# 3 Inside the knowledge networks

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## Introduction

In providing accountability to our research practices, in this chapter we offer a hands-on account of the conduct of higher education policy research and reflect on our research process, including empirical fieldwork in the European Parliament and in Finnish governmental and parliamentary bodies. We thus aim to outline our research journey from the researcher's perspective and share insights about how we understand knowledge and trustworthy research. In this reflexive account we analyse the research project's internal group interviews, fieldwork notes, and project members' research diaries. We draw on the literature concerning trustworthiness in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 1985), reflexive methodology (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009), the messiness inherent to research (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022), and the role of research paradigms in education contexts (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

To establish our research practices' trustworthiness, we follow Guba and Lincoln (1985) in approaching our research journey from the perspective of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Regarding trustworthiness, we draw on Guba and Lincoln's (1985) field-defining work on qualitative research methodology and its further applications (Amankwaa, 2016; Stahl & King, 2020). Hence, trustworthiness refers here to the research findings' credibility, reliability, and authenticity. As qualitative researchers, we acknowledge our different positions as project team members, considering it vital to establish trustworthiness to ensure the results' credibility, and that they accurately represent the participants' experiences.

More specifically, to discuss our findings' trustworthiness, we consider the four criteria Guba and Lincoln (1985) introduce, which many other authors have further developed: credibility; transferability; dependability; and confirmability. Credibility refers to the confidence that the research findings are an accurate reflection of the participants' experiences or the studied phenomenon. To enhance credibility, we discussed our findings as a group throughout the project, drawing on the research project members' expertise and experience as both researchers and policymakers. In combining three different types of data – network analysis, interviews, and observations – we were also able

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to crosscheck our findings. Many of our observations were apparent in all our datasets. Our prolonged engagement and time spent in the field helped us understand the context and build a rapport with the participants, further enhancing our project's credibility. In this project we collected an extensive dataset, spending many hours in the field to observe the phenomena closely (see Chapter 2).

Transferability refers to the extent to which the study's findings can be applied or transferred to other contexts, settings, or populations (Stahl & King, 2020). While our project focused on policymaking networks between the European Union and Finland, descriptions of the study's context and participants allow readers to assess whether our findings are relevant or transferable to other situations. Throughout the project, we reviewed the literature on knowledge, power, knowledge networks, network analysis, and network ethnography to understand how policymaking networks had been studied before. This enhances the possibilities to evaluate our findings' transferability.

Dependability emphasises consistency in the research process and transparency in documenting methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). To enhance dependability, we produced a comprehensive trail for our decision-making process, using detailed fieldnotes and clear protocols for data collection and analysis, including meeting memos, notes, reflexive discussions, and detailed descriptions of data collection and analysis processes. We also involved multiple researchers in data collection and analysis to ensure a consistent approach (Amankwaa, 2016). For example, we agreed to write down our initial observations and reflections before and after policymaking interviews, which would be shared with others. All the observation data were collected in pairs, and we also conducted most interviews in pairs.

Finally, confirmability emphasises researchers' reflexivity in engaging with researcher bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The data documentation described above helped us establish confirmability, as did engaging in reflexivity, actively reflecting on our biases independently and as a collective, and getting other researchers to review and confirm our findings. For example, we cross-examined our fieldnotes from two perspectives: researchers in our project with policymaking experience could attest to the situations' authenticity; those without that experience could cross-examine those interpretations from an outside perspective. Furthermore, two of this chapter's authors, Salokangas and Saarinen, were not involved in the empirical work, injecting an element of reflexivity.

Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability provide a framework for assessing our research's trustworthiness. Trustworthiness concerns how others evaluate and assess research and its merits based on commonly established criteria. This frame helped us ensure our findings were meaningful and reliable, and accurately reflected the studied participants' reality. Subsequently, we have engaged in numerous reflexive discussions about our theoretical framework, biases, assumptions, and position within higher education policy networks throughout the project.

In addition to trustworthiness, we require a broader discussion of the basic building blocks of interpretation in research. Paradigms can be understood as internalised beliefs and worldviews involving certain assumptions with consequences for how interpretations are made, what should be studied, and how (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). As Kivunja and Kuyini (2017) emphasise, the choice of research paradigm implies that it will follow a particular epistemology, ontology, axiology, and methodology that will subsequently influence research questions, participant selection, data collection, and analysis. Paradigms permeate even routine judgements – for example, pertaining to the importance given to the consistency of data and analysis (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In addressing our paradigms, we provide the context for this research project, engaging in discussions of the evaluative and normative aspects of what constitutes "good" research (Abbott, 2004). For example, a poststructuralist paradigm leads us to view knowledge as socially constructed (Chapter 1). We have also paid special attention to policymakers' language and texts in our analyses, and how they enable and constrain possibilities of thought and action (Foucault, 1977, 1980).

As a paradigm, poststructuralism also worked as a lens for our research processes, during which power was at play in questions of access. When interviewing people in power, as researchers we must define a group that appears to embody an "elite" social status and is in a key position for understanding our research object. We therefore assume that society is organised in a certain way, that hierarchical power structures exist, and that we can identify an "elite network" (Williams, 2012, p. 65) that is the basis for determining whom to approach. Our researchers' personal histories and backgrounds facilitated access to institutions and policymakers that are often difficult to reach. Access to gatekeepers – often informal – helped make connections with other gatekeepers or even potential interviewees (Odendahl & Shaw, 2011).

To facilitate this discussion of paradigms, we turn to the concept of reflexivity as the "interpretation of interpretation" to examine our interpretations' background and context (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 12). We consider that the same set of facts can support different theories or views (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), and that the validity of interpretation is always related to our knowledge interests (Heiskala, 2014). We also follow Addey and Piattoeva's (2022) proposal that we should be open to the "messiness" of research and take seriously how as researchers we interfere in the worlds we study, and how those worlds interfere with us. We therefore did not write this chapter as a reiteration of the methodology or as a critique of our theoretical approaches. Rather, we engaged in writing about ourselves in our study, less "evaluating" or "critiquing" than engaging with and learning not only what we did to the process, but what it did to us (Engman et al., 2023).

In this chapter we aim reflexively to discuss our research process for transparency and trustworthiness. By embracing messiness as "building blocks rather than stumbling blocks" (Rose & McKinley, 2017, p. 14), we consider the challenges and difficulties during research an integral part of the research process. We wish to problematise some of the (often hidden) assumptions of research processes, particularly pertaining to the normative understandings that research processes should somehow be linear and clean, with the messiness and uncertainties of everyday life polished away (Rose & McKinley, 2017) – especially given that as researchers and project group members we constitute this chapter's research object, and that we come with our own histories and connections to the larger study context the project addresses (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). This is also an ethical issue: we do not wish to obscure our process or eradicate its uncertainties but to make the research relationships, positions, and hierarchies visible.

## Research design: Research group as data

We attempt to provide transparency regarding the research process as a whole and to expose our analyses and interpretations to the scrutiny of others – our colleagues, participants, the communities we examine, and society at large. We do this to enhance our research's trustworthiness and to promote dialogue and acceptance of "messiness" with the academic community. We therefore ask the following research questions:

1. How have our conceptions of a trustworthy research process informed our interpretations?
2. How did this make us relate in specific ways to our research context and data?

To answer these questions, we analysed three datasets to provide a transparent description of the various power relations connected with collecting research data from settings like the European Parliament. First, these data included interviews with members of our research project: Paula Silvén and Joni Forsell interviewed Katri Eeva, Jarmo Kallunki, and Jaakko Kauko after their data collection in Brussels. Second, we conducted two semi-structured professional conversations among all our research project members to discuss our conceptions of trustworthy research, what was unexpected or surprising during the research process ("messiness," Addey & Piattoeva, 2022), and what each found interesting or relevant during it ("trustworthiness," Guba & Lincoln, 1985). This was done to provide space and time to reflect on our experiences and emotions after the fieldwork, and again at the end of the project. In practice, our collective experiences and discussions as a research group constituted the data we seek to analyse here. Third, we drew on documentary data. We analysed notes made after research interviews (n = 74) and fieldnotes from observations (n = 37), and compiled observations matrices (n = 25).

We analysed the three datasets using qualitative content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). First, we carefully read through our data, drawing attention to questions and topics we deemed important for understanding the converging and differing beliefs and understandings of what trustworthy research was, what interpretations had been made, and the questions that most occupied us. This preliminary reading gave us a sense of the most important topics. This chapter's authors and all project members then discussed these topics. Second, we used these discussions to focus further on our analysis. Two members of our advisory board, this chapter's co-authors, Taina Saarinen and Maija Salokangas, supported these analyses and discussions, providing a much-needed outsiders' perspective on our research process, as well as challenging our interpretations of our research paradigms. As we were writing this chapter, we met several times, discussing the data and the analysis, and developing the chapter iteratively during and between meetings.

Our analysis is divided into three sections. We first discuss the fieldwork in Brussels as described by three research group members. We then turn to group discussions of trustworthy research. Finally, we analyse the interview and observation background material.

## Brussels as a case of knowledge networks in practice

In this project we are concerned with normative and productive power effects (Foucault, 1977, 1986). Yet, during the fieldwork we recognised that power could not, and would not, remain an external study object (e.g. Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). Instead, the researchers exercised power in gaining access, and power was exercised over the researchers – for example, in how our backgrounds and credibility were assessed, how control was exercised over our physical bodies in security checks, and how monitoring technology like QR codes made institutional safeguards visible and felt. Institutional procedures were also present in the expectation that we should follow proper communication channels and know the process of establishing contacts. As one of our researchers reflected when participating in the fieldwork in Brussels, denying access was ultimately easy:

> The kind of negative feelings are related to what if this all falls apart, and what if we get a strict no. So that's related to the exercise of power because denying access is an easy thing to do.
>
> (Researcher 2)

These situations therefore posed a challenge to consistency during the research process, as one interview could quickly replace another (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Time spent on Brussels institutional procedures and bureaucracy was potentially deducted from interviews when meetings were agreed at a certain time. Yet being able to account for these rules and understanding the logic in which Brussels operated also opened access to speaking with powerful people. Relying on our own networks and personal contacts was thus paramount. One person we interviewed in our research explicitly mentioned that the only reason an interview had been granted was because one of our researchers knew the right people. In relation to this, we reflected on how our networks, which made data collection possible, were the same as policymakers used to verify our credibility and gain background information (see Chapter 8). It subsequently became evident that for our research and data collection to succeed, we needed to fit into the policymakers' schedules and procedures, and to capitalise on their networks.

During the interviews we utilised various proven strategies for collecting data in policy settings (drawing on Walford (2012) and Williams (2012), for example): giving affirmative reactions and withholding those reactions to nudge interviewees to focus on topics in which we were interested; name-dropping people known in the network to establish credibility; preparing for interviews by conducting background searches; and securing recommendations from those whom we initially wished to interview but could not. We were in turn tested by the interviewees: abbreviations were used in quick succession; our reactions were observed to see if we were following what the interviewee was saying; and we were corrected if we made mistakes in naming or recognising institutions. Some classic challenges associated with "elite interviews" (Dexter, 2006) were therefore also experienced: the interviewee occasionally led the interview; challenged the researchers or the research project; and took control of the time with long-winded answers. Yet some also showed vulnerability in interviews or presented their work enthusiastically. These observations span all the interviews we conducted in the European and Finnish policymaking settings.

This back and forth between researchers and participants and navigating questions of access helped establish trust and ensure continuing access to interviews. When trust was established, we felt that interviewees were forthcoming and shared their work and papers readily. We strove in turn to cultivate trust by promising interviewees transcripts of our discussions or allowing them to double-check the quotations we planned to use in our final manuscript. Building trust was beneficial for enhancing our research's credibility: we managed to secure longer interviews, reflect with interviewees on questions that had arisen during the research process, and discuss our initial interpretations with them (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Interestingly, we observed that a shared national background helped establish trust between researchers and interviewees. For example, we found that Finnish policymakers were more open in their accounts: in Brussels one was always seen as representing one's nationality, whereas the researcher's image and the institutions to which we belonged had less impact in Finland.

This was again related to one aspect of fieldwork in Brussels: people's image and reputation were constantly worked on and established in discussions and through networks. Here we observed our entanglement with our study context (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022), and that our own professional network history carried some weight. During interviews we worked to convey our interest in all kinds of knowledge with which policymakers engaged in their work to prevent being associated with a strict interest in scientific research as representatives of academia. Interestingly, when our interviewees also had an academic background, there was a sense that they understood the difficulties of research and helped us expedite data collection. We could in turn capitalise on this by emphasising our experience and history in various higher education institutions, and by referring to academia as a unifying factor during interviews.

The fieldwork in Brussels also exposed the "messiness" inherent in research (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022): merely being ushered into the meeting room could result in being positioned far away from the participants who were to be observed or interviewed. These instances could also work to our advantage, however. Waiting in the queue for security at the right time could be beneficial for establishing contact.

> We were aware that to bring in three persons to the parliament we'd have to contact the Member of the European Parliament's assistant. … And it just so happened that this assistant was also in the queue. And we agreed to think about this interview together, and they told their colleague to contact me. Well, we didn't get an interview, but we did get to participate in a discussion that wouldn't have happened if we hadn't been at the security check at the same time.
>
> (Researcher 1)

Not only understanding how Brussels worked but also capitalising on such moments was thus important for our data collection. Yet our networks in Brussels and the Finnish policymaking context brought additional ethical and methodological challenges that required us to reflect on and react to our bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). If our researcher knew an interviewee personally or through their work history, we agreed they would not participate in the interview. We also took steps to ensure that our interpretations did not conform to our own experiences as policymakers by subjecting our findings and claims to the whole research group's scrutiny.

## Our perceptions of what is considered trustworthy research

To better understand how our conceptions of trustworthy research influenced our research process and our interpretations during data analysis and writing this book, we arranged two reflexive group discussions with project members (Eeva, Forsell, Kallunki, Kauko, and Silvén). We pseudonymised our group members with numbers from 1 to 5.

The theme that entwined these reflections was the overall discussion of what was considered a trustworthy research process. This could be seen as an umbrella theme that combined all the other aspects. The discussion of what was considered a trustworthy research process was generally addressed from two perspectives: technical conduct; and the relationship between substance and values.

Our research group members saw trustworthy research processes as containing reflexivity, empiricism, systematicity, and a commitment to truthfulness. Our group also valued interdisciplinary approaches, emphasising the goal of producing new knowledge with an impact on the world. As a group we recognised that our perceptions of what we considered trustworthy research were affected not only by internalised and tacit assumptions of research processes as linear and systematic (see Rose & McKinley, 2017) but also by various traditions and conventions that could be difficult to untangle. Our perception as researchers today is influenced by our former studies, the literature we have read, research experiences, and our personal values, which can be difficult to articulate or analyse but are nevertheless compressed as individual perceptions of what is considered trustworthy research. We recognised that while research had consequences, there were reservations about what the actual societal impact of any research could be. Indeed, there was even a discussion of how this normative evaluation of research was out of our hands, as any reader would arrive at their own conclusions regarding our research's merits and societal impact. One member of the research group pondered on the difficulty of communicating the nuances and insecurities of research:

> I have this feeling, maybe a bit suppressed, that … we don't want anything vague. We want the vagueness to be gone. And then here is this knowledge claim and so on and so forth because it's much more impressive to present it in the research, because research has to be very clearcut. But when it isn't, how to get there is very difficult. I still don't really know because in my opinion the discourse is bigger – the power, everything.
>
> (Researcher 4)

The discussions also acknowledged research's critically transformative potential to produce views that could challenge pre-existing notions about gender, power relations, and policy, for example. From this perspective trustworthy research was evaluated through its intentions and consequences. In the group discussions our joint understanding was that despite surface-level differences in our onto-epistemic views and what we considered trustworthy research, the overarching perceptions were remarkably similar. Everyone's primary goal was to understand the research phenomena from a fresh perspective and to generate new knowledge that could lead to new insights and novel applications. We mentioned social constructionism and complexity thinking as onto-epistemological starting points or inspiration. However, there were also more pragmatic veins of thought, in which research was about results supported by data.

> My thought is more that it's quite empirically oriented in the sense that what we bring out with data – that's the science. And then how it's

> dressed up with different language games and positioning and all that – that's a different matter. And less interesting, actually.
>
> (Researcher 5)

From the perspective of what is considered technically trustworthy research, our discussions touched on the importance of collecting data systematically, examining the data from various perspectives, maintaining theoretical coherence, and defining concepts clearly. We identified these conceptions as stemming partly from our own histories and socialisation in academia, where as individuals we were initiated into certain discussions and values in specific times and places. However, we also seemed to share an understanding of our research's messiness, complexity, and context-dependency. This suggests that the specific nature of the research problem and research context needs to be considered when choosing appropriate methods, and also that the research's systematic and messy nature is not mutually exclusive but intertwined.

> And then here we perhaps have the assumption and norm, and what we've been trained to do, which is that concepts should preferably be defined clearly, unambiguously, and perhaps exclusively. And then when we start doing a literature review, they aren't defined. … We had a [visiting] researcher or a visiting professor, and my eyes were opened when they pointed out that a good concept doesn't exclude things but opens them up. Maybe I still prefer to exclude things by defining them rather than opening them up.
>
> (Researcher 2)

Methodologically, mixed methods and combining various data were appreciated. Indeed, one of the values seemed to point to a perception of methodological plurality as a richness. This methodological plurality was built into our project's combination of ethnography, network analysis, and interviews. While we recognised that different paradigms and questions would yield different perspectives as results, we all understood that these differences made research more interesting.

> I'm a bit of a borderline case in these matters, as I adhere to multiple scientific paradigms. … Even though I feel I'm a strong supporter of a very relativistic and subjective research approach, there's also a pragmatist in me. And methodologically, I see that mixed methods, not in all research topics of course, but often, are perhaps the best way to get the most information about the studied phenomenon.
>
> (Researcher 1)

Our ontological view seemed to favour understandings of reality as something stable and shared, not subjectively constructed. Epistemologically, the understandings were close to social constructionism and socio-materiality approaches (Fenwick, 2015).

Furthermore, we discussed the reconciliation of different backgrounds, working methods, and their impact on our research and writing process. The discussions highlighted the richness of diverse perspectives, as well as how different approaches could create friction when the accustomed and internalised ways of conducting research differed. It was generally acknowledged that these different perspectives enhanced our research's trustworthiness and produced a richer understanding of the subject.

> So, the basic point was just that somehow when I know that we're pleasantly different, there are different combinations. And when we put different combinations to work, then different results come out. So, I think that in itself brings diversity to the examination of the material.
>
> (Researcher 4)

We observed that it would have been important to have had reflexive discussions on different onto-epistemological perspectives in our research project's early stages. This left us wondering whether addressing conceptual, theoretical, and methodological "frictions" through dialogue could have helped us avoid some of the issues we faced during the research process. For example, we had long and complex disputes which might have been avoided had we had a better understanding of each other's perspectives earlier.

> What I myself thought was, what is the perspective related to writing analysis or writing processes that I'd like to share? And it's precisely a reflection of our way of working. And in that way, what I have myself, or how can I put it? That there are many hidden operating models that we can never fully explicate. That is, we have such familiar operating models – how we do research, how we write articles, what our perspective on the scientific world is.
>
> (Researcher 3)

Despite apparent differences in our onto-epistemic views and preferred research methods, we tended to agree on many aspects in practice. This consensus was evident in our group discussions. Paradigms are not a rigid package deal; rather, researchers can selectively adopt elements that resonate with them at any given moment (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Indeed, one discussion involved the question of which elements oriented the researchers' gaze. We seemed to agree that approaching data head-on provided a good starting point, while we also identified theory-driven approaches. We also discussed the intuitive nature of research. Following this, it could be questioned if research was ever strictly data- or theory-driven, or whether in practice we repeatedly moved between data and theory rather than linearly (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022).

We also reflected on how our preliminary conceptions of the research phenomena in question, as well as our interests, worked to privilege some views and marginalise others. While we recognised this as a general trait of research, we also discussed how much emphasis should be placed on this possibility of the unknown in research. We agreed here that our research team members' various backgrounds and experiences as a whole would benefit our research and our interpretations' credibility. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that if a researcher is deeply connected to the research topic, there is a risk of confirmation bias (Guba & Lincoln, 1985): it is much easier to pay attention to what we "know" already based on our experiences. However, this is a double-edged sword: a deep understanding of the phenomenon we are researching simultaneously allows a better insight and a possible blind spot when things do not fit with this prior knowledge:

> Yeah, so that's exactly what I also want to address, … what it leaves unseen because we're the ones doing this research. So, I've been thinking a lot about that. And just, in that way, it's interesting how one's own background at the same time makes you blind, but then at the same time it helps you see more. It's somehow really paradoxical. … So, of course, it's great that there are people from very different backgrounds here, that kind of also supports maybe the reliability, that we have five different set of eyes, five different backgrounds and experiences through which this is reflected.
>
> (Researcher 2)

Another major theme pertained to how our own preconceptions had been changed during the research process – if at all. One member of our research team discussed how their conception of evidence-based policymaking had changed during the interviews, with policymakers showing a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between politics and knowledge as always involving a human element. For another member of the team, however, this was less surprising, yet we discussed whether these conceptions of evidence-based policymaking were ever real or merely a fabrication that largely inhabited specific research literature. Similarly, another member found that their understanding of research as something "purer" or detached from politics and power struggles differed little from the world of politics. In relation to this perspective, a member raised the view that researchers had their own stake in power: for example, privileging research knowledge and expertise in research was also a way to promote researchers and academia themselves as something distinct.

We wish to emphasise how difficult or even impossible it is to analyse these group discussions "objectively" or separately from what we already know about these individuals and ourselves. It is intriguing to consider why we strive for such rigorous "objectivity" as researchers when examining ourselves in the reflexive part of the process (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). We assume this may be connected with the internalised and normative views of what is considered a methodologically sound research process. We therefore acknowledge the value of people outside our research group being involved in the reflection process and questioning our interpretations of the data.

In conclusion, it was evident that we all shared the view of the importance of everyone striving to understand the phenomena we researched as deeply as possible and ambitiously pursuing new knowledge. Although we had different routes for achieving the research project's overall aims, we all shared an understanding of the necessity of reflexive discussions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) throughout the project and addressing any possible biases (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) we might have because of our experiences and backgrounds. We noted that our research's overall trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) benefitted from our research group's methodological plurality and various perspectives.

## Evaluating knowledge, ruptures, and atmosphere

We identified three themes in the research interview memos and observation notes: knowledge evaluation; insecurities and ruptures; and describing the atmosphere in interview and observation situations. The memos and part of the notes we use here were means of personal reflection and method development. We therefore do not indicate researchers but simply show quotations in this subsection.

One of the most prominent and repeated themes in the interview notes was the evaluation of knowledge, as well as whether that knowledge was useful to us. As researchers we seemed interested and sometimes considered whether the interviewees gave us useful or relevant content. This evaluation was continuous, as suggested by descriptions such as "In passing they could mention interesting observations in subordinate clauses and, after general chitchat, end up discussing things that interested us," and "In my opinion the interviewee approached the topic very straightforwardly and provided useful answers. It became clear in several instances that we did not have the same understanding of the terminology."

The same topic was present in the observation matrices. This concern with trustworthiness had less to do with observations as a method and more with us as researchers trusting ourselves to notice the right things, and if we would be able to connect the flotsam of observational data with the larger question of knowledge networks – the extent to which our observations would hold true to reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Observing the European Parliament on site especially, where interpreters were depended on, raised the question of reliability of observations:

> I don't like simultaneous interpretation: it's difficult to follow what speakers are saying because interpreters translate and fix translations on the go. I can follow a speech in English and make some observations – but that's small consolation. I'm unsure how worthwhile observing is.

> Yet I don't know how that would differ in situ because there too interpretation would be challenge.

It seemed we asked ourselves whether the policymakers we observed were genuine in their actions, and if what we saw was indeed representative of what regularly occurred in meeting halls and parliamentary debates. By extension, we evaluated our observations based on their alignment with our understanding of policymaking's realities and necessities.

This evaluation of knowledge is understandable and natural: our interviewees were senior higher education policymakers. The stakes in every interview were high, as there would be no opportunity for another interview in some cases. We also conjecture that our preoccupation with a theoretical framework partly explains this, leading us to focus on the aspects arising from our project's theoretical backbones during our interviews. Another influence here may be intuitive insights prompted by experience.

Another theme in these notes was descriptions of events during interviews. These small ruptures can be interpreted as inconveniences that disturb research interview rituals. They are often described neatly in research articles (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). In research reports' methodology sections, interviews and interview situations are described as rational, strategic, well prepared and controlled. Research interviews can be all this, but they also contain moments of uncertainty, unplanned events, and the need to improvise (see Kosunen & Kauko, 2016). These messy disruptions are often eradicated from our academic writing, yet embracing these uncertainties and bringing them out openly can enhance the research process's trustworthiness and transparency (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). These ruptures can also reveal interesting aspects of conducting research that are seldom expressed. Here is an example from an interview memo:

> The interviewee also expressed some opinions quite boldly, then glanced at the recorder and said something to the effect that perhaps they shouldn't have said it so provocatively. The same boldness continued until a woman with a Marimekko bag sat at the table behind us: we guessed the woman was probably Finnish, and the interviewee apparently guessed the same thing (and as [the other interviewer] noted, the interviewee possibly knew her as well), and after that the interviewee spoke more generally and cautiously. However, this happened only towards the very end of the interview, so the potential harm of an inquisitive ear was minimal.

The interview notes also revealed uncertainties we navigated as researchers. Some interviews did not proceed as planned because of technical difficulties in online interviews, or because we lacked the time to prepare for one granted at a moment's notice, for example:

> We'd tried to arrange this interview for a month. However, the interview was only confirmed a few days before, and the meeting room became the

> interview location, even though I tried to suggest a quieter place. We were able to anticipate that the meeting room might be noisy, and that there could be interruptions or even a cancellation.

Although we tried to tackle these uncertainties with well-prepared interview frameworks and thorough studies of our interviewees' backgrounds, we occasionally needed to resort to improvisation. This could arouse unpleasant feelings. Improvisation and intuition play an important role in the research process, however, and bringing out the research process's natural messiness (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022) demonstrates that high research ethics are being followed. It is uncertain what added value acknowledging this messiness gives to our methodological considerations, but we see transparency as crucial for our research's overall trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). At least in action research, acknowledging the messiness can be considered "a vital element for seeing, disrupting, analysing, learning, knowing and changing" and a place where our internalised, naturalised, and long-held beliefs can be questioned (Cook, 2009, p. 277). It is also a reminder that researchers are human beings who make mistakes.

Third, in most of the interview notes at least a couple of lines described the overall atmosphere and social interaction between the interviewee and interviewer or interviewers. A positive atmosphere and interaction in interviews was considered an important factor in their success. A relaxed and easy atmosphere combined with trust was seen as a way to obtain more information. In the great majority of interviews, the interviewees had a generally positive attitude to the interviewers. They wished to help and engage in open discussion:

> We'd tried to conduct the same background research on the interviewee as we did on others, but no information was available from public sources. … The preliminary information suggested the interviewee would be reserved, but on the contrary, the interviewee was very talkative and open. … The interview was extremely informative and valuable compared with expectations.

Many of our interviewees were eloquent speakers and skilful discussants. They were thus able to steer the discussion. This required the interviewers to remain alert and have substantive knowledge to redirect the conversation to keep within the interview's planned framework. Interestingly, the interviewees sometimes created an impression of exerting power over the researchers, and some seemed to attempt to convince us of the importance of their knowledge. Indeed, as researchers we were part of the higher education policy network we were researching.

We also analysed the atmosphere in the observation matrices from another angle. We were emotionally invested in fieldwork and observations. A prominent topic in the observation matrices therefore concerned researchers' reflection on their own emotional states and interpretation of others' emotions. For example, an observation note discussed how "the increase in formality can perhaps be simply explained by the fact that it was a joint meeting, and not all the participants necessarily knew each other." There was relief among researchers when it was understood that they were free to conduct their observations without policymakers paying any explicit attention to them. When policymakers drew attention to the researchers' background or history, this in turn produced a sense of unease. This underlines how difficult it is for researchers to remain separate from their research contexts (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). Rather than dismissing researchers' entanglement with the context, however, we recognised its importance for data collection and exploited it to challenge our findings (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Sensing the atmosphere was implicitly visible in the observation notes and in the presence of our previous experiences and histories. For example, when describing what was happening, observers used words and phrases like "usually," "normally," and "familiar to me," indicating a personal connection with the context. This is reflected in the following note:

> Even though the context was familiar to me, the observations were a challenge. We had a new observation matrix that was piloted for the first time at the Monday meeting on 24 October. In addition, observing was interrupted because I was discussing interviewing practicalities with a policymaker.

Although the fact that our researchers belonged to the networks we were studying made our study possible, it also introduced the potential for bias in observations. Undertaking observations together was thus well received by everyone in our project. Having at least two interpretations of the same situation was seen to add to our research's credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) and to ease an individual researcher's discomfort concerning their observations' trustworthiness.

## Conclusions and discussion

Our group reflections lead us to conclude that our different perspectives, positions, and experiences add to our study's trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). The chapter also highlights how seemingly incompatible theoretical approaches and research paradigms work together, reinforcing our understanding of how important it is to engage in dialogue between research group members to address the tensions that may arise from different methodological backgrounds and epistemological approaches, thus enhancing our research's credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

Trustworthiness was built on extensive dialogue to challenge our beliefs and conceptions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017) about how to study education policy, and how to engage with tricky concepts like power, knowledge, and networks. Indeed, our research group's biweekly meetings were a stage for intense reflexive discussions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009) of topics such as the best way to observe knowledge and networks in committees, how interviews should be conducted and who should be involved, how to operationalise concepts like power and knowledge, and how we could approximate and construct a network of policymakers based on open data.

These continuous discussions, their intensity and difficulty, and our literature review point to the inherent difficulty and complexity of concepts like knowledge and networks. Instead of arriving at clearly defined conceptions of knowledge and networks, they have been and remain a point of contestation (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022) during the project. In some respects this goes against the smoothed-out narrative in which we first define concepts, operationalise and apply them, and in a sense close that branch of enquiry (see Rose & McKinley, 2017), instead emphasising how the very concepts on which we have built this project are themselves a point of enquiry and contestation. Drafting and redrafting our (individual and collective) conceptual framings on paper, returning to them, and discussing and redrafting them again are both a sign of the importance of these conceptualisations for our research and of the necessity to allow for reiterations and new interpretations as we challenge our own understandings and expectations of our research context.

A key element of this ongoing reflexivity concerned how power and access were entangled with our researcher positions as part of this knowledge network. In a sense we could see the network come alive here: previous contacts provided access to the network. This underlined the idea that as researchers we belonged to this knowledge network, instead of the network being a separate and external object of research. The project researchers' networks provided access in practice to otherwise inaccessible policymakers. Our position as part of these knowledge networks, combined with our discussions and negotiations of theoretical concepts and our empirical observations, enhanced our research project's dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Reflexive discussions enabled us to challenge our own and each other's interpretations of the phenomena (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Reflexivity continued throughout the building of our empirical framework, where our previous discussions and negotiation of our project's main theoretical concepts were operationalised as our interview questions and observation matrices. During these discussions our personal connections illustrated how the same topic appeared different from a policymaking outsider or insider perspective. Some interactions and events seemed noteworthy and relevant to the outsider, whereas they were contextualised as part of everyday work for the insider, perhaps resulting in an emphasis on specific knowledge and information (Addey & Piattoeva, 2022). Having two researchers with insider perspectives thus enabled us to produce rich data and to cross-examine them from both perspectives, strengthening our project's dependability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) and ensuring consistency in data collection (Amankwaa, 2016).

One of the consistent themes, and a connecting thread running through all our reflexive data, was the constant evaluation of what was considered important knowledge and its usefulness from our research project's perspective. We need to ask what this constant evaluation tells us about the research process in general. If we instantly deem some data more valuable, we may miss some key information hidden more deeply in the data. We should also be aware that the knowledge we produce in this project is entangled with the creation and continuation of power structures. The knowledge we produce ourselves represents the phenomena we study in a specific light.

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