# Horseshoe and Catwalk – Power and Complexity in the United Nations Security Council

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*"The social science that we want to concern ourselves with is a science of actuality. We want to understand in its particularity the incompassing actuality of the life in which we are placed – on one hand, the coherence and cultural significance of individual occurrences in their contemporary configuration, and on the other hand, the reasons for those occurrences being historically so and not otherwise."* (Weber 1999a, 170-171 in Jackson 2011, 20-21)

## Introduction

This paper discusses in what extent and how anthropology can extract the general from the unique and thus the notion of generalizability. Rather than seeking answers that can predict events in the future, my project aims to explain why peacebuilding is a cumbersome and not always successful project by investigating power relations in the UN (United Nations) and the complexity of this organization. I have chosen to understand their activity as part of a global institutionalization process. Because this process is global and involves activities that inhabit different rationalities at different levels and places, it could not be understood by a long-term fieldwork in one locality alone. A UN quick impact project in a rural village in Liberia is part of something that is infinitely much bigger than solely the involved actors and receivers on the ground. Therefore, in order to grasp this phenomenon, it was necessary to apply a research strategy that could investigating it through a multi-sited fieldwork, following people, connections and relations across space and time in order to identify cases containing a substantial amount of explanatory power. My fieldwork is based on several shorter field visits to countries hosting a peacekeeping mission, but mainly Liberia and DR Congo, conversations and interviews with staff in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and NGOs based in Oslo, an anthropological fieldwork in the UNSC (United Nations Security Council), and a long-term fieldwork in the United Nations DPKO (Department for Peacekeeping Operations) headquarter where I did participant observation for almost a year.[1]

This paper looks at friction between three different levels of this institutionalization process: The UNSC (Executive level), the DPKO HQ (Bureaucracy level), the field (Liberia) (Implementation level). A comparative analysis between the three different levels will be used to gain a better understanding of the process as such. Because there are considerable differences between the fields I studied I had to adapt my approach each time I entered a new field. Consequently several scientific challenges emerged through the methodology I applied and not the other way around. Given the limitations of this paper I have chosen to focus on challenges pertaining to one of these *sites*, the field-

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[1]   This way of triangulating qualitative research is also in line with King, Keohane and Verba's recommendations for qualitative research methods when they argue for the need to study plural cases.

work in the UNSC. My aim is to use my own fieldwork to illustrate how anthropology is about ways or modes of knowing and how this is interlinked with the relation between the researcher and the persons being researched. Propelled by this, the paper ends up in a discussion on how the study of cases can contribute to general knowledge.

## Horseshoe and Catwalk

Today the UN has 192 member states and all of them are represented with the same rights in the General Assembly. However, the responsibility for keeping world peace and international security lies exclusively with the 15 member states that constitute the only organ that has the power to adopt internationally binding resolutions for the member states, the UNSC.[2] All states want to have a seat at the UNSC table where these important political decisions are made. My aim with the fieldwork was to gain a better understanding of power relations in the organization through studying day-to-day foreign policy practices in a relatively small, but executive and multilateral setting.

UNSC member states are usually spending considerable economic and political capital on influencing the Council's decision-making process in order to positioning themselves in world politics. Discussions around the UNSC's horseshoe-table are receiving much international attention and are for international politics to a large extent the same as the catwalk is for beauty contests. Still, it goes without saying that there are more to the processes of the UNSC than just looks. Formal and public statements made by the countries at this arena was therefore of interest to this project, but as studies of practice have illuminated, a focus on the informal and internal dynamics in the UNSC may tell us even more.

## Methodology

*"Methods are techniques for gathering and analyzing bits of data, whereas Methodology is a concern with the logical structure and procedure of scientific enquiry".* (Jackson 2011: 25)

My research on the UNSC rests on anthropological fieldwork consisting of observation, case studies and interviews and falls within the *contextualist* approach to social science methodology (Mjøseth 2009). My process tracing approach was inspired by the *Extended-Case Method* developed by the Manchester School.[3] It advocates activities such as following individuals, relationships and networks over space,

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2   Five permanent member states with veto power (France, Britain, USA, China and Russia) and ten elected member states, without veto power, that rotates every two years.
3   For more on the Extended-Case Method see Burawoy (2009).

time and functional issue areas as the best way to gather data, and is particularly well suited for distinguishing social structure from actual interaction. One challenge with anthropological fieldwork is that cultural meaning can be learned only within relationships that involve a certain degree of trust. A second challenge is the effect of prior knowledge when approaching new cases and the risk of leaving out possible explanations. A third challenge, perhaps more specific to anthropological studies of bureaucracies, is how to gain access. And a fourth challenge is how case-based knowledge can be generalized. To achieve trust and access, challenge 1 & 3, it is important to be aware of how the anthropologist's presence affects the players in the field. My own approach became an important factor in the process of building confidence. I always made sure that one contact could bring me to new contacts through personal introduction, emails or telephone calls. Over time I built up a network in Oslo that I transferred, via the head of the UN section in the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to the Norwegian UN delegation in New York. In that way, the process of building trust went hand in hand with the process of gaining access. Due to the long-term anthropological fieldwork, where substantial parts consisted of following up on traces and investigating their explanatory capacities, I increased the likelihood of finding typical cases and reduced the risk of leaving out possible alternative explanations.

In order to strengthening the relevance and accuracy of my research, I started out with a series of interviews with staff in the UN section and observed discussions at the various meeting arenas established in the MFA in relation to Norway's seat on the Council.[4] Throughout this part of the fieldwork I was told over and again that everything *Norway* said or did in the UNSC was cleared with the home apparatus in Norway or was based on instructions from the ministry. At the time, I thought I was well prepared for the fieldwork in New York. My aim was to gain insight into the status-seeking game in the UNSC by examining the Norway's membership and the positions the country took in formal UNSC meetings. *How* did Norway's status play a role in the decision-making processes of the UNSC? However, most of those I interviewed responded to my queries by immediately starting to talk about the structure and organization of the Security Council. I was also told that if I were to understand anything about Norway's role in the Security Council, I would have to study the Council's working methods. As Cato Wadel says, echoing Fredrik Barth: "Both topic and method must be allowed to develop in response to the concrete situation of fieldwork and the findings that accumulate. (Wadel 1991: 127) This may also provide an answer to the second challenge I listed

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4    See George and Bennett for an overview of the revitalization of the dialogue between methodologies (2004:5).

above, because anthropological fieldwork as a method provides an opportunity for adjusting prior knowledge while still in the "lab".

A challenge with an anthropological inquiry is that one's time in the field is spent with a limited set of people. This may make it difficult to capture the larger picture. The UNSC is a big organization, and although the Norwegian MFA is smaller, it is still an organization of considerable size. I was limited to speaking with only a fraction of those working in these organizations. The advantage was that I was able to conduct good conversations and interviews, and that I had the confidence of those who provided me with the data. Regarding the overall picture, I used the opportunity to talk with the interviewees about working methods and structure. I also benefitted from the fact that the Security Council has formalized its way of working through its Rules of Procedure. This can be regarded as an *a priori* imperative for social action between the Council delegates from various countries. I could acquire information about cultural meaning and social relations through anthropological fieldwork, while also gaining access to the bigger picture through the Rules of Procedure.

## How to study Organizations

> *"'Getting it right' is backed by anthropologists being in touch with reality – not by standing outside it looking for evidence"* (Hastrup 2004: 469)

In his book *The Organization of Hypocrisy* Nils Brunsson describes and compare two different models for studying organizations: the action-oriented and the political-oriented model. Furthermore, he argues that "the behaviour of most large organizations is difficult to understand if we do not allow for both models" (2002: 195). While the action-oriented model is focusing on the *external effects* of an organization's decisions and actions, the political-model is focusing on the *environment* of which the organizations is part of, takes responsibility for, in other words "the good intentions of the organization" (ibid.). Taking both models into account, this approach is still in many ways very *output* oriented and thus depends on an understanding of organizations as formal, rational and well functioning. In the article *Getting it right* Kirsten Hastrup celebrates the *anthropological mode of knowing* by claiming that "evidence" has to be understood in relation to the context or situation in which it is couched. Anthropologists have to stay *in touch* with reality, consequently there is no evidence outside of the argument. Looking at the context of selected UNSC decisions, which means being involved with the practitioners working on these processes, led me to focus on the internal dynamics in the UNSC and to an understanding of these as especially important in order to understand the rationality behind its outputs and thus the organization bet-

ter. This approach gave me certain kinds of data that further led me on to a way of understanding the UNSC through a perspective on practice, which at least the way it appeared to me, was based on a faith in the UN rather than rationality. My point here is that methodology provides a perspective on the "reality" to be researched and that it is important to be aware of this when one is making ones argument.

## Culture-analytical Perspectives and general empirical Principles

By leaning on existing literature and publishing ones finding to the research community it is possible also for anthropologist to make general assumptions that may have relevance elsewhere. Bruno Latour has shown how *faith* is part of modernity (1993), Michael Herzfeld (1992) have argued that modern bureaucracies, although there are differences related to scale, are no more rational than traditional societies and that national bureaucracies cannot be understood without including internal dynamics and "culture". Furthermore, Chris Shore highlights the importance for state-like entities to be "created, imagined and represented in order to create and sustain the unity it will need to function…" (Krohn-Hansen and Nustad 2005: 17). According to Shore EU-bureaucrats see this as one of their most important tasks. Consequently, he speaks of the importance of looking at "culture" in order to better understand states and organizations. (Shore 2005: 235) Iver Neumann celebrates such a culture-analytical perspective in his article about the development of diplomacy, through the following quote: " If one views world politics as an historically emerging and social phenomenon, then diplomacy plays a key role in it." (Neumann 2003: 342). In another article on the role of diplomacy, he concludes that it is important to turn the focus from text to practice if one should attempt to understand the role of diplomacy (Neumann 2002). By looking at "world politics" as a social phenomenon where diplomats play a key role, we find the starting point for a typical anthropological field where it is possible to maintain an anthropological ideal concerned with studying small places to answer the big questions. Following up on this tradition, but moving from national to international bureaucracy, I discuss why it is necessary to include practice and informal processes in order to understand how international organizations like the UNSC work. I argue that rather than becoming paralyzed when faced with inconsistent demands as described by Brunson (2002: 13), the UNSC dealt with such challenges through informal processes. The Norwegian delegates entered these informal processes with a profound faith in the UN and its mandate. This faith was expressed through a strong consensus focus in the Council. Thus, system maintenance became the coping mechanisms for the Norwegian delegates to deal with inconsistent demands.

On the basis of my fieldwork, I will discuss how formal structures are a marginalization of practical realities, and how informal processes overlap formal structures in order to achieve consensus between member-states of the UNSC. The next step is to investigate how this overlap tendency has implications for policy-making in small and medium-sized states like Norway when they are represented in international organizations such as the UN Security Council.

Most of the literature on international organizations in general, and the UNSC as such, takes *structure* as its starting point.[5] However, it is difficult to understand organizations solely by a focus on structure, pretending that these exist independently of the actors that constitute the various positions in the structures. Actors bring flavor to the positions. Even delegates in the UNSC cannot divest themselves of their individual personalities, humour, and roles. Furthermore, actors take shortcuts, find loopholes and interpret rules and norms differently. These variations may generate social patterns that are in conflict with the rules of the organization or society, perhaps ultimately leading to change. Both action and structure are important for understanding organizations. As the anthropologist Reidar Grønhaug puts it, "… one may assume that social life displays both aspects at the same time, and that an important problem of its own lies in the interrelation between them."[6] Structures have influence on actors' values and thus their choices. Individual choices may generate patterns that have structural and social implications. Both structures and actors exist and are constructed in relation to each other (see for instance Berger & Luckmann 1992; Borchgrevink 1989:4; Giddens 1979 and 1984). Organizations, like societies, are not static. Therefore, it is not enough to look at organizational structures in order to understand organizational change or how they work. It is also important to understand who does what, with whom, and why. An actor-oriented perspective with a focus on the interplay with structure may prove useful in enabling conclusions on how the UNSC works.

## Generalizability in qualitative Research

> *"In qualitative research, generalizability concerns general structures rather than single social practices, which are only an example of this structure"* (Gobo 2006: 423)

States, by producing formal schemes and frames, have effects on people. International organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank and IMF produce action plans and programmes for countries, and their citizens, across the world. This activity is in many ways sim-

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5    See for example: Malone 2004, Hurd 2007, Kirgis 1995, Bailey 1969 & 1998, Bedjaoui 1994, Schweigman 2001, Boyd 1971, de Carvalho & Schia 2004 .
6    See Grønhaug (1972: 2).

ilar to state activity; we could say that these organizations produce state-like effects. When a democratic state produces schemes and plans, it is, in principle, accountable to its parliament and its citizens; and delegates to the UNSC are, in theory, answerable to their home countries. However, the internal culture within the Council is to a large degree autonomous and accountable to no one. Once the players' join the game there is a tendency for those from the elected countries (as opposed to the five permanent members) to play by the informal rules of the UNSC, so that responsibility towards their home countries becomes overshadowed by responsibility towards the UNSC. In order to have the opportunity to exert influence in the Council, Norway paradoxically had to adapt so much that its foreign policy at times became paralyzed. If Norway – admittedly a small nation, but also among the biggest financial contributors to the United Nations – had this experience, it is more than likely that other small and medium-sized nations experience the same challenge in the Security Council.

Qualitative research and its ability to make generalizations differs to a large extend from the process of generalization among quantitative researchers. Where quantitative researchers will be interested in the numbers of persons, organizations or countries who feature one characteristic, the qualitative researcher will focus on the *relations* between such variables. There is a long tradition in the literature of philosophy of science concerned with the distinctions between quantitative and qualitative research, it is not my intention to repeat this debate here. In a fundamentalist view the two approaches can be viewed as the Jing and Jang of how social scientists struggles to achieve an understanding of the world (this dualism continues to cause debate within academia, but in practice most disciplines now make use of both quantitative and qualitative methods).[7] Because Jing has to be understood in relation to Jang I have briefly mentioned quantitative research in order to anchor qualitative research. But I will leave aspects regarding quantitative research here and continue with challenges regarding the notion of generalizability and qualitative research.

By studying and observing social relations through participant observation, the qualitative researcher seeks to identify social practices that recurs and constitutes social patterns or structures. The ability to generalize thus depends on the amount of observation and data collected that can be used to describe relations and variables in the field. In this perspective, the concept of generalizability deals with social representativeness. But how can the qualitative researcher be confident when extracting the general from the unique, when moving from mi-

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[7]   For an overview of this debate and a nuance of the fundamental caricatured dualism above see for instance Mjøseth (2009: 41), where he provides an overview of the three practical philosophies of social science; the standard attitude, the contextualist approach and the social –philosophical attitude, and their evolvement through time.

cro to macro, when investigating small places to answer the big questions? Because anthropologist traditionally has dealt with small-scale societies, the possibilty to apply a holistic approach to the field used to be accepted within the discipline, thus the challenge just described did not use to be very imminent. Over time however, anthropologist became interested in studying large-scale societies and processes. This raised several concerns within the discipline, as it was not possible, in these studies, to grasp the *complete* picture of the members, connections and the social relations of the society. Consequently anthropologist started to develop new methodologies or approaches. One of these approaches was developed by the Manchester School and named the Extended Case Method.

This method emerged through multiple field studies in Central Africa that corresponded with the waning of British Colonialism. As such it was developed in a time characterized by change and complexity. The extended case method has from the very origin "…been cognate with complexity in social ordering, with the non-linearity of open-ended social fields, and with recursivity among levels of social ordering" (Evens and Handelman 2006: 223). In 1961 Max Gluckman published an article, *Ethnographic Data in British Social Anthropology,* which promoted a shift in anthropology towards the *extended case* and a focus on *practice* and *process*. According to Evens and Handelman, Gluckman mentions generalization as a challenge, but does not provide any advise on how to analytically generalize from a particular case to the social whole. J. Clyde Mitchell continued the unpacking of the Extended Case Method and argued that generalization within this approach had less to do with "whether a characteristic of a particular case (…) is representative of that characteristic in the population as a whole, but rather on the nature of the connection between different characteristics than with connections (…), a relationship that demands theoretical explanation." (Evens and Handelman 2006: 46). In this sense, generalization from case studies does not focus on "… typicality but rather of the creation and assessment of theoretical propositions about the way things hang together." (ibid.).  There are several other approaches to generalization in qualitative research, but in my final considerations I will use the opportunity to view my project in relation to three alternative approaches described by Burrawoy; (i) the inductive approach, (ii) the grounded theory approach and (iii) the Extended Case Method. The labeling and categorizing of these approaches are contested and there are a number of other and perhaps better ways of describing various ways of how cases can contribute to general knowledge, but the three approaches identified here are selected be-

cause they are helpful in explaining the way my project may contribute with general knowledge.[8]

## Final Considerations

The inductive approach to generalization seeks to identify "common patterns among diverse cases, so that context can be discounted"(1998: 19). This approach emphasizes generalization through a horizontal comparison of aggregated cases where each case is understood as "independent atoms". Burawoy also suggests calling this approach "the segregative or horizontal approach". A challenge with this approach is that it to a large extent misses out on global connections and vertical power processes or aspects, and thus it would not be very useful for this project.

The grounded theory approach is described as "Participant observation, conducted according to positive principles (…) and concentrates on deriving decontextualized generalizations from systematic analysis of data" (ibid: 25). This approach seeks to create theory. As an example of this approach Burawoy describes Martin Sanchez Jankowski's ten-year study of thirty-seven urban gangs in three different cities, where he tries to make general claims about gang organization. Such an approach has different challenges, at least for my project; (a) it depends on the ability of the researcher to minimize his involvement in the field. As described above, this would have been very difficult to do in my fieldwork, because even the basic fact that I was a *Norwegian* studying the Security Council already positioned me as a researcher in relation to my informants, (b) instead of process this approach focuses on correlations, and (c) it ignores the geographical and historical context.

I have described the third approach, which is the Extended Case Method, before. The advantage with this approach regarding my project is that it deploys a vertical comparative strategy. Burawoy suggests calling this approach "the integrative or vertical approach" (ibid: 19). This approach seem appealing to me as the purpose of the approach is to inductively connect the cases and let each case work in its connection to the other cases. In this way, I would regard my project as an anthropological project within the contextualist approach seeking to make generalization from case studies through the creation and assessment of theoretical propositions about the way things hang together within a specified context. Consequently aiming to develop established theories rather than to create new ones.

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[8]   I could also have used the table in Mjøseth 2009: 52 where he describes the "Notions of theory and strategies of generalization and specification", but since my project was inspired by the Extended Case Method the concepts within this tradition was closer to the project. A discussion between the two could have been interesting if the framework of this paper had allowed for a longer text.

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