to provide a window into the multifaceted relations of institutional social coordination.

The paper is structured such that it first provides a brief overview of IE as a feminist epistemology and methodological approach. I discuss TIE as an extension of IE, building on existing IE work taking a global or transnational perspective and problematizing challenges that surface with this lens. Specifically, I question how practitioners of TIE can methodologically meet these challenges and how TIE can require more spatially conscious methods of inquiry. In what follows, I introduce the empirical research and the EU Framework Programs as a critical case of a transnational institution. I illustrate some central obstacles that surfaced while working with TIE and explore how developing pragmatic solutions contributed positively to both the fieldwork and analysis.

Institutional Ethnography

Developed by sociologist Dorothy Smith (1987, 1990, 2005, 2006), IE is best described as ethnography of complex institutionalized social relations, rather than ethnography of specific companies, organizations, or sectors. Smith established the approach as a feminist methodology organized around standpoint theory, an epistemology aligned with other contemporary feminist scholars at the time such as Sandra Harding (1991, 1992, 2008) and Nancy Hartsock (1998). Starting from a standpoint in IE means that ordinary daily activity becomes the basis for an investigation of social relations and forces that transcend and inform these activities; later the approach was sometimes referenced as doing 'sciences from below' (Devault, 2006; Harding, 2008).

In IE, grouping individuals together in a standpoint becomes a tool to understand how institutional order is 'put together' through a specific vantage point, rather than a tool for universalizing experiences. Analysing standpoint material specifically calls for the lack of privileging or valorizing informant knowledge, treating it as ultimately empirical. Informants are considered 'experts' on their daily activity and work practices, however their knowledge is explored not as a stable truth, but for its social constructions and embedded contradictions (Rankin, 2017a). In doing this, IE recognizes and takes seriously the real (not just theorized) social organization of people's lives by "the strange forms of power that are at once present and absent in the everyday" (Smith, 2005, p. 41). This means, an inquiry in IE is intended for making visible, de-naturalizing and, de-neutralizing taken-for-granted forms of social organization, hierarchies, and objectified structures.

Additionally, the concept of 'work' is important for understanding practices through the lens of a standpoint. Smith (2005, p. 152) gives a definition of work explaining, more than simply paid labor, work extends to anything intentionally done by people that takes time and effort, using any tools or means they have at their disposal. This generous concept of work gives ethnographers the means to acknowledge the many activities people do which cannot be quantified or recognized and are not formalized in institutionalized language.

Field-Making and Methods in Institutional Ethnography

As Coleman and von Hellermann (2011) emphasize, research fields are created, rather than naturally occurring. Opting for mapping the field as a function of the fieldwork itself means recognizing that people are continually 'sense-making' as they go along, the ethnographer included (Marcus, 2011). Dorothy Smith would likely agree, as neither she nor other practitioners of IE have conclusively defined the concept of an institution or delineated many institutional boundaries in their work—particularly none limiting an institution to a brick-and-mortar presence. Without an authoritative definition, an institution cannot become a priori portable or static object of inquiry. However, the concept of an institution in IE is not void of meaning. Institutions are considered to be merely bracketed off, well-framed, empirical heuristic tools that integrate complexes of organizations and discourses focused on function (Smith, 2005, p. 68).

The methods in IE are most effectively employed to do this 'field-making' through the triangulation of interviews, participation observations and textual analysis. Interviewing in many ways resembles that of other methods of inquiry in terms of gaining access, building rapport, narrowing down interests and focus, and active listening (Flick, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). However, specific to IE interviews, "the purpose is to reveal how the accounts, experiences and activity reported has become socially organized" (Lund, 2015, p. 87). For example, asking 'how did you learn that?' rather than 'Why did you do that?' gives insight into the 'ways of knowing and doing' for an institution and how these are instilled and naturalized. As Devault and McCoy (2006) note, "the process of IE is like grabbing a ball of string, finding a thread, and then pulling it out […] ethnographers know what they want to explain, but only step-by-step can they discover whom they need to interview or what texts and discourses they need to examine". This is to say, the process of finding participants to interview and speak to is also entangled with participating and observing in a space, continually unpacking, and discovering how it is socially organized.

In concert with interviews and participant observation, institutional ethnographers rely heavily on texts and textual analysis in order to critically map out complex, trans locally coordinated social terrains (Campbell, 2006; Smith, 2001). Texts in IE are considered a valuable avenue for exploring how administrations and bureaucracies manage people through standardizing and objectifying mechanisms (Smith, 2006, p. 67). By paying attention to how and when texts are consulted and invoked, institutional ethnographers can discover how individuals interact with and organize around discursive artifacts which mediate actions and ideology. Texts in their many forms (pictures, symbols, words etc.) then become a window into how trans locally formulated concepts and ideology permeate into everyday life.

Mapping or tracing texts in IE is sometimes used to make visible the way that seemingly banal symbols and documents can quietly and pervasively govern the everyday social world. It involves observing and sequencing participants' actions and work to understand and how various extra-locally produced texts and policy are 'activated', and how institutional practices are learned (Griffith & Smith, 2014; Smith, 2005; Talbot, 2017). The mapping of social relations through text can also take on various forms and functions, depending on what the ethnographer intends to show. Sometimes, the intention is to show informant specific maps, while other times the purpose of mapping can be to show a larger flow of work processes (Talbot, 2017; Turner, 2006). I will discuss shortly how mapping worked during my fieldwork as a helpful organizing tool for pictographically showing complex and diverse landscapes.

Transnational Institutional Ethnography: Building on the Discussion

Doing IE that crosses borders or spans regions is infrequent, as Dorothy Smith's introductory address alludes to. For institutional ethnographers, national borders can be conceptual boundaries, but also a material empirical reality. There are real national policies and legislation, such as national labor or education laws and policy goals, that coordinate and guide how institutions formulate and function; this affects how people are institutionally organized by certain administrative texts and bureaucratic norms. For example, in Janet Rankin's (2017b, 2017a) practical guide to conducting an analysis in IE she uses the demonstrative example of a wound clinic and explains that the researcher could adopt the standpoint of either the nurse or the patient but must make a choice about which empirical location or vantage point will be examined within the institution. However, this example is useful not only because there are clear demarcations between the institutional roles of patient and nurse, but also because the institution in question is locally based and nationally contained. This means, although another nurse might evaluate a patient differently, their actions are still coordinated by a shared understanding of hospital nursing in a specific locale, mediated by national labor laws and norms of nursing in that context. Thus, concentrating IE within national borders or condensed physical locales is often helpful, as these provide an apparent empirical boundary for an inquiry and a reasonable 'end-point' for analyzing trans-locally coordinating texts. This is frequently the case in examples of IE that create text maps, with policies such as national labor laws or guidelines acting as boundaries for the field.

Still, IE has significant potential for bringing novel dimension to global and transnational questions, and a slow growing number of institutional ethnographers have signaled a move towards acknowledging this. Lauren Eastwood's (2006, 2018, 2021) notably questions how the ontological approach can be used to study the intersections between the local and the

global. In her research exploring practices of UN Environmental policy formation, Eastwood explicates how IE allowed for an empirical focus on localized connections and practices whilst studying transnational and global policymaking. Additionally, institutional ethnographers such as Liang and Lin (2021), Spina and Comber (2021) and Rudrum (2016) have contributed to this methodological discussion, all of whom call attention in some way to geography or national and transnational policy in their work. To date, the most explicit use of TIE comes from Daniel Grace's (2013) multi-sited exploration of HIV 'model-laws'. Grace investigates cross-border diverse institutional settings, moving beyond a state-based or nationally confined norm usually associated with IE whilst discussing challenges that arose as a result.

Nevertheless, TIE remains underexplored both in the advantages it offers and challenges it presents. For Smith, understanding work practices with consideration to bodily situatedness is essential for exploring institutional social organization. She writes, "individuals are there [in time and place]; they are in their bodies; they are active; and what they're doing is coordinated with the doings of others. That is the four-part package that is foundational to the institutional ethnographic project" (2005, 59). Her emphasis on bodily and physical space implies an inextricable relationship between material location and how people are positioned and coordinated within an institutional landscape—a component which has not been fully explored in IE inquiries that take the global or transnational into consideration. To take this seriously is to also ask how the methods of TIE need reshaping when geographic space is widened and the multiple material locations in which people are embedded increase in heterogeneity. In other words, it is necessary to critically engage with the concept geographic space, and its potential to disrupt the methods of IE. This is particularly true when employing the approach in highly complex and bureaucratic landscapes, where the transnational institution is comprised of multiple institutional settings and the inquiry crosses local or regional institutional spaces in addition to national legislative boundaries.

In the sections that follow, I introduce the multi-sited empirical field of Horizon 2020 as a part of the EU Framework Programs and describe how this instrument for EU science funding functions for participants. I then introduce some opportunities and challenges that arose from studying the Framework Programs as a transnational institution and elaborate on how these were considered during the fieldwork process.

The European Union Framework Programs: Horizon 2020

As I approached the empirical landscape of EU-facilitated science funding, I was drawn to the methodological tools of IE as instruments for sense-making. The EU geopolitical space is unique in that academic careers are heavily concentrated in national institutions of higher education and research, yet a significant portion of research funding comes from a geographically dispersed range of inter alia regional, national and EU sources.

When it comes to the EU science funding, the European Framework Programs are the most tangible manifestation of systematic political effort towards fueling a European community for science with the explicit intention to 'blur national borders and barriers to scientific knowledge' (EU Commission, 2014). Subsequently, the programs are known to fund large-scale, transnational research collaborations with consortia that include researchers and institutions scattered across the EU.

The fieldwork centered on how academics continually maneuvered between two distinctly coordinated institutions, sometimes multiple times per day via video calls, emails, and other forms of textual communication—one being material locale of their university work with its own social order, coordinating texts and national policies and the other being the trans local, transnational institution of EU knowledge production.

Choosing Projects to Study

While EU projects are most often coordinated out of one research center or university, there are usually several affiliated partners and institutions across Europe. I chose three projects with separate consortia and conducted geographically spread out, multi-sited fieldwork. This was not only a methodological necessity for providing a fuller depiction of the transnational institution, but also itself became a form of participant observation by virtue of the research having similar characteristics as the participants (Clifford, 1992; Falzon, 2015). The fieldwork involved visiting four institutional contexts and conducting approximately 40 semi-structured interviews with scientific coordinators, project managers, and researchers in the projects, both virtually and in person. Interviews were also conducted at the EU commission with policy officials involved in formulating the EU's stance and values for what kind of work would be funded and contributions to the criteria for funding a proposal. During this period, the global Covid-19 pandemic was at its height, so doing participant observation was limited, but I observed and sat in on meetings, on and off-line.

Transnational Institutional Ethnography: Opportunities and Challenges

Although thinking with TIE to study the EU Framework Programs proved analytically productive, the process of adapting certain features of IE to a geographically dispersed empirical field presented challenges throughout the project. First, conceptualizing the Framework Programs as a transnational institution was neither theoretically nor empirically self-evident, and the process of transnational 'field-making' was both a critical opportunity and a challenge. While the programs represent a central funding body with rules and regulations, each project is generally considered to be stand-

alone, without continuity or connection to other funded project. Ultimately, as I will show, thinking with Smiths loose definition of an institution as an empirical heuristic tool led to considering the Framework Programs as a transnational institution—with each project functioning as a window into the institutional coordination of people and practices.

Nonetheless, studying various projects as a single empirical field was pragmatically challenging. Geographically dispersed participants were constantly interacting with differing and overlapping organizations and texts that shaped their work and permeated into the formulation and function of the EU Framework Programs. Everyday practices were coordinated not only by participation in EU research, but also by other forms of coordination, such as university requirements or national policies that directly entered into daily life. Thus, studying multiple projects as a single transnational institution meant sifting through and tracing entangled texts and policies as both a method for locating practical boundaries for my inquiry and outlining the values and ambitions underpinning the Framework Programs. As I will elaborate further, this process not only aided in a form of 'field-making', but it also led to a deeper exploration of the less visible work that constitutes participating in EU-funded research alongside other institutions and organizations for knowledge production.

Additionally, the emphasis put on standpoint epistemology as a central feature of IE presented challenges both practically and theoretically. Taking the empirical realities of EU research into account meant considering how experiences and practices of collaborating academics grew increasingly heterogenous as the geographic contexts from which partners worked broadened. This pertained not only to how people navigated their project role and tasks, but also in how contributions were made and received by other project members. In short, I was challenged to critically engage with standpoint epistemology when studying a geographically dispersed transnational institution.

Still, thinking with TIE provided an opportunity for studying transnational issues that other forms of global ethnography lack. First, it offered an ontological alternative to, for example, Buraway's (2001) and Burawoy et al., 2000) global ethnography or Wilding's (2007) take on the transnational, both of which draw the inquiry and data upward towards more transportable conceptual categories. In contrast, TIE provided the means to ask and explore questions that illuminate trans local coordination without losing focus on people, practices, and materiality— even as the investigation widens to include forces that transcend, coordinate, and inform these.

The process of critically working with TIE also offered an avenue to think differently about a 'field' in IE by widening the scope of empirical issues that can practically be analyzed as single institutions. For example, the EU Framework Programs are almost exclusively studied 'from above', focusing on themes such as national funding distribution, science policy, or disciplinary representation. Less emphasis is put on practices of participating scholars, mostly likely due to their heterogeneity—one of the few uniting factors these scholars share is the politically fueled funding scheme shaping their work practices. By studying the Framework Programs through the lens of TIE, I could approach EU funded research as a single field 'from below,'—consequently adding ethnographic value and insight into how EU funding programs organize scientific knowledge production.

Defining a Transnational Institution Using 'European Union-Language'

Consistent with typical IE research, I began my inquiry by speaking with people about their work practices. After conducting preliminary interviews with policymakers, administrators, and academics, I chose to take the broad standpoint of researchers participating in transnational and multidisciplinary Horizon 2020 projects. Over time, I noticed a shared jargon for describing the research process and particular ways of categorizing time or tasks that seemed naturalized and ubiquitously understood by project participants. These were not scientific or discipline-specific terms in social science, nor were they simply bureaucratic. These terms that seemed fundamentally administrative and unique to EU projects, such as 'deliverable', 'work-package', or 'person-months,' would also permeate into non-administrative, scientific aspects of the research. For example, the formulation of collaborative teams and research questions, correspondence throughout the project, and the final outcomes of the work (e.g., books articles, conferences) all were shaped by what one researcher called 'EU-language'. Although the three projects I studied were largely heterogeneous in their theoretical and disciplinary alignment, with partners distributed across distinct institutions and geo-political spaces, collaborative work was systematically organized between all three around almost identical language. In other words, using 'EU-language' was a natural part of working with transnational EU knowledge collaboration and although it was neither nation dependent nor discipline specific, all project members were seemingly fluent to various degrees. In this case, there was clearly a coordination of people and discourses in EU project work. However, it was unclear the extent to which peoples work was organized as a function of the goals and values of a transnational institution, and how this entangled with their local institutional setting. Thus, I began 'mapping' texts that I encountered as they were involved and made actionable by participants.

Tracing Entangled Texts

The choice to follow three projects closely allowed me to analyze scientific practices as they were shaped and coordinated by the project grant agreement (GA). In EU funded projects the GA is a legally binding text between the EU commission and the participating partner institutions. It is most often formulated by the project coordinator and details not only legalities of timeframe and budgets, but also acts as a

detailed roadmap for the process and direction of the work. It sets in place the projects main disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological framing with relative firmness. For mapping texts in TIE, this was the text that most closely coordinated project work across all projects I studied.

One scholar described her relationship with the document saying,

> "It's a reference that I go back to quite often, especially the theoretical conceptualization behind it. I kind of keep on going back and connecting what I'm doing […] to think, why are we doing this? what are the ideas behind it? So, I do have it kind of on tap. And people reference it all the time."

This researcher describes how she and many other project members utilized the GA as a text that prescriptively guided work practices and consciousness around knowledge production. Although each project differed in their content, the project proposals and eventual GA were structured in similar ways. Thus, the way academics learned and engaged with the 'EU-language' was relatively standardized and paralleled across each of the projects. Consequently, 'field-making' became a function of analyzing how documents like the GA coordinated social organization, language, and practices and allowed me to trace these practices and discourses up to various governing EU policy texts and their underlying funding values. Illustrated in Figure 1 is a simplified representation of the Horizon 2020 EU Framework Program. It shows how texts such as EU research policy and discourse directly and indirectly shape the formulation and language present in a GA. For my purposes here, many details of this map are omitted.

Navigating Between Multiple Institutions

In addition to the GA, participants regularly mentioned intersecting or entangled forms of textual coordination that fell outside the scope of their project role, yet still shaped their participation and collaboration. This meant relevant texts were not limited to those relating directly to EU knowledge production, because other texts such as university policies and national research norms worked in concert to shape everyday work directly and indirectly, and by extension their participation in the Horizon 2020 project. Although the function of these policies often aligned, this was not always the case. For example, one researcher explained that her university, located in an EU country infrequently receiving EU-funding, did not have the infrastructure to support participating or coordinating large EU projects. She described an implied discouragement

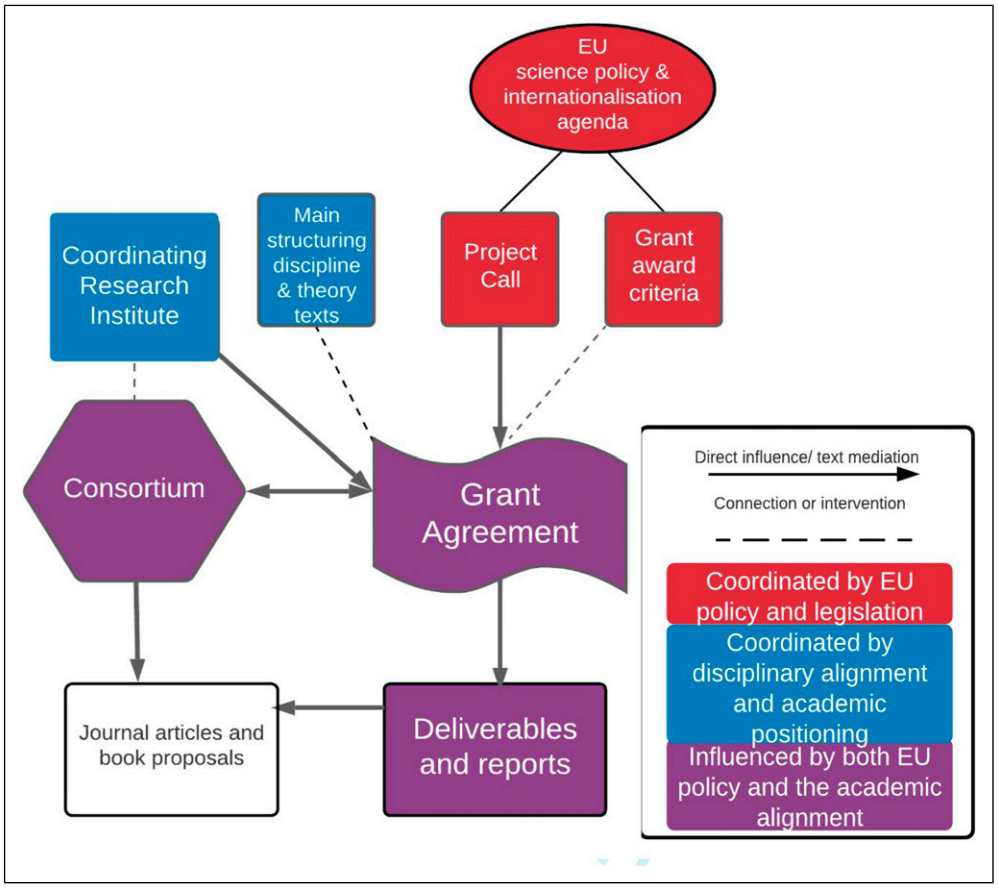

Figure 1. Simplified map of the Horizon 2020 European Union framework program.

from her administration to participate in EU projects, because her institute would neither cover her many teaching hours nor offer other incentives to join. So, although she was regularly subject to discourse from all directions about the importance of internationalization and transnational collaboration, the actualities and policies governing her everyday university context implied opposing values to those perpetuated in her networks and in the EU collaboration. Her experience showed how the complexities of the daily spaces that researchers were embedded and participated in also shaped how they related to the transnational institution.

Exploring tensions between academics' multiple institutional affiliations was a methodological challenge that meant constructing loose boundaries for my inquiry. I was specifically interested in the transnational institution but found it necessary to explore a researcher's local context to untangle how it shaped their experiences with the EU Framework Programs. It was through this continual 'field-making' that new analytical dimensions took shape. I noticed the various kinds of navigational work academics were doing between their institutional alignments, specifically when there was disjuncture between underlying institutional goals and values. It was clear that some people were in a better position to do this kind of navigational work than others because their local context more closely aligned with the goals and values underlying the transnational institution.

For EU knowledge production, the majority of work took place in each partners' respective university setting and national context. Few meetings were conducted in person or even formally scheduled between whole consortia. This was the case even before the Covid-19 pandemic, when national borders became a significant barrier for academics traveling across Europe. Project members primarily interacted through on-line spaces, quickly moving between their different institutional roles and affiliations. This constant virtual navigational meant a strong focus on electronic documents and texts as a primary tool of coordination and practical alignment. For this reason, text-mapping was essential in TIE for pragmatically deciding how the local and national levels entered the lives of participants and how coordination from these spaces practically overlapped and disjoined. Although this kind of navigational work is not unique to participants of transnational institutions, it proved to be a significant aspect of their work. 'Transnational' is not a location but instead functions as a processual concept; something to be done. Transnational institutions frequently entail a degree of physical or virtual mobility and some form of multiple institutional connections, requiring people to navigate the social organization and coordination of these different belongings as a natural part of their everyday work, here utilizing Smiths generous definition of the concept.

In the following section I highlight an additional and related methodological challenge. That is, how the landscape for these work practices represents an historically shaped and geopolitically unequal playing field and how this affected my inquiry in TIE.

The Epistemic Status of Nations: The Relationship Between Geographic Location and Institutional Positioning

The transnational institution became most evident when there were disjunctors between its bureaucratic or textual representations and the actualities of scholarly collaborative work. Conversations with participants underlined clear associations of how 'good' or 'proper' knowledge production in EU-projects looked and where it came from. Sometimes it was a question of disciplinary or epistemic alignments but frequently these disjunctors were related to geographic positioning of people and their associated universities. For example, the researcher quoted below from a central European country explains the long-term collaborative relationship her institute forged with another research center in a wealthy western EU country. She said:

> "We've been trained in how [the coordinating university] applied. This is kind of their everyday work, and we choose to try to look and learn. A lot of our contemporary potential is something that we've learned from them… and they were doing this for us as a center that was coming from a country that joined the EU fairly recently and had still a lot of things to learn… We still are treated here on the local market as an 'avant garde', because we've learned from the best."

Here, this researcher calls attention to the notion that not all nations are equally considered as potential spaces for knowledge production in EU-funded projects. She is underlining the relationship between geopolitical history and perceptions of 'proper' EU knowledge production and sheds light on how this contributes to experiences in both a transnational institution and her subsequent positioning in local institutions.

The notion that geographic positioning shapes how individuals are positioned in a transnational institution can be explored through Maria Do Mar Pereira's (2014, 2017, 2019) concept of the epistemic status of nations. This is the idea that 'proper' scholarliness is associated with certain geographic locations, most often wealthy western or global north nations. In her work, Piera explores the local status of global knowledge hegemonies and how they are negotiated and reproduced by scholars in (semi) peripheral geographic locations and communities, shaping daily work locally and in international networks and collaborations. She clarifies her position, writing that although epistemic status is continually recognized and negotiated with relation to context and professional power, rather than something owned by particular scholars or fields, certain people and groups are tendentially in a better position to have their claims to epistemic status accepted as true and justified (2017, Chapter 2). Pereira addresses a central theme in the feminist approach to studying the intersection of science and power, suggesting who makes a claim and where they are associated with carries just as much or more weight than the

claim itself. It emphasizes that individuals within a transnational institution may have vastly different experiences of navigating their work and institutional positions, regardless of similar professional titles or career trajectories.

This conceptualization of epistemic status presents a unique challenge for working with TIE. Attempting to approach fieldwork grounded by the standpoint of collaborating academics grew increasingly difficult as the geographic contexts from which partners locally worked broadened. Experiences and practices became not only more heterogeneous regarding how participants navigated their project role and tasks, but also in how contributions were made and received by other project members. This was the case regardless of similar career stages or formal titles like 'work package leader' or 'professor'. Taking this seriously meant considering how these different geographic contexts and the epistemic status of nations would necessarily affect the fieldwork and what this meant for taking a standpoint. In principle, I had to consider that scholars are embedded in locales which are not trans local or transnational, even when participating in institutions that *are*. Put differently, scholars are still being coordinated by the texts and policies of the transnational institution, even when they go back to their respective universities. Thus, I found it important to explore the experiential discrepancies that come with being at similar 'locations' within the institution but occupying different geographic locations.

Conducting Divided Interviews

I was both interested in how local context structured everyday work in addition to how this was entangled with participation in the Framework Programs. However, I faced the practical question of structuring the fieldwork with limited time and travel ability. Covid-19 restrictions affected not only my travel opportunities but also those of my participants. Thus, I primarily approached the challenge of participants heterogenous geographic locations through making use of interviews and texts.

Ordinarily, in IE I begin interviews asking participants to describe an actual day, from start to finish, to quickly get a fuller sample of their daily work. However, EU project work is punctuated and sporadic and this approach would give me a fragmented picture of their project work and how it intersected with material surroundings like their university setting. My strategy was to explicitly split the interview into two parts, treating the local context and the EU project as separate institutions. Although many academics saw their work as intertwined in these spaces, I separated these lines of inquiry so that it became easier to understand how and when these contexts overlapped, aligned, or disjointed in values and coordination.

First, I directed my questions to their local institutional affiliation, their university or research center. I asked about their career trajectory, current position, and how their days were structured in relation to the breakdown of their formal workload. I also asked about details such as their office location, who they ate lunch with, and how often they collaborated or socialized with their university colleagues. Additionally, I discussed with participants any textual or formal guidelines that came up for things like gaining research hours or securing a tenure track. Finally, I asked pointed questions such as how their colleagues, or an immediate supervisor reacted when they joined the Horizon 2020 project e.g., was there an email sent out? Was there a reaction by colleagues?

Following this, I moved to the participants relationship to the EU project and the transnational collaboration. I began by asking questions about past experiences with EU-funded collaborations and how or at what stage of the project formulation they joined the current project(s). Sometimes, I would ask participants to walk me through the last Horizon 2020 project related meeting they attended. At times, I came with copy of relevant texts and sections of the GA and asked questions directly about how participants approached specific tasks and how EU terms like 'work packages' and 'deliverables' were learned and written.

Employing this style of interview worked to underline and shed light on how heterogenous institutional coordination and participants actual material locales strongly affected their position in the EU project. It clarified both who did this navigational work and how it differently affected practices. It was evident that some academics' local context *was* the transnational context. This is to say, their everyday work context almost completely aligned and overlapped with the values and practices of participating in the EU project work. In contrast, some project members found large disjuncture's in these different spaces and thus were in a less advantageous position to skillfully navigate the transnational space and, as a result, be acknowledged as an equal knowledge contributor. While this method of interview was a necessity during the pandemic, it also has potential to open possibilities for working with TIE despite limited travel capability.

Trouble With Taking a Standpoint

Although conducting divided interviews proved helpful, acknowledging how geographic location shapes institutional positioning still presents a puzzle for adopting standpoint epistemology in the study of largely geo-dispersed transnational institutions. This challenge during the fieldwork ultimately led to the decision not to take a firm standpoint.

The value of a standpoint can only be considered with respect to the researchers' purpose for employing it. In IE, standpoint epistemology is a heuristic tool; a 'way-in' to a location within an institution and used as a mechanism to ground research in experiences and practices. In this fieldwork, attempting to locate a group of people with a similar institutional vantage point became problematic when actors were working from largely different politico-historical contexts, (in) formal institutional roles and material conditions. Adhering to a rigorous standpoint without significant adjustments meant undervaluing experiential discrepancies of

the institution. Instead, I chose to loosely define a standpoint and focus on experiences and practices of academics as a broad category. It meant limiting the scope of findings and choosing not to follow other lines of inquiry as they presented themselves. For example, despite having opportunities to speak with EU officials, their interviews were useful in this project only insofar as they informed how EU research policy might coordinate academic practices.

The choice to forgo a firm standpoint is not unprecedented in IE, particularly when taking a global or transnational perspective. For example in her institutional ethnography studying UN environmental policy formation, Lauren Eastwood (2005) did not adopt a clearly defined standpoint, choosing instead to situate herself and her work within a thoroughly reflexive vantage point. This is to say, while this article does not advocate for simply omitting standpoint epistemology, practitioners of TIE might move towards critically evaluating how to productively work with this device when an institution is constituted of dispersed people or organizations in heterogenous material locations.

Conclusion

Despite being a geopolitically specific funding body, this paper considers the EU Framework Programs to be an opportune case for critically discussing TIE. Transnational institutions, predominantly large political and bureaucratic institutions with multiple locations such as the UN, the World Health Organization, or the World Bank, continue to adapt and take on various forms and functions. This is especially true in the light of an ongoing climate crisis and the digital post-Covid-19 era, making virtual work commonplace and giving the concept of 'local' new meaning. Now more than ever, people take part in integrated transnational institutions from their living room or office, with everyday work practices directly and simultaneously shaped by several forms of institutional belongings, textual coordination, and material surroundings.

As Dorothy Smith emphasizes, the ontological approach and methodological tools of IE do not lack the capacity to explore aspects of global organization—addressing the trans local is built into the objectives of IE. However, with this paper I have illustrated added value in revisiting certain features of IE to account for materiality and bodily location when defining and studying geographically dispersed institutions. In this, I focus particularly on global and cultural knowledge hierarchies and their role in the social organization of work and knowledge production.

The account of TIE I provide entails not only studying spaces where members of an institution come together under one roof, but also requires acknowledging the 'negative space'— when people are apart. For example, individuals returning to their national organizational headquarters after a global summit or participating in international meetings over video call, followed by lunch with colleagues down the hall. In other words, considering how different locations and physical surroundings diverge, and exploring how dissimilar locales shape work and relationships with and to transnational institutions. As I found, studying navigational work for academics between institutional belongings not only helped to define the Framework Programs as a transnational institution, but also facilitated exploring how work practices can be organized by sometimes disjointed forms coordination.

While the global state of climate and technology continues to transform, so should our approach to studying people and their everyday work. A geospatially conscious approach to TIE offers the capacity to explore the unseen and underestimated ways that people are connected and coordinated in transnational and global processes without sacrificing an essential focus on materiality and everyday practices. Moving forward, this article invites continued thinking with and about TIE as a 'way-in' to inquiries that cross borders and span regions and advocates for TIE as an underutilized point of departure for ethnographically studying organized work as a part of largescale global coordination.

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