

“We are all living on a big spaceship”: A grounded theory study
on the lived experience of newly elected MEPs



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Abstract

Using a grounded theory qualitative research approach the author constructs a theoretical framework around understanding the subjective experience of incoming (newly elected) Member European Parliament (MEPs) to the European Parliament and proposes a theory to explain the relationship between MEPs and the Parliament. A select group of MEPs were interviewed around their subjective experience of joining the European Parliament, and how they attempt to resolve their main concerns. The author used a grounded study framework proposed by Tie et al (2019) which is designed to assist the novice researcher. In an on-going iterative process of 'comparative analysis' which stayed close to the original data, the author 'reached down to fundamentals' and 'up to abstract understandings' (Charmaz 2012) while exploring the emerging concepts, to theorise that when transitioning into the EU Parliament, MEPs experience a changing identity, and in seeking to shape parliament, MEPs are themselves shaped by the parliament.

The findings suggest that newly elected MEPs experience a changing identity on joining the Parliament, and in response attempt to change the Parliamentary structures and practices. The Parliament however resists change by a socialising process. The MEPs themselves are changed during their term in office, and the Parliament remains fundamentally unchanged. The process is repeated with the periodic arrival of newly elected MEPs.

Chapter 1: Introduction

MEP: ... I am always telling my friends at home we are living...in a big, like in a ...um.. um what's that in English [making gestures]

Researcher: Like in a bubble?

MEP: Not like, in a bubble yes yes, that's one thing but the other thing, like in star trek you have a big...

Researcher: Spaceship?

MEP: A spaceship! We are living in a big spaceship...

The above is an exchange I had with an MEP early on in my research. It demonstrates how many of the newly elected MEPs felt about the European Parliament: that it could be a strange, otherworldly environment. Even for those on the outside, the parliament may be considered a sprawling, fractured terrain; a constantly evolving entity with over 7,500 staff, spread over two locations, currently consisting of 751 members (known as MEPs) who are directly elected from 28 (now 27) member states every 5 years to represent European Union (EU) citizens. Arguably, it could be said that the parliament is the most democratic of the EU's institutions, due to its members being directly elected by European citizens. Yet it has also been criticised as not having enough power (Moser 1994), and should have more power (Noury & Roland, 2002); being just 'lucky' as opposed to powerful (Selck & Steunenber, 2004); or being totally irrelevant to some¹; suggesting that there is little consensus on the role of this institution.

However, despite the indeterminacy on the purpose of the European Parliament and its evolving nature, as an institution it is relatively permanent and stable.

In contrast, the life cycle of any individual MEP is rather brief. The rate of turnover of MEPs in the Parliament is considerably high, with typically over 50% of MEPs not being re-elected during any given election (Whitaker, 2014). This effectively means a standardised large scale

¹ In terms of an "electoral connection" between the European Parliament and the electorate, Bjørn H & Hix S (2013) state that it is "non-existent"; and that few citizens are aware of how the parliament functions or even its importance (Hix & Noury & Roland, 2007, p 26)

redundancy/lay off every 5 years. In the most recent elections, which took place May 2019, there were over 400 first time newly elected MEPs (meaning new MEPs made up 61% of the overall number)². In terms of election or re-election, for the majority of MEPs, other factors such the popularity of their national party, or even the timing of the European elections, are greater determinants for success rather than the actions of the individual MEP (Hix & Marsh, 2007).

Such a situation is unusual within most working environments (where turnover is typically more gradual or constant); particularly in such a relatively stable existing institution such as the EP. Both the quantity and the coordination of the turnover, raises questions on how the institution manages this dramatic (in)flux and whether the relatively high turnover of MEPs enhances or hinders the functioning of Parliament; and how new MEPs manage this transition.

The reflections of newer MEPs may give some insight into the effects of this turnover, both on how the institution attempts to accommodate and the experience of new MEPs; and discover whether there is anything that can be learned from their early experiences of parliament, before their (quite probable) exit from parliament in the following elections.

I will use a grounded theory research approach to construct a theoretical framework aimed at understanding the subjective experiences of newly elected MEPs to the European Parliament. This research will draw from across three methodological genres within grounded theory ('traditional', 'evolved' and 'constructivist'), in seeking to understand the incoming data gathered from interviews with individual MEPs. At the outset of this research, using a 'traditional' grounded theory approach (Glaser, 1978), the author adopted an 'objective observer' stance, and taking a 'positivist' approach to the incoming data by considering it as objective fact, and searching for an 'ordinary' explanation for the behaviour of the participants (MEPs) and how they engage with their environment (the European Parliament). However, it became apparent that in recounting their subjective experiences, MEPs attached deeper significance to certain interactions, with their understanding to be at the more abstract and conceptual level. It was therefore appropriate in analysing some of the data to use an

²

<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/en/press-room/20190627IPR55404/constitution-of-the-9th-legislature-of-the-european-parliament>

‘evolved’ grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approach and consider the symbolic meaning MEPs may be ascribing to aspects of their experience (e.g. ‘living in a spaceship’). Both approaches focus on identifying ‘a single process or core category’ (Creswell, 2013).

In this study ‘identity’ emerged as a core category and it was possible to link this category descriptively to other sub-categories, via an axial coding process. A resultant ‘ordinary’ explanation or theoretical framework emerged in the form of a ‘narrative statement’ (Creswell & Brown, 1992). The author then sought to create a more theoretical understanding of the MEP’s experience by adopting a ‘constructivist’ grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2012). This involved the author taking a more interpretivist stance (in contrast to an ‘objective observer’ stance) and considering the data as representing a range of MEP interpretations and perspectives, rather than ‘objective’ facts. This involved taking a more flexible approach to the methodology. Rather than focusing on one central phenomena, it instead focuses on multiple interpreted realities. The resultant theory of this research is therefore more abstract and consists of both the participant’s and the researcher’s perspectives or view of reality. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Throughout the process the author adhered to research methods that are common across all three grounded theory genres. These included *coding* the initial data and comparing data already gathered to incoming data in a *constant comparative* cycle in order to identify relevant themes and patterns. Throughout the process the author maintained a record of her own reflections on the process, in a series of *memos* which are designed to ‘feed’ the researcher’s own thoughts and ideas back into the incoming data. In this way the author becomes more ‘immersed’ in the data and shifts stance from that of an ‘objective’ observer of the data, to a more ‘interpretivist’ position.

The proposed theory will seek to explain the relationship between MEPs and the European Parliament that, as a result of this methodology, goes beyond a merely formal description and seeks to draw out the personal relationship that structures MEPs’ experiences.

1.1. Outline of This Study

One of the advantages of using a grounded theory approach is how structured the guidelines are for such a study. However, the method can be complex and includes variations. As a

novice researcher the author initially adopted the Tie et al. (2019) framework designed to structure a grounded theory approach for an inexperienced researcher. The research framework outlined by Tie et al, provides clear steps to follow both for data collection and data analysis, as well as actions (such as making memos and constantly comparing data) to be done concurrently throughout the research.

In grounded research, data collection and data analysis occur simultaneously. Therefore, drawing a firm line between both stages is not only redundant, but would in fact hinder the research. The following is a brief outline of the study that includes both data collection and analysis, and does not yet clearly define the step of grounded theory research.

A selected group of four newly elected MEPS in 2019, described in the study as the purposive group, were interviewed around their subjective experience of joining the European Parliament, and how they attempted to resolve their main concerns. Following an initial coding process, a pattern emerged of enthusiastic MEPs becoming disorientated upon entering the complex and polarised environment of the European Parliament, where it is ‘difficult to make your voice heard’³. In a process of ‘theoretical sampling’ this pattern was further explored and developed in subsequent interviews with a further ten participants. An ‘ordinary’ explanation emerged around MEPs’ attempts to find a role within Parliament while experiencing work overload and time pressures. Connections between aspects of the MEPs experiences were explored via an intermediate or axial coding process. A linear response was identified, which ranged from initial enthusiasm to protest, pragmatic responses, adjustment and eventually to cynicism. MEPs then either leave early or do not seek re-election. New incoming MEPs continue to ‘feed’ the cycle.

At this stage, the research study was impacted by government restrictions which were implemented in response to a COVID-19 pandemic. This precluded the further gathering of data by ‘face to face’ interview and interrupted the ‘theoretical sampling’ process before ‘theoretical saturation’ (that is, no new patterns or insights were emerging in subsequent interviews) was achieved. The author had however already gathered a significant amount of data and could also draw on data from other sources including email and telephone conversations with MEPs, and observations and insights already gained from working as an

³ This is a code used later in this study.

intern in the parliament. It is appropriate within the grounded study process to using data sources other than interviews, as ‘all is data’ (Glasser, 1998)

As an alternative to further developing a single ‘core category’ around ‘identity’, (which had been identified within the axial coding process), the author expanded the study to also explore other emerging categories, using a ‘constructivist’ grounded theory methodology, and analysed and hypothesised as to how all categories may be interrelated via both explicit and implicit links. Concepts emerged around ‘disorientation’ and ‘role unfamiliarity’. This appeared to support a more abstract or interpretative understanding of the MEP’s experience. It appears that, on undertaking an unfamiliar role in an unfamiliar environment, the MEP may experience a loss of their sense of identity. This may then result in a disorientating experience. Responses are then evoked around seeking to recover the ‘lost identity’ and seeking to establish a ‘new identity’. This can then exacerbate feelings of disorientation and result in high levels of stress.

In an on-going iterative process of ‘comparative analysis’ which re-referenced the original data, the author ‘reached down to fundamentals’ and ‘up to abstract understandings’ (Charmaz, 2012) to theorise that in transitioning into the European Parliament, MEPs experience a changing identity and, in seeking to shape parliament, MEPs are themselves shaped by the parliament.

The preceding steps will be laid out in detail in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 with footnotes containing memos and references to appendices, in order to provide sufficient evidentiary support for the analysis outlined above. In Chapter 6, the study is placed in the context of a literature review and discussed in relation to its findings and the limits of the methodology. An intrinsic aspect of a grounded study is the recording of the researcher’s thoughts, reflections and interaction with the data and with the research process. These are recorded in memos. Throughout this study, the author’s memos have been included in footnotes in order to demonstrate further details of the thinking process behind the study.

Chapter 2: Research Question

In this chapter, I will present the research questions that this thesis explores, and briefly discuss the conditions/process by which these questions emerged. Furthermore, the epistemological and philosophical assumptions that undergird them will be discussed.

Similar to other forms of qualitative inquiry, the research question in a grounded theory approach typically explores social processes. However, in contrast to other forms of qualitative research, where the research question “directs how the study proceeds” (Birks & Mills, 2015, p. 20), the research question in grounded theory, “it is the research process that generates the question” (ibid.). The character of research questions in grounded theory is to emphasize social processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This orientation lends itself to more open questions. For the purposes of this study, the research question must be open, and allow research to evolve naturally.

The author first decided to narrow the focus of the study to newly elected MEPs, as it could be argued that established MEPs who have served in the parliament longer will have more insight into being an MEP. However, new MEPs are undergoing a very different experience of transition to that of the more established MEP. The author felt that the immediacy of that transitional experience might render the social processes more accessible to both the newly elected MEPs and to the author, as a researcher. The cohort of research participants was therefore specific, and consisted of newly elected MEPs from across the political spectrum talking retrospectively about their first year in parliament, one year into their term of office.

The author then considered the question of whether it is possible to fully understand the subjective experience of another. The difficulty is perhaps illustrated in an influential paper in which the philosopher Thomas Nagle asked, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” (1974). Nagle proposes that it is reasonable to assume that bats, although they are very different to us, have a subjective experience. However, attempts to understand their experience by using physical descriptions of typical ‘bat behaviour’ (i.e. hanging upside down, using echolocation etc.) will not lead to any greater insight on what it is *like* to be a bat. Even behaving like a bat will not get us into the ‘mindset’ of a bat. Despite knowing all there is to know about the behaviour of bats we will still be ignorant of what it is like to *be* a bat. We would only know

what it would be for *us* to *act* like a bat and how we might feel doing this. It would not explain what it is like *for a bat* to be a bat. But the analogy cannot completely apply to human beings who, unlike bats, can communicate with the researcher in a language which can be understood. Nagle contends nevertheless, that despite knowing every objective, observable, physical, behaviour of another person, there will still be something *missing*, something unobservable that prevents us from fully understanding their experience.

In any event, even if it was possible to fully understand the ‘unique’ subjective experience of a specific individual, there is a question raised around how inherently useful this understanding may be. Nietzsche’s concept of ‘perspectivism’ argues that an individual’s perspective or understanding both helps and restricts how that individual understands the world. Seeing things from one perspective prevents the individual from seeing things from another perspective (e.g. looking left will allow us to see what is in that direction but prevent us seeing what is on our right). It could be argued that what we ‘think’ we see depends on our unique combination of knowledge and previous experience. Mautner (1997, p. 418) suggests that “there is no escaping the partial or perspectival restriction of experience and knowledge”. Therefore, viewing anything through only one perspective may be inherently limiting, and has been described as “just looking through a bamboo tube at the corner of the sky” (Tanahashi and Dogen, 2011, citing the 13th century philosopher Dōgen Zenji).

The author then considered if and how a ‘limited’ understanding of an individual MEP’s ‘restricted’ perspectives, might be applied to a wider understanding of the experience of a group of MEPs, who are varied, different and cannot be regarded as a monolith. One MEP, when informed of my research, doubted that it was possible to find significant commonalities between such a large group of individuals. However, on thinking it over again, stated “well, there is common ground, we face many of the same challenges, however, how we deal with those challenges, is how we differ”. Therefore, there may be a ‘commonality’ of experiences that can contribute to a wider, perhaps objective, understanding. Anderson (2017) suggests that ‘objectivity’ can perhaps be achieved by “exploiting the difference between one perspective and another, using each to overcome the limitations of others”. This view is supported by Nietzsche (cited in Kaufmann 1969, p .87) who suggests that “the more eyes, various eyes we are able to use for the same thing, the more complete will be our concept of the thing, our ‘objectivity’”.

Thus any ‘answer’ to this research will be qualified by the limits around our ability to fully understand another’s experience, the limits inherent in the narrow nature of a ‘subjective’ experience itself, and the difficulties involved in extrapolating individual experience and applying it to a group situation. The author, nevertheless, considered the possible merits of ‘multiple perspectives’ in developing a ‘textured understanding’ (Charmaz, 2012) of the group experience, in deciding to research MEPs as a group⁴.

The author therefore intended to approach the research question around understanding the subjective experience of MEPs by adopting a ‘constructivist’ research paradigm which takes an ontological position that there are multiple ‘realities’ that are subjectively interpreted, and that these ‘realities’ can be understood epistemologically by interpretations of the underlying meanings. The author considers that an appropriate research methodology is a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach which emphasizes social processes (Strauss & Corbin 1990), and co-construction of meaning.

Thus, after the above process the research questions for this study are as follows:

- *How do new MEPs experience the transition into the European Parliament?*
- *What were their main concerns about Parliament and their role as MEPs?*

These initial research questions were open enough to allow an exploration of the subjective experience of newly elected MEPs, and let the data itself lead the research. It was not possible to ‘narrow’ the questions further until themes around ‘identity’, ‘timescales and space’, and ‘institutional functioning’ emerged from the incoming data and suggested a specific direction for the study.

2.1. Literature Review

Qualitative methods have often been used to help understand and explore political institutions. Such explorations allow a view behind the scenes of such institutions, in order to see ‘everyday politics’ in action. MEPs have been the subject of many qualitative studies, and multiple methods have been used to explore their work. These include the anthropological and ethnographic work of Wodak (2009), Abélès (1993 & 1992) and Busby (2013), as well

⁴ Memo: In being aware that my research findings were not going to represent the one ‘True’ account of being an MEP; this gave me the freedom to immerse myself in the data.

as the mixed method sociological approaches of Landorff (2019) and Bale & Taggart (2006). These qualitative approaches allow us to perceive the role of individual actions within institutions. The present study is situated within this area, and views the individual actions, motivations and behaviours of politicians as being critical to having a more complete, nuanced, understanding of politics and political institutions.

Both within the literature and the institution itself, there appears to be no definitive agreement on the role of MEPs. In theory, MEPs have some clear guidelines which they should follow in order to fulfil their role as MEPs. However, in practice, despite some rules and procedures being set out to guide their work, MEPs often have to balance competing concerns, such as whether to support the interests of their own country first or that which would benefit the European Union as a whole; to be loyal to their national political party or to the political grouping they are members of in the European Parliament. Bale & Taggart (2006) have highlighted this variation within the MEPs as a group, suggesting that there are several different ‘types’ of MEPs, who hold a variety of motivations and beliefs, on how to ‘be’ an MEP. Bale & Taggart (2006) identify ‘freshmen MEPs’ and the roles they choose (or their ‘role orientation’) in order to see whether MEPs behave in predictable manner and to study if and how these responses change over time, as they stay longer in the European Parliament (2005). Both understanding roles as “attitudes intertwined with behaviour”.

A review of the relevant literature lends support to the research findings around the subtle role political institutions may play in shaping politicians. Handy’s (1993) work supports this study’s proposition that the amorphous nature of the EU Parliament can contribute to difficulties around role definition and establishing identity. Research by Obholzer and Roberts (1994) point to the difficulties around ‘collaborative’ group structures and the resulting changes in individual behaviour when such groups are formed within organizations with unclear boundaries.

A significant paper for this study comes from Mechthild Roos (2020). Roos studies how the efforts of early MEPs shaped the way the European Parliament functions to this day. Roos looks at these early MEPs’ role in the institutional development of the parliament. The actions and behaviours of early MEPs leaned towards those of ‘Euro-parliamentarians’ rather than national politicians. Through the lens of Europeanization, Roos highlights these early MEPs’ socialization into Parliament P, where “Inside the EP, MEPs were therefore both

themselves Europeanized and pushed for the Europeanization of the EP more generally”. Later cohorts of MEPs became socialized through following established patterns and procedures (set by early MEPs). Roos’ work is in tension with that of Roger Scully (2005). Scully found that, based on evidence of MEPs’ attitudes and behaviour, MEPs “do not become more pro-integration as they are socialised into the institution”, and that MEPs largely remain national politicians, leading to several implications on the nature of integration within the EU. However, both of these works focus primarily on the Europeanization and pro-integration aspects of the European Parliament from the outset. In other words, they choose to let their question lead their research. In contrast, this research lets the MEP’s thoughts and reflections lead the research; without attempting to impose any preconceived theories on the results.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this section, the author will discuss the methodology of grounded research, its history and the three iterations of grounded theory method that were utilized in this study. This section will then detail the data collection methods employed. In this regard, the interview process was the primary means of data collection. Therefore, due to its importance within the research, the interviews process will be discussed in detail and given in-depth consideration. The framework used to structure memos will be laid out. Furthermore, ethical considerations when interviewing people and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on data collection are also reviewed.

The method chosen for academic inquiry should be based upon the research requirements and objectives (Cassell & Johnson, 2006 and Cavana et al., 2001). This study seeks to understand the subjective experience of a group of participants (MEPs) therefore a qualitative approach is indicated. A Grounded Theory research approach was chosen as the aim of the study was to develop a theory which was ‘grounded’ in the experiences and perspectives of newly elected MEPs. Grounded Theory is a qualitative research approach originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) who proposed that research could start with data from which a theory could be generated, through a process of induction. The theory would then provide an explanation for the data.

3.1. Three Types of Ground Theory

Tie et al. (2019) describe the ‘three distinct methodological genres’ within grounded theory as ‘traditional’, ‘evolved’ and ‘constructivist’ grounded theory. A ‘traditional’ grounded theory (Glaser, 1978) approach aims to generate a conceptual theory that explains the behaviour of the subjects of the research (Tie et al., 2019). The researcher assumes an ‘objective observer’ position in relation to the research participants, whose behaviour is analysed by the researcher. In ‘traditional’ grounded theory the data is considered real and already existing, and the grounded theory steps are the ‘conduit’ to its discovery.

The initial stage of a grounded study research approach is to gather data by interview from a selected group of participants, described as the ‘purposive group’. By an ‘open coding’

process the data is then coded, and similar codes are placed together in descriptive groups. The researcher then identifies links between these groups and places these linked groups together to form categories.

The researcher then explores and develops these categories further, in interviews with more participants, in a process known as 'theoretical sampling'. This involves the researcher specifically focusing subsequent interviews on the categories that have emerged from the purposive group. The researcher will also be alert to any new categories that may emerge. Throughout this process the researcher will constantly review the initial codes and groups that have already emerged from the purposive group and compare them with the incoming data from the 'theoretical sampling' group. This 'iterative process' is described as a 'constant comparative' method, and its aim is to achieve 'theoretical saturation'.

This 'zigzag' (Creswell, 2013, p. 86) cycle between interview transcripts, initial codes, groups, emerging categories, and the researcher's memos (containing the researcher's evolving thoughts and ideas) continues until the categories have been developed to the point where further incoming data is not resulting in new insights. This is termed 'theoretical saturation' or 'theoretical sufficiency'. The researcher's ability to recognise the significance and relevance of incoming data, with reference to data previously collected from the purposive group, is described as 'theoretical sensitivity'.

The 'traditional' grounded theory approach suggests that a 'core' category is then selected around which other (sub) categories may be linked in a process, using a visual model, described as axial coding. This latter approach links the identified core category to the sub-categories, both descriptively and conceptually, using a Strauss and Corbin framework which considers the core category in relation to 'casual', 'response' and 'consequence' factors. The relationships between the 'core' and 'sub' categories is further developed via 'selective coding' and then described within the theory.

An 'evolved' grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) approach emphasises the symbolic meaning people ascribe to social interactions and is described as the 'imagined understanding of the other person's role and response during interaction' (Charmaz, 2012, p. 127).

Creswell (2013) suggests that 'traditional' and 'evolved' grounded theory takes a systematic approach to the development of a single process or core category. The resultant theory can

then take the form of a 'narrative statement' (citing Strauss & Corbin, 1990), a visual picture (citing Morrow & Smith, 1995), or a series of hypotheses or propositions (citing Creswell & Brown, 1992).

In a 'constructivist' grounded theory approach the assumption is that "what we take for real is based on our perspective" (Charmaz, 2003). The researcher "co-constructs experience and meanings with participants" (Tie et al., 2019). This co-construction therefore consists of both the participant's and the researcher's perspectives or view of reality (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

As part of this co-construction the researcher 'interacts with the data' by maintaining a record of their own reflections on the process, in a series of memos which 'feed' the researcher's own thoughts and ideas back into the incoming data. This inevitably results in periods of confusion as the researcher attempts to understand what is emerging from the process. This confusion is intrinsic to the grounded theory research process and, if the process is to remain grounded in the data, it is necessary for the novice researcher to accept this inevitable confusion. Shahid (2014) suggests that the researcher is required to tolerate a degree of confusion while waiting for "conceptual sense... to emerge from the data". The process of keeping memos, however, also helps the researcher to both clarify some of the confusion and to recognise significant data emerging in subsequent interviews. The author continually strived to maintain an awareness of her own assumptions and distinguish them from those of the participants. In interacting with the data and co-constructing the experience with the participants, the author tried to ensure that the research remains focused on the subjective experiences of the participants not on the researcher's own interpretation of the participant's experience.

The aim is to enter the participant's world, learn their views and actions and try to understand their lives from their perspectives. Having an open mind, but not an empty head' (Charmaz, 2020, p. 26).

In constructivist grounded theory the process itself creates the data. (Charmaz, 2012, p. 132). Constructivist grounded theory takes a more flexible approach to methodology, and rather than focusing on one central phenomena, it instead focuses on multiple interpreted realities. The resultant theory is framed by the researcher's perspective, and is "suggestive,

incomplete, and inconclusive” (Charmaz, 2005 cited in Creswell, 2013 p. 88).

3.2. Data Collection Methods

For this research, data was collected via face-to-face, phone and email interviews with MEPs and their assistants. Further data was gathered by the author’s own observations which helped to both supplement memos and the overall analysis. The memos may also be considered part of data collection, as they detailed and recorded observations, thoughts and reflections on the unfolding process.

I was initially undecided how to structure my memos. I had numerous ideas and an overload of information. Once the interviews and data collection commenced, I became aware that my memos (and my thoughts) had become very disorganised. At first, I just hoped that they would become more coherent towards the end of my thesis. I then decided to put some form of structure on my memos, although by their nature memos tend towards being haphazard and disorganised as they represent the random thought processes of the author.

In deciding how to best structure my Memos to both engage with the data and facilitate my learning, I initially considered using the Kolb theory of learning. Kolb et al. (2000) proposes a four stage learning cycle of experience, reflection and formation of new ideas, which are then tested or applied. The cycle is repeating and continuous. This has parallels with the grounded study process.

Handy (1993, p. 27) learning theory however appeared to offer a more suitable framework. He describes the process of learning as occurring in a four-stage circular process of:

1. Questioning, which he describes as working “from experience outward, not inward from models”. This is a similar concept to the data gathering approach of a grounded study where a theory emerges from the data rather than the data being fitted into a pre-conceived theory.

2. Conceptualisation, which he describes as “setting the experience or problem in a more general context or framework”. This parallels the grounded study process of initially coding the data, then grouping, categorising and developing concepts.
3. Experimentation is described as “testing to see if our better understandings lead to better predictions”. This parallels the grounded study iterative process of ‘testing’ emerging concepts by returning to the data using ‘constant comparison’ methods and theoretical sampling.
4. Consolidation, where “concepts are internalised and future actions are based on new hypothesis” and “the lesson has been learnt”. This could equally be a description of the the grounded study stage of development of a new theory. Handythen suggests that consolidation becomes “the start of a new exploration, a fresh cycle of understanding”. Similarly, in a grounded study, the theory developed becomes the basis for developing further understandings.

Thus, Handy’s learning cycle parallels the grounded study cycle of theory development. Therefore, my aim is to use Handy’s circular learning process to allow my own understanding of grounded theory to develop in tandem with my developing understanding of the subjective experiences of newly elected MEP transitioning into the European Parliament.

At the time of this research, the author was on work placement in the European Parliament, as a research assistant to a newly elected MEP. Therefore, research was complemented with non-participant observations that occurred throughout the course of the author’s time in parliament. Her presence in the parliament allowed the author to get a sense of the ebb and flow of the lives of MEPs and engage in informal conversations with MEPs and other parliamentary staff. This experience helped in writing memos and increased my awareness of the context in which MEPs were operating in. Moreover, access to the building allowed greater freedom and flexibility in meeting with MEPs, as the author was able to meet MEPs at a moment’s notice, and did not require being signed into the parliament building⁵.

⁵ Memo: My decision to explore the subjective experience of incoming MEPs to the EU Parliament arose during a work experience placement within the European Parliament as part of an MA European Politics and Society (EPS). My decision was influenced by the following factors:

My work placement as a research assistant was with a newly elected MEP.

As the location of my work placement was within the European Parliament, I anticipated having opportunity to access MEPs. As I was also ‘new’ to the Parliament, as a research assistant, I felt that I might be able to identify with some of the MEP experiences.

To arrange interviews with MEPs, the author sought ‘expressions of interest’ from newly elected MEPs by means of a ‘broadcast’ email. The steps leading to the interviews required some planning. There are over 400 newly elected MEPs. An option considered was to send the same email to the entire list of MEPs. As the author had a European Parliament email at the time, this would have been relatively straightforward. Emails are regularly sent across the entire legislator to inform MEPs, their assistants and other parliament staff, about various subjects from documents for an upcoming plenary to housing advertisements. However, the author felt this was not the right approach, as this would have included MEPs who have been in EP longer than one term (i.e. those falling outside the proposed research cohort). While it would have been possible to include an apology to those MEPs, I felt that this would merely add to the considerable amount of emails that MEPs receive on a daily basis. Furthermore, there would have been no way to address MEPs individually, but only an impersonal ‘Dear MEP’ salutation. I believed that my email was more likely to be received positively if it was more targeted and specific. Therefore, I chose to send an email addressed to each relevant MEP individually.

Generally, there is a list of incoming MEPs available on the EU Open Data Portal. However this currently only includes the incoming MEPs who became Members of the European Parliament after the United Kingdom withdrew from Parliament following Brexit⁶. Therefore I had to create a list of all incoming MEPs for the 2019-2024 term manually. To create such a list I had to manipulate two datasets available from the EU Open Data Portal. The first was the list of MEPs elected in 2019 (704 members)⁷, and the second was the list of MEPs elected in 2014 (748 members)⁸.

To create a basic list of "new" MEPs, I then removed all duplicate entries from the 2019 list that also appeared in the 2014 list. This left 447 members. This does not take into account members of parliament who were elected in 2019 but not 2014 but who had been MEPs

⁶<https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meps/en/incomingoutgoing/incoming/xml>

⁷

<https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/members-of-the-european-parliament/resource/3128b29f-947d-4922-b3ca-44a7aeaf48f0>

⁸

<https://web.archive.org/web/20190320030142/https://data.europa.eu/euodp/en/data/dataset/members-of-the-european-parliament>. The second list is only available through the archive.org Way Back Machine as the Open Data Portal seems to overwrite new datasets in the place of older datasets; therefore a historical list of MEPs by data of election is not readily available.

before the 2014 election. There was no easy way to eliminate these MEPs from the dataset automatically so I simply endeavoured to remove any of these members I could identify as I checked through the data manually.

After creating this list of incoming MEPs, I then needed to find the email addresses of each MEP. This again was not straightforward due to the way email addresses were assigned by Parliament. Some MEPs with a single first name and second name were straightforward as they are usually assigned an email address in the format `firstname.secondname@europarl.europa.eu`. However, MEPs with more than one first name or second name have no fixed email address format. This can be illustrated using the example of two Spanish MEPs: Nicolás González Casares has the official email address `nicolas.casares@europarl.europa.eu` while Antoni Comín i Oliveres has the email address `antoni.cominioliveres@europarl.europa.eu`. This is despite the fact that the former uses his full name Nicolás González Casares on his social media accounts while the latter goes by Antoni (or simply Toni) Comín on his⁹. It was then necessary to remove all diacritical marks from the names of each MEP as the email system only uses the 26 basic alphabetic glyphs used in English

3.3. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations may arise within the grounded study approach as the participant may disclose difficult and perhaps painful feelings and stories in response to ‘interpretive inquiry’ which “is about trying to capture people’s actions and efforts to make meaning in a lived context” (Morehouse, 2012, p. 47). This may mean asking intrusive personal questions, which could result in participants potentially experiencing uncomfortable or even distressed (Charmaz, 2012, p. 30). The researcher is urged to “assume participants’ comfort level has higher priority than obtaining juicy data” and to not treat participants “as objects from which you extract data” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 110). These considerations also applied to any non-participant observations made in the course of this study. Any information which could be viewed as overly personal, embarrassing or politically or personally sensitive was omitted from this research.

⁹ Although it is beyond the focus of this study, it is interesting to note how the diverse languages and cultures of the European Union are standardised, or not, by the Parliament's email system.

When using particular research methods (such as ethnography) in elite political situations, where participants are especially concerned about their public image, Busby (2011) says that the question of what and what not to write about is ever salient issue. Busby says that researchers have a duty to their participants (for example, to not harm their chances of being re-elected), which they must also balance with their academic responsibilities; that is, to deliver “valid, quality research”. This situation may result in ethical dilemmas, and highlights “the political nature of elite political research”. With the present study, the anonymity of the participants allowed the author to circumvent some of these dilemmas. However, even for the group as a whole, it was important to represent the data fairly, yet to keep in mind an MEP’s position as a public figure (even if MEPs could not be individually identified). It is conceivable that an unfavourable, or unduly critical presentation of the MEPs, could do reputational harm to the group as a whole.

Other important considerations include ensuring informed consent has been obtained from participants. Prior to commencing all interviews, in line with ethical research principles around informed consent and the avoidance of harm to the participants, the author outlined the aim and purpose of the study to the participant. Participants were reassured that no identifying information would be presented and that the findings of the research would be in conceptual and theoretical terms. The participants were also informed that no transcripts or identifying information would be retained beyond the requirements of the academic course timelines and would be held securely for the duration of the course, and then destroyed when the course had ended. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the interview at any stage. The author then sought the participant’s consent to proceed with the interview.

Ethical issues were considered again when the development of new groups and categories suggested new directions of inquiry as these directions could not have been anticipated before the research process commenced. Not knowing the ultimate direction of inquiry prior to commencement of the study is an aspect of the grounded study approach, and this could lead to possible ethical issues emerging at a later stage in the research. It was also necessary to review ethical considerations before commencing the theoretical coding phase as new directions of inquiry can emerge at this stage. It is not possible to anticipate what the core categories will be beforehand, thus needing further ethical considerations following

development of core categories. All researchers should strive to not treat participants “as objects from which you extract”¹⁰ (Charmez, 2012, p. 110)

The author sought to make the interviews as accommodating as possible, and interviews were conducted at the participant’s convenience. The researcher was attentive and courteous and took care not to end an interview abruptly after searching questions or if participants appeared uncomfortable. It was also planned to have some questions that would elicit positive responses, towards the end of the interview. Strategies for handling whatever discomfort may arise, included continuing the conversation in a supportive manner, and a follow up call should this be necessary.

Overall, the author attempted to engage well with the participants and was respectful and attentive. Charmaz (2012, p. 24) urges researchers to “engage the study phenomena and get involved”. The researcher is advised by Charmaz (ibid., p. 26) to have “an accepting demeanour’ and to observe and listen with sensitivity and encouragement”. This was the author’s aim at all times within interviews. The author developed a good awareness of their own assumptions and how their own political view could distort the incoming data from both MEPs of similar and dissimilar political views to the author.

3.4. The Interview Process

The selected participants were sent an email, inviting them to take part in this study in the form of an interview. From the respondents, a purposive sample of 4 participants was selected from across a range of political groups. This was done in order to prevent the sample from biasing the research in a particular direction (which might be the case if all or most of the sample was from a particular political group).

Emerging themes were explored in both follow up interviews with the purposive group participants, and in subsequent interviews with a further 8 respondents. During this phase of the research, where the focus is gradually becoming abstract, data collection was interrupted

¹⁰ Memo: Through the course of my research, I became keenly aware of the power differentials that could develop between the interviewer and the interviewee/ the researcher and the participant. Despite being a lowly trainee within parliament, a role with relatively little power, the status of researcher had allowed me to gain access to MEPs for reasonable amounts of time. In this instance, I do not believe my position was altogether that significant. However, I reflected that if participants were in a more vulnerable position (such as asylum seekers), the researcher is in a very dominant position.

by government restrictions which were implemented in response to the COVID-19 worldwide pandemic, which precluded the further gathering of data by ‘face to face’ interview. This made it difficult to achieve full ‘theoretical saturation’, as a number of MEPs who had initially agreed to take part, could no longer do so and politely sent their apologies. However, by this stage the author had already gathered a significant amount of data from the interviews and was fortunately able to conduct further interviews by telephone and email exchanges.

However, the author was concerned about whether it would be possible to achieve the same rich qualitative data that is gained from face-to-face interviews, or whether this valuable data would be lost in telephone and email interviews. Patently, it would not be possible to register any subtle facial expressions or gestures that might indicate that the participant has something more to say on a particular topic that has been raised. There were some other, additional drawbacks to telephone interviews. For example, time delays at times caused conversations to sometimes become stilted, as it was not possible to react as quickly as in person. These incorporeal interviews also highlighted language barriers between the interviewer and the interviewee, something that was easier to overcome in person.

However, despite these issues, it is the opinion of the author that interviewees may have perhaps felt more relaxed in phone interviews than in those conducted in their offices in parliament. After COVID-19 prevented people from meeting in person, interviews generally took place while the MEPs were in their homes. MEPs appeared to feel more relaxed and could say things that they would perhaps refrain from doing so in the more formal space. Moreover, some MEPs who had initially declined to take part in the study, decided to become involved, and were often more willing to stay longer on the phone, as many of their schedules had effectively become cleared (time constraints were one of the reasons many MEPs gave when declining to be involved in the study in the first place).

Overall, the author believes that the quality of both sets of interviews are comparable, and that changing medium did not greatly alter the standard of the data.

3.4.1. Self- Selection

Due to the fact that the impetus to become involved in the study was largely placed on participants (i.e. that MEPs volunteered to take part in this research) means that this was as a self-selected sample. Criticisms of this way of gathering participants suggest that there is bound to be a degree of self-selection bias, leading to the possibility of an overrepresentation of a particular sub-group. For example, such self-selected participants may have certain characteristics/traits that might not be representative of the larger sample.

To a certain degree, this was unavoidable, as the author was seeking a particular subset of MEPs that would respond to such a request. For instance, the author could not have accepted any MEP, due to language requirements that the interview be conducted in English. This will have prevented some MEPs from taking part in the study. Furthermore, it was very important to have MEPs who *wanted* to talk about their experiences, as the more the MEPs spoke about their experiences, the more data was collected. Those MEPs who replied positively to the broadcast email, were arguably interested in sharing their experiences. They were often enthusiastic and genuinely interested in their own work in parliament and in the author's research. Therefore, it was an unstated but implicit requirement of this research that MEPs were interested in discussing the topics explored in this research.

Self-selection led a particular demographic that was out of the author's control. The overall demographic composite of the group I interviewed consisted of more men than women and contained marginally more participants from western European countries.

In regards to the former, the author attempted to mitigate this situation by sending follow up emails to those female MEPs who had sent a negative reply to the initial email (feeling that this small level of contact may perhaps indicate some willingness to engage more). The author explained that the study was lacking female participants and asked that if they should reconsider at a later stage, it would be greatly appreciated if they could please contact the author. This yielded one positive result (although, due to reasons the COVID-19 government restrictions, this interview could not take place). In regards to nationality, ultimately, this appeared too complicated to attempt to mitigate. Instead, the author remained aware of this detail and considered how it might impact the results. However, in terms of political affiliations, the composite of participants was satisfactory; and at least one member from each

political group was involved in the study. Due to the nature of the institution, this appeared to be the most critical aspect in which to have a diverse range of participants.

3.4.2. The Interviews

Each interview took between 10 and 50 minutes with the majority lasting 30 minutes. All interviews were audio taped, with permission, using a digital recorder. I opted to use a small, less sophisticated recorder, rather than one which was more superior technically speaking, but more intrusive looking. This allowed both the participants and the author to become less distracted and take less notice that they were being recorded and to focus on the conversation itself¹¹.

Recording the interviews allowed them to be stored digitally, which the researcher transcribed verbatim. The transcription process took a significant amount of time. However, in addition to being a necessary part of the research, it was an invaluable way of interacting with the data: the actions of listening/re-listening to the interviews and transcribing/re-transcribing, and reading/re-reading, allowed constant comparison and kept the author immersed in the data. The author became surprised how much more information was ‘heard’ on a second, or third or even fourth listen/reading. The transcripts made it possible to return

¹¹ Memo: Initially, I felt that in interviews I was paying more attention to what I was going to say next, rather than listening to what the participant was saying. I then focused on developing the interviews into more like a conversation, that could flow any way and that there was no pre-destined end point. This made me more relaxed and my interview skills improved and I was able to continue the interviews for longer without worrying about the time. Few people are afforded to the opportunity to analyse their own conversations skill in such great detail. This was a blessing, but also could make for uncomfortable/embarrassing listening. As I listened back to the recordings, I learned that I noticed I often filled any gaps/pauses, with further questions, even when a participant was in the process of answering a question (but was perhaps thinking thoughtfully on how to answer fully). Instead, I should have let the participant ruminate on the question at hand, and instead provide follow up comments, if needed for clarity. I realised the more I spoke, the more time (or data) my voice took up. Therefore I endeavoured to ask as many open questions as possible and let the participant guide the way. During my research, I came upon the work of Carl Rogers, a pioneering humanist psychologist, who adopted a human centred approach to his therapy sessions. In not trying to ‘solve’ clients various issues, but making sure that he was fully ‘listening’, I found some of the techniques he suggests useful to my own interviews. It was particularly helpful that he said that the therapist must be unafraid to get things ‘wrong’ or misinterpret their client, and could ask for clarification. For this reason, he has recorded many videos and published transcripts of his own interviews. Therefore, I had ample examples to learn from. In short, the skills I learned from the grounded theory method thought me how to be a better listener in general.

the interviews quickly and ‘mine’ them for further information to develop into concepts, in the latter stages of research.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

This chapter will focus on analysis of the data gathered, as described in the previous chapter. The chapter will go through the stages of grounded theory, following the framework set out by Tie et al., and using guidelines from Charmez and Strauss & Glaser. At the end of this chapter, the main concepts of the eventual theory will be developed, and then Chapter 5 will present the resultant theory, which will link these concepts together.

4.1. Forming a Purposive Group

When gathering the initial data, the author selected participants to interview by seeking ‘expressions of interest’ from newly elected MEPs by means of a ‘broadcast’ email. The author was aware that this allowed for self-selection by participants, and that this could potentially impact on the resultant findings. To counteract this, the author selected 4 volunteer participants from across the political groupings for initial interview for the purposive sample, remaining mindful that the researcher should examine her own preconceptions as “topics that prompt you to contact certain people but not others already circumscribe what you address” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 100).

During an early interview with a participant the author was aware of the risk of researcher bias as the participant held radically different views to the author on political issues. Being aware of the potential for bias helped the author maintain a neutral stance. However, further strategies were developed in order to deal with any similar situations that may rise in the future. This was primarily through focusing on the MEPs’ reflective thoughts on the more personal aspects of their job, rather than issues of a more firmly political nature (e.g. migration, economic policies, etc.). It was very important that any political differences would not present an obstacle to ensuring that the participants felt comfortable in speaking with the

researcher, and would not feel on the defensive. For that reason, I tended not to follow up on political issues in interviews, and tried to keep the focus on personal reflections¹².

The author adopted an ‘interpretive inquiry’ approach into how the participants attempt to resolve problems and pursue goals, exploring their subjective meaning while avoiding making assumptions about their meanings (Charmaz, 2012, p. 33). At times however, due to the author’s lack of experience with the grounded theory approach, some aspects of the initial ‘open’ style interviews could perhaps be described as a somewhat “unfocused foray into the field setting” and contained elements of “superficial random data collection” (ibid., p. 23). In subsequent interviews the author attempted to rectify this by adopting a semi-structured interview framework (ibid., p. 31) to guide questioning and elicit subjective meanings by “going beneath the surface of the described experience” (ibid., p. 26).

A sample of the interview questions¹³ is presented below:

- *Tell me how you came to be a MEP? (Open-ended initial question)*
- *What was it like? / how did you feel? / what you think? [on being elected as an MEP]*
- *How have your thoughts and feelings changed since?*
- *Contrast the person you were before election with the person you are now?¹⁴*
- *Negative changes? Positive changes?*
- *Describe the most important lesson you have learned?*

¹² Memo: Acknowledging your own assumptions is a key aspect of grounded theory. Initially, I thought perhaps my political views might be more of an issue and how they might conflict with participants would be more of an issue. Therefore, I remained aware in interviews and ensured that they did not become an issue. However, I noticed my biases come up in other ways also. Occasionally, what came up within interviews were my own views on the European Parliament. I realised at times I was trying to impose my ‘outsider view’ on the participants experience. I acknowledged that I was not “blank sheet” and was constantly filtering ideas through my presuppositions on various topics. This type of pedagogical approach is in line with constructivism account of learning, which acknowledges that we do not possess a ‘tabula rasa’.

¹³ Memo: Using an ‘open’ style of questioning I asked MEPs about their experiences and perspectives, and attempted to keep the study grounded in their subjective experiences by re-focusing the interview on their thoughts and feelings whenever participants talked too much about the workings of the EU and political issues, which was not the focus of my research.

¹⁴ Memo: as my questions evolved throughout the research process, I began to see that I was looking at a transition and more crucially, the effect of that transition on the participants. The research direction began to shift towards attempting to elucidate the effects of time, and how this altered the participants behaviours/motivations and perceptions

- *Has the organisation been helpful?*
- *What advice would you give a newly elected MEP?*
- *Is there anything else you think I should know to help me understand your experience better?*
- *Is there anything you would like to ask me?*

4.2. Initial or Open Coding of Interviews

During the process of coding the initial data, the author accurately transcribed the conversations from the recordings of the initial individual interviews with the 4 participants of the purposive group¹⁵. The data was then broken down into codes or labels in a ‘line by line-coding’ process. Tie et al. (2019) describes this process as “fracturing the data”. The author created a significant number of ‘codes’ by identifying important common words, sentences, verbatim quotes, actions, incidents, etc. and looked for similarities and differences and possible patterns. The resultant 126 codes from the 4 interviews transcripts which formed the purposive group, are held as supplementary information, separate from the study in order to preserve anonymity.

As there were a considerable number of codes, the author attempted to group similar codes together by description¹⁶. The author remained aware of the risk of ‘losing’ significant codes

¹⁵ Memo: I approached the initial coding stage with an awareness that my interviews with the four participants in the purposive group may have perhaps fallen into the trap, as identified by Bergson (1903) and cited in Chamaz (2012, p. 25) of ‘going all around it (the subject)’ at times rather than ‘entering into it (the subject)’. In the sense that, I perhaps at times to what MEPs said at face value, and did not explore certain things further in the interviews. For this reason, I was anticipating that I may need to return to interview some MEPs in the purposive group again. Indeed, such a step is in keeping with the grounded study process in any case.

¹⁶ Memo: I attempted to place the codes into descriptive groups. Strong ‘anti- European’ views were expressed by two MEPs. I was unsure if these views were confined to right wing politics and that placing these codes with the other codes would mis-represent the data. I was aware that the ‘self selection’ method I had used in identifying participants for my research study may have attracted participants who held strong political views in the context of the Brexit process (this points to the importance of placing research in context). With this in mind I decided not to separate these codes representing right wing views. I anticipated that they would either appear again in subsequent interviews and become a part of developing concepts, or not re-occur and have little influence on the outcome of the study. An example of such a code is ‘predicting the collapse of the EU’. I did not know at this stage if this view would be repeated in later interviews with other participants.

at this early stage, but also needed to balance this risk against the need to manage the data.¹⁷ The author remained aware that codes left out at this stage could have as much theoretical significance as the codes included¹⁸. The author attempted to list the codes by description, action and language used, rather than by themes, as it was felt that the latter approach would be likely to re-create an established narrative rather than facilitate new understanding. The initial codes from the 4 purposive group transcripts were amalgamated into 26 descriptive groups¹⁹. (See Appendix 1).

4.3. Creating Groups

After the initial coding process, the author then looked to refine the above descriptive groups into more abstract groups, by identifying possible patterns that may connect the codes and groups. The author was aware that some of her initial decisions around which groups to place the code in, and her subsequent decisions around identifying connections between groups, represented her interpretations of both the transcripts and the codes, and that data omitted could be as significant as the data included²⁰. The author paid particular attention to the actual words and phrases used by the participants, creating ‘*in vivo* codes’ or ‘symbolic markers’ which “contain the meaning within the code itself” (Charmaz, 2012, p. 55). Throughout the

¹⁷ Memo: it occurred to me that my selection of codes may have been significantly influenced by my own experiences in parliament. Ultimately, another researcher could study the very same data, select other codes as significant and therefore come to very different conclusions than my own. This supports a basic aspect of constructivism, that there is no one ‘truth’ or ‘reality’, but multiple interpretations.

¹⁸ Memo: I looked for “compelling codes (that) capture the phenomenon and grabs the reader” (Chamaz 2012 P 48). These included particular words, phrase and sentences, description of events and expression of views. I noticed a number of ‘in vivo’ codes and regretted that I had not explored their subjective meaning further during the interviews. This is particularly so as some participants were not using their first language and used terms and metaphors in the English language which may have had a different subjective meaning than that which I had assumed.

¹⁹ Memo: Having done the initial coding I was unsure how to manage the large number of codes (69) or even if my codes were accurate. Charmaz (2020, p. 47) states ‘we may think our codes capture the empirical reality. Yet it is our view’. The large number of codes was confusing, with lots of repetition and some contradictions.

²⁰ Memo: My initial codes were descriptive and that when I placed them into groups and tentatively put labels on those groups it became apparent that certain codes possibly belonged in another group. For example, I initially grouped codes around ‘getting a first time mandate’, being familiar / unfamiliar with the organization, and ‘being inexperienced’ together in the expectation that this might form a group relating to anxiety around a new role. On a deeper reading of the transcripts however became apparent that more appropriate group labels might be ‘demonstrating confidence in self’ and ‘compensating for feelings of inexperience’.

process the author continued an iterative process or ‘comparative cycle’ designed to keep the study close to or ‘grounded’ in the data.

The following groups and their associated codes emerged:

Unfamiliarity

Related codes:

- “Strange mandate”
- “Being in a spaceship or bubble”
- Feeling of remoteness
- Adjusting to the new (“it is definitely different”, “The beginning was very hard”)
- Overwhelmed
- Rite of passage (“they say it takes at least a year to find your feet”)
- Complex/ undefined environment/ lacking boundaries

Seeking the familiar

Related codes:

- Being an inexperienced MEP
- Trying to find a role within parliament
- Working on areas that are familiar (“it helps to have an area of expertise”)
- Finding a role using previous experience

Disconnected

Related codes:

- Emotionally taxing/ away from family
- Sense of EU institutions being isolated from EU citizens
- Unable to connect those back home on what is happening in the European Parliament
- “The plenary is a series of disconnect statements, not a debate amongst MEPs”

Scale

Related codes:

- The parliament is a “legislative machine”
- Hard to find your way around the physical buildings

- Masses of information
- Different ideas, people, cultures

Speed

Related codes:

- Could work non-stop
- “On a roller coaster”

Seeing other Possibilities/Critical of Status Quo

Related codes:

- Having a “blank slate” with the new parliamentary term
- Seeing themselves as ‘different’ to typical MEPs/politicians setting themselves apart

Being ‘the ideal MEP’

Related codes:

- MEPs should listen to each other
- Communicate with citizens what is going on in parliament
- “Living up to the mandate”
- Working hard
- Specialisation/knowing your subject matter

Enthusiasm

Related codes:

- Passionate about politics
- Wanting to bring about change/ improve ways of working together/ build relationships
- “Working together with other Europeans is really special”

Perceptions on EU Institutions

Related codes:

- The European Parliament administration/bureaucracy is “hypocritical”/“cumbersome”/“unavoidable”
- “EU has shifted from its original purpose”
- Belief in EU ideals... but not integration
- “The EU will collapse in its present form”
- Lacking democratic legitimacy

Feelings

Related codes:

- Frustrations, unfairness, anger
- Excited/overwhelmed/daunting
- Defiance
- Obstructed
- Need to justify views
- Not being heard
- Eagerness to express views

Adapting

Related codes:

- ‘You can’t really learn until you are in the middle of doing it’
- Adjusting to the role/new identity
- Adjusting to the length of the process of EP
- Being open-minded

Pragmatism/ Weariness

Related codes:

- “I don’t think I will change the world for example... this is not how it works”
- Being realistic, pragmatic, strategic, “that’s politics”
- “there is a lot of conflict, this is just how it is”
- Oppositional politically, yet co-operative practically

Change:

Related codes:

- “Very difficult”
- “Bit by bit”
- “Not too small to make a difference”
- “Must be in influential positions, in order to get the changes you want”

Learning unwritten rules

Related codes:

- Learning how to get work done
- Casual meetings, the more open the debate is, the more political it gets, the more antagonist it gets
- “Look at, for example, not who is proposing something, but (what) is he proposing” agree on certain things
- Stereotypes of other groups

Time

Related codes:

- Wanting more time for reflection, “think time”, the pressure of time
- Having to be in three places at once
- Less/no time to delve deep into subjects – must keep moving on to the next thing

Cynicism

Related codes:

- Getting cynical because they lost faith in being able to change things
- “The longer you are in this house, the more cynical you get”
- “The ‘bubble’ makes something with you”,²¹

²¹ Memo: As my own traineeship progressed, I found myself ‘beamed up into the space ship’/ or ‘drawn into the bubble’ more and more. I believe the longer that I myself stay in the bubble, the more it will affect me. Partly this is due to the environment being relatively all encompassing and the work potentially all consuming, there is little time for anything non-EP related. Even lunch/dinner with colleagues often becomes a discussion about some aspect of work. Even when speaking to family and friends, can be difficult, as much of the daily life

4.4. Theoretical Sampling: Developing Categories

The theoretical sampling process involved refining the groups in the previous section into categories and then developing these into tentative concepts. This stage involves beginning to piece data together into a more coherent whole or as Charmaz (2012, p. 5) puts it, “[w]here initial coding fractures the data, intermediate coding begins to transform basic data into more abstract concepts allowing the theory to emerge from the data”. The author conducted further interviews with other participants and started to ‘follow leads’ or ‘clues’ which were identified in the coding, grouping and analysis of the initial data.

The following categories were perceived by the author as pertinent:

- Intense/complex/amorphous environment
- Unfamiliar roles/seeking the familiar
- Finding a role/identity
- Being ‘the ideal MEP’
- Disconnected (being in a bubble, a spaceship)
- Feeling not heard
- Lack of time/speed
- Adapting/being pragmatic/learning the unwritten rules
- Timescale (the length of time the processes take)
- Scale of EU
- Pragmatism/cynicism

4.5. Intermediate or Axial Coding: Identifying and Connecting ‘core’ and ‘sub’ Categories

The following section will explore how the above categories may be possibly connected to form a more coherent picture. Strauss & Corbin (1998) suggest a framework within which the

within parliament, due to its many complex details, can be difficult to explain to those who do not also have a strong understanding of at least the basic structures and procedures of European Parliament.

significant categories can be linked, using Axial Coding. This linking is done at a conceptual rather than a descriptive level, with a view to developing a more theoretical explanation.

Strauss and Corbin (1998), cited in Charmaz (2012, p. 61), propose organizing categories into a linear framework whereby a ‘condition’ or situation triggers an ‘action/interaction’ which results in a ‘consequence’. I felt that this framework would give a structure within which categories could be organised and developed conceptually. However, I remained aware that this approach also had the potential to truncate the data and ‘limit vision’ (Charmaz, 2012, p. 61), as to see one way, or through ‘a bamboo tube’, inherently closes off another. (Kaufmann, 1969, citing Nietzsche, and Dōgen 2009). However, to avoid “blooming, buzzing confusion” (James, 1890, p. 462) of the senses, the author decided that some structure was needed.

Within the above Strauss & Corbin (1998) linear framework of ‘condition/action/consequence’, a process appeared to be emerging around *an uninitiated MEP trying to establish a role within the institution, attempting to manage the schedule of increasing of work within limited timeframes, and compelled forward by the demands of parliament*. A core category emerged around ‘seeking an identity or identity formation’. The core category is “the highest-level concept of the theory” (Artinian & Giske, 2007) and will “decide and demarcate the theoretical framework” (Lillemor & Hallberg, 2006). The author therefore attempted to conceptually express the process in the form of a core category around *‘seeking an identity’/identity formation*, and its relationship to other sub-categories, using an axial coding process (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

4.5.1. Axial Coding

Core Category

‘seeking an identity’ or identity formation

Condition

Sub-categories involving the European Parliament, as the conditions of the overall process: (Complex environment, unfamiliar roles, time scales and size of EU).

Action / Interaction

Sub-categories involving the responses or interactions of MEPs to the other MEPs and to the Parliament: (Trying to be ‘the ideal MEP, seeking the familiar, trying to bring about change, negotiating bureaucracy, not listening, not hearing, adapting, being pragmatic, strategic, learning the unwritten rules, avoiding politics, following unwritten procedures).

Consequences

Sub-categories involving the result or outcome of the MEP’s responses: (Overwhelmed, isolated, disorientation, disconnection, being in a bubble, a spaceship, defensive, experiencing anger and unfairness, polarisation by strongly affiliating with own political groups, holding ‘nuanced’ positions, nobody listening, nobody being heard, cynicism, not being re-elected).

Within the above axial coded framework of connections, a pattern is discernible as a linear style explanation, and functions as a step towards developing a more abstract, theoretical explanation.

4.6. Emerging Concepts

4.6.1. A ‘Basic’ Theory

Charmaz (2012) describes the researcher’s role in developing concepts and abstract understandings as both “reaching down to fundamentals, and up to abstractions” (p. 135). In ‘reaching down to fundamentals’ the above picture or ‘ordinary explanation’ had emerged of enthusiastic MEPs entering a complex environment and experiencing initial shock, disorientation and isolation. In response the MEP may then seek familiar roles and support from political parties aligned with the MEP’s own political ideology, for moral and practical support. Depending on the membership of the group, this may occasionally lead to further isolation. Once within groups, MEPs must negotiate and renegotiate their place in the group, both how the group’s values align with their own, and whether the group is an appropriate fit.

The MEP must negotiate and manage multiple competing complex issues within the EU's 'cumbersome' institutional mechanisms. MEPs report difficulty in making their voices heard, particularly in spaces such as the plenary. The experience of not being listened to and obstructed by the institution results in strong emotions and perhaps an inability, or unwillingness, to listen to others. Few accepted that parliament should remain exactly as it is, and MEPs express their wishes to change a variety of aspects of the institution. Some of these changes were fundamental and included overhauling basic aspects of how parliament functions; and how it relates to EU citizens; others changes were of the more incremental variety, and saw small steps in the 'right' direction as the means by which sustained change could be achieved. MEPs articulated desired changes that were of the political (such as pushing the political agenda of parliament in a particular direction); for the personal (such as desiring power and influential positions within parliament); or changes to the general functioning of parliament (such wishing to change the debating structure in plenary, or how Commissioner are questioned in plenary/committees). There appears to be a hierarchy of responses, over time, ranging from initial enthusiasm, to pragmatic and strategic responses, and eventually to some cynicism. Most MEPs will not be re-elected but are replaced by new incoming MEPs who continue to 'feed' the cycle. Having initially followed a 'traditional' grounded theory approach, the author had developed the above basic hypothesis or narrative type theory.

4.6.2. Developing an Abstract Understanding

The author considered how the above 'ordinary explanation' might be understood in terms of the concept of 'seeking an identity', which had emerged as a significant category. It was not possible however to continue gathering data via face-to-face interviews and selectively code it around the emerging core concept of 'identity', due to the imposition of worldwide government restrictions during the early COVID-19 pandemic. Attempts were made to continue with the interview process via telephone interviews. Although several interviews were conducted in this way, they were not sufficient in number to achieve 'theoretical sufficiency', i.e. when incoming data no longer yields fresh insights. (Dey 1999).

To explore more abstract understandings the author then adopted a ‘constructivist’ approach and explored, in addition to ‘identity’, a broader range of emerging categories and concepts, using the significant amount of data already acquired, and supplementing this via phone contact with MEPs. This phase of the research process then became more interpretive and abstract while remaining ‘connected’ to the original data. It involves the researcher ‘entering into’ rather than ‘going all around’ the emerging phenomena. (Bergson, 1903, cited in Charmaz, 2012, p.25). In shifting from an objective, ‘neutral observer’ stance to an ‘interpretative’ stance, regarding both the data and the process itself, the author became more immersed in the data and fully engaged with the phenomena, to create a more interpretative reading of “what is really going on in the data” (Charmaz, 2012).

4.7. Memo Writing

This significant turning point, in changing from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘constructivist’ approach, was considered in memos where the author attempted to ensure that the research remained focused on the subjective experiences of the participants, not the researcher’s own interpretation of the participant’s experience. Charmaz (2012, p. 90) recommends using two techniques, ‘focused free writing’ and ‘clustering’, to help accelerate memo writing. The author used these techniques to help process ideas and data, with the aim of developing more creative insights to feed back into the research process. The author used the technique of ‘focused free writing’ around the interview transcripts and their codes, to summarise the data from the theoretical sampling interviews already acquired (Appendix 2). In a ‘clustering’ exercise the author then explored descriptive and possible conceptual links between the original purposive group interview data and the theoretical sampling data contained in the ‘free writing’. A major theme was identified around ‘lack of sufficient time to do the work involved in being a MEP’. Other themes ‘clustered’ around the complexity of the environment and the establishing one’s role as an MEP. More abstract themes included difficulty around establishing a ‘compromised’ public identity that perhaps conflicts with the MEP’s inner identity. Thus the ‘free writing’ and ‘clustering’ exercises appeared to support possible connections around identity.

Chapter 5: The Analytic Process:

This chapter will focus on the formation and full articulation of the theory that has resulted from the preceding steps.

5.1: Advanced or Theoretical Coding

5.1.1. A 'Constructivist' understanding or interpretation:

In this coding process the author moves from considering fundamental or descriptive explanations, towards a more abstract understanding. The author will theorise with a view to developing an abstract theory, whilst remaining 'grounded' in the original coded data.

The research process thus far shows MEPs as being thrown into unfamiliar roles in an unfamiliar environment, resulting in feelings of disorientation. An 'identity crisis' can occur initially when MEPs first arrive. Attempts are made to recover and maintain parts of their 'lost' identity, either political or personal, and to form a new identity that will allow the MEP to manage their new environment. There are variations in strategies used by MEPs. However, there are also commonalities. One response that was common was for MEPs to become encumbered with more tasks, feeling compelled to keep up with the volume of incoming information. This could be understood as MEPs trying to establish a useful role, in other words 'an identity'. Some responses could be placed in a category labelled 'being an ideal MEP'. However, this appeared to have less to do with idealism and more to do with MEPs wanting to achieve their priorities, without compromising on their principles. This may sometimes result in stress due to the holding of contradictory positions and attempting to hold their own values while pragmatically trying to bring about change.

In the face of institutional structures and procedures, MEPs may lower their aspirations around identity in a socialisation process leading to acceptance of the status quo which remains unchanged. This cycle is then perpetuated with new MEPs entering the system to replace MEPs who leave.

Some MEPs referred to the EU institutions as remote and disconnected, describing a sense of isolation, alienation or disconnection from their own constituency and country. Being an

MEP in the EU Parliament is experienced as ‘living in a bubble’, a ‘spaceship’, and a ‘hostile’ environment (containing ‘sharks’) running on its own schedule. MEPs describe finding it difficult to explain to others what is going on in parliament.

The following concepts were selected as pertinent to the construction of an interpretive understanding of the MEP’s experience. These concepts are then developed further and their conceptual links explored, with a view to developing a theoretical framework of understanding:

- Identity formation.
- Amorphous/shapeless environment.
- Aspiring to be an ‘ideal’ MEP.
- Difficulty sustaining preferred identity.
- Hierarchy of responses.
- The shaping forces of time and space.

5.2 Developing a Theory

The above concepts will now be developed and their conceptual links explored with a view to developing a theoretical framework or theory around an interpretive understanding of the MEP’s experience.

A theory can be defined as “a set of well-developed concepts connected through statements of relationship” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). However, Charmaz (2005) suggests that, as a theory is framed by the researcher’s perspective, it is “suggestive, incomplete, and inconclusive”. As this study used a combination of both a ‘traditional’ grounded study approach with roots in objectivity, and a more subjective ‘constructive’ approach, the resultant theory will inevitably contain elements of both.

The participants are not directly quoted in this theory section, as the resultant theory is abstract and attempts to move away from concrete examples, into the theoretical. However, they are very much embedded into this analysis, as the author has continually remained close to the data (including direct quotes, incidences/ or actual examples of situations told by participants etc.) and has progressively built the theory on this foundation.

The following is a detailed explication of the theory, which began with the open question ‘how do new MEPs experience the transition into the European Parliament?’. Through successive levels of analysis, the concepts have been developed and are now linked together in a relationship (which is an interpretation by the author). The above ‘how’ question may be answered by the following theory on identity formation that takes place in an amorphous, boundaryless environment; where attempts at creating an identity that will support one’s aims, must not morph into one that contradicts one’s own values; environmental forces will also act upon and attempt to shape this identity, so that it conforms and adapts to suit the surroundings.

5.3 Theory on the transition of newly elected MEPs

5.3.1. Identity Formation

Identities are not intrinsic properties. Rather, they are arguably viewed as contingent phenomena which are formed and defined by our relationships to other elements, often within a structure. For example, a pupil and teacher have a defined relationship which is partly constituted by that relationship (i.e. there is no ‘teacher’ without ‘pupils’, and vice versa.). However, the relationship only exists within a structure, namely, a ‘school’. Therefore, both relationship and structure can be essential aspects of a theory.

The data gathered in the study suggests that MEPs are searching for ways to fill a lacuna in the vast, formless, amorphous environment of the European Parliament. This lack of boundaries can be exciting, but also overwhelming. MEPs must define their own identity and role as a MEP. While they will try to create a new identity, MEPs will maintain aspects of their previous identities, both personal and professional. This is often achieved by seeking familiarity through working on committees requiring pre-existing skill sets and joining political groups that align with the MEP’s existing values. This is often done for pragmatic rather than ideological reasons. Such groups give MEPs a stable base from which they can ‘find their feet’ and build another identity. However, maintaining an identity in ‘two worlds’ can be experienced as contradictory, stressful and exhausting, as MEPs often return to their

constituencies, political campaigns and previous roles, throughout their time in parliament, perhaps as a way of coping in ‘this strange, unfamiliar world’.

5.3.2. Amorphous/shapeless environment

The European Parliament is seen by those both within and from the outside as a ‘strange world’, a place unto itself, with its own space and time. MEPs are stepping into a new world, with its own topography which operates in a different time and space. Various conditions appear to amplify and strengthen the effect of the particularity of space and time within parliament, and how these shape and mould MEPs (‘a place unto itself’ ‘living in a space ship’ ‘disconnected’). If we consider identity as related to space, we may speculate how such a space may be perceived or experienced and how it may contribute to the construction of an individual’s identity. With ‘space’ being understood as both the physical parliament (i.e. the buildings, both in Brussels and Strasbourg) and also ‘space’ in a more conceptual manner, with the expanse and scale of the parliament being described by some MEPs as a ‘bubble’ or ‘spaceship’, where their voices are not being heard and nobody is listening to each other. The phenomena of existing in an ‘infinite space’ is possibly exacerbated by parliamentary structures and procedures. The format of the large plenary is experienced by some MEPs as ‘nobody being heard’, and of speaking into an abyss, rather than to each other. Rather than a feeling of openness, which often occurs in more informal settings, the larger plenary format can make MEPs feel that parliament is not listening. As early codes show, MEPs are often overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the institution, and the workload. Supports appear limited and the feeling of being slightly ‘lost in space’ is often treated as a rite of passage.

5.3.3. Aspiring to be an ‘ideal’ MEP;

In response to the challenge of developing a new identity in an amorphous environment, MEPs attempt to adapt to the parliamentary environment while adhering their principles and values. The ‘identity’ formed is often a balance between pragmatism and principles. Enthusiasm and good faith appear to guide responses, while aspiring to an ‘ideal MEP’ status, which is, as described by MEPs, a person who can balance pragmatism and principles.

5.3.4. Difficulty sustaining a preferred identity

Contradictory dilemmas appear to be a feature of a MEPs role. In attempting to balance both pragmatism and principles, new MEPs describe adopting an attitude of openness in response to the multitude of ideas, peoples, cultures, and opportunities that are encountered daily. MEPs saw themselves as non-judgemental of other MEPs and other political groups. A contradictory dilemma however appears to occur in relation to the far-right groups within parliament. (e.g. the Identity and Democracy group, or ID). A schism exists between groups, manifesting as a *cordon sanitaire* which seeks to exclude the far-right groups from parliamentary life de facto. While MEPs from these groups experience openness within their own groups, feelings of isolation are also high. There are contradictory views among non-excluded MEPs about this approach, however, it was by and large tacitly accepted as the way things operated, a norm that had become reified.

Being at the forefront of decision making, and becoming essentially transnational actors, MEPs can again find themselves attempting to resolve contradictory positions. MEPs meet people that are major decision makers in world politics. Experiencing politics on this scale is both exciting and comes with some tensions. Many see themselves as not merely acting on behalf of their constituents but on behalf of a wider European constituency, thinking in a European rather than a national context. This can result in internal conflict when decisions need to be made for the 'greater good' but may potentially negatively affect their own national constituents. How the 'ideal' MEP behaves in such situations, depends on the issues at stake and how they view their principles. Alternating between 'national' and 'transnational' dimensions is a regular feature of MEP life, and MEPs often attempt to bridge the gap by assuming a responsibility to communicate the political ramifications of EU policies to their own constituencies, despite there being no clear communication channels to do so.

5.3.5. Hierarchy of responses

Enthusiasm leads MEPs to immerse themselves in their work, while committing to an increasing workload. Speed, volume, and stamina characterise a typical MEP's day to day schedule, with a requirement to 'throw oneself in' as the only way to keep up with one's

schedule. This pressure appears to be both self-imposed, and a response to perceived expectations of others. As pragmatic responses emerge, MEPs describe often ‘avoiding politics’ and finding it more productive to address issues via informal meetings. This strategy often influences parliamentary decisions. It can also enable MEPs to drop their political identity in private and make pragmatic decisions that are not consistent with their public ‘political’ position, or stated values. The holding of contradictory positions creates levels of stress that cannot be sustained over a long period. MEPs often do not seek re-election.

5.3.6. The shaping forces of space and time

The European Parliament is not an inert entity. Most large institutions aim for stability and resist change. This can also be viewed as an organisation’s attempt to hold onto power. The resistance of the institution to fundamental change has a changing effect on MEPs. As MEPs attempt to form an identity they are required to navigate forces, such as the ‘space’ and ‘timescales’ of parliament. This dynamic relationship between the MEP and the Parliament can shape the MEP’s identity while leaving the institution unchanged.

New MEPs, by virtue of being ‘new’, represent a change in the parliament. In making up over 50% of the total number of MEPs, they have the potential to be a significant shaping force on parliament. Individual MEPs describe themselves as being non-conformist and critical of aspects of the status quo in parliament. They express a willingness to initiate change. However, this momentum for change does not appear to result in significant change. Instead MEPs appear to settle for slow, incremental changes, perhaps as a pragmatic strategy.

Like ‘space’, the European Parliament operates within its own time frame. MEPs wanting to make changes must contend with the fact that the overall parliamentary process is very slow. However despite the slow pace of legislative change, MEPs themselves have full schedules and, being on a roller coaster, and have little spare time. Despite the sense of getting a lot done and perhaps the impression of making a lot of changes, there is very little fundamental or substantial change (‘no think time’ and ‘lack of time to delve deep’). The rush to get things done can prevent MEPs from making deep fundamental change. MEPs experience themselves as providing labour to keep the parliament or ‘the legislative machine’ moving forward, with little time to analyse reports or assess situations. By being kept in perpetual

work, while feeling like they are getting somewhere, the MEPs become deeply entrenched in the institution, and are then replaced every 5 years, like replaceable cogs in the machine.

Those who are not 'replaced' i.e. those who are re-elected, are known as senior MEPs, and play an important role in maintaining the status quo. Having spent the 'most time' in parliament, they are given roles with the most influence. They can in effect, control MEPs' time by deciding who gets to speak, when and for how long, and on what subject. They are also very familiar with the structure and processes of parliament and have the potential to be important agents of change. However, they are less likely to want change. Senior MEPs can become cynical, as they were once newly elected MEPs who have become frustrated at the lack of change, and now often function as a barrier to change. They have, in effect, been shaped by the parliamentary process. The European Parliament has shaped them, through time, and has now recruited them indirectly to shape the newly elected MEPs.

In a nutshell, the theory may be put like so: *the author proposes a theory that newly elected MEP may enter parliament and try to 'shape' the institution but are instead themselves 'shaped' by the institution, which itself remains relatively unchanged*

Figure 1 on the following page illustrates this process.

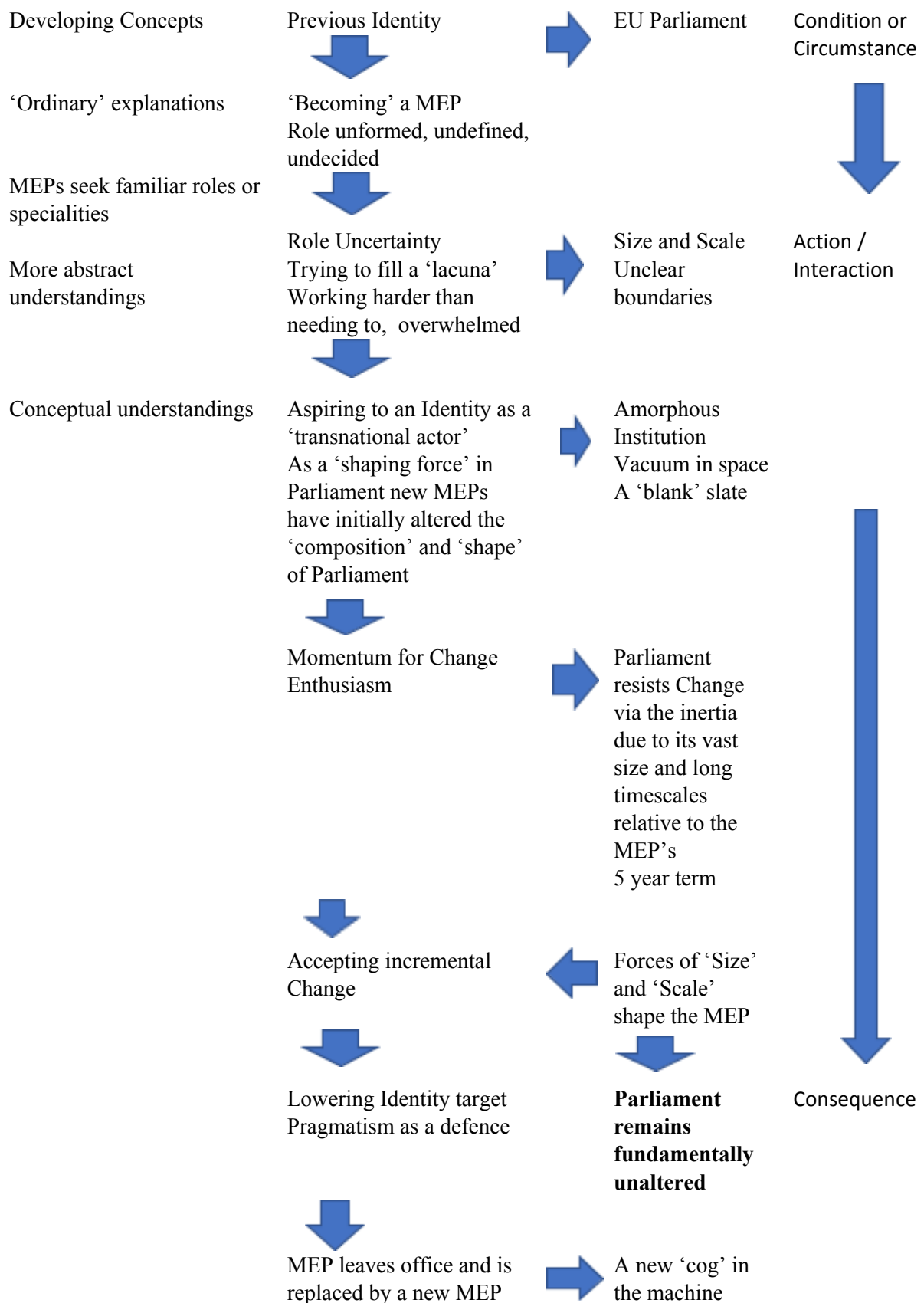


Figure 1: Diagram outlining the theory of the transition experienced by MEPs (middle columns); the far left column maps the research process to this theory, while the far right column maps Strauss & Corbin's conceptual framework to the theory.

Chapter 6: Discussion

The chapter presents a more in-depth discussion on the mid-level theory that has been developed in previous chapters. This chapter aims at contextualising some of the features of the theory, within other more established theories, and to see whether they support or contradict some of the findings. This chapter will finish with some suggestions for further research.

In a grounded theory approach, the literature review is done after developing an independent analysis (Charmaz, 2012, p. 6). In attempting to avoid undue bias the author did not do an initial literature review and attempted to remain grounded in the data being presented by the participants. A review of the relevant literature, in general, lends support to the research findings. This research has primarily been about the tension between institutions and the individuals forming identities within them. The question of who is more influential in forming the other is a question that has been asked by many theorists. Michel Foucault is one of the most prominent theorists on critiquing institutions, and the means by which they shape individuals. Through the course of his life, he analysed schools, hospitals, prisons, and other institutions within society, and found that they had a fundamental role in shaping individuals, into particular types or kinds of individuals (Foucault, 1975). Depending on how these individuals were shaped, it often serves to legitimatise and give greater power to the institutions, and included forms such as the 'mad'; 'deviants'; and 'criminals'. For if there is no 'mad' people, there is no need for psychiatric hospitals (or 'asylums', as they used to known); if there are no 'criminals', then there would be no prisons, or indeed, the entire judicial system, would be redundant.

Forms of power, such as repressive or sovereign power, are physical and often violent, using force to achieve a given aim, often by inflicting pain on our bodies. In contrast, institutions and society in general, will use normalising power. This power acts by making us behave in particular ways, without needing to use force. For example, it is more beneficial to the aim maintaining stability that people conform to societal or institutional norms. For the order of society, it would better if *more* of us behave like 'upstanding members of the community', than like 'criminals'. On Foucault account, a person is not merely "subject to power" (as is

the case in sovereign forms of power); their subjectivity is fact “produced” by the “dispersed micropactices”, and becomes embedded in the institution’s operational sphere (Dovey, 2009, p. 14). Michel Foucault believes in the importance of space and its ability to shape bodies. In *Discipline and Punish* (1975) he highlights how the enclosure of bodies in disciplinary spaces, such as prisons, schools and hospitals, creates a normalizing impact on people’s behaviors and contributes to the creation of ‘docile bodies’, which are bodies that are at the same time more pliable and more useful to the perpetuation of the existing status quo. From this, it could be suggested that the European Parliament attempts to shape MEPs so that they behave in particular ways, in order to maintain its own power and legitimacy.

From this, it could be suggested that the European Parliament attempts to shape MEPs so that they behave in particular ways, in order to maintain its own power and legitimacy. One participant of this study stated that ‘every organisation will want to hold on to power’, and that the European institutions are no different. Arguably, the ‘dispersed micropactices’ which have been repeated and repeated through the parliament’s lifetime, have become entrenched and established. With this in mind, it is more likely that such micropactices (which have had a long time to develop) will shape MEPs, before MEPs (who are there for a relatively brief period) have the time to shape parliament.

Keith Dowding (2008) says that “whether ‘power’ is predicated on agents or on structures” is one of the profound differences when discussing where power lies in society. There are those that are ‘individualists’ and ascribe power onto human agents. In contrast, the ‘structuralists’ view the institutions as the ones holding power and regulating the actions of agents. While himself an ‘individualist’, Dowding suggests forms of structures (which he refers to as ‘deep structuralism’) present a greater challenge to the individualist. This is where the structures go so deep, that it is not merely that agents are responding to structures, but their very aims, motivations, actions and behaviours etc. are shaped by the structures themselves. Dowding describes them as “‘deep’ because the structure goes all the way into the mind of the subject”. In this sense, it is not clear who is doing the actions: the agent, or the structure *through* the agent. In relation to the present study on MEPs, it could be suggested that as MEPs become more pragmatic and/or cynical as time passes, the institution is shaping their aims and motivations, in a way that allows the institution to maintain control.

More on this type of structural power comes from Clarissa Rile Hayward (2018), when discussing Rainer Forst's views on structural power. Hayward points to the fact that, due to the nature of structural power, this is an incredibly complex area of study. It is far easier to highlight clear examples of power differentials between individuals, such as that of a boss and an employee, or a landlord and tenant, see how concrete examples of how this power may be abused (e.g. sexual harassment). However, the nature of something such as structural racial inequalities and its effects, are inherently more complex. Describing a type of 'deep structuralism', Hayward says that when "norms are institutionalized, they define incentive structures, which people internalize as motivational systems. When they are objectified, they produce intersubjectively shared, practical know-how, which people learn corporeally". This moves away from the idea that 'structure' is merely bound to physical structures, and yet may have very tangible effects. In this sense, structure has movement and fluidity; it acts; it responds, primarily through agents. The senior MEPs in European parliament often act to some degree as the custodians of parliament. Through their influential positions (which new MEPs are often prevented from holding) they have retained power. However, it is only through existing structures that they derive their power. Therefore, we may ask whether it is their power and influence, or the institutions' acting *through* an agent. This may be an even more pertinent question, if we consider that such MEPs have been subject to the shaping forces of parliament for a greater amount of time.

Leon Festinger (1957) proposed the theory of cognitive dissonance, whereby if a person holds contradictory beliefs or if their actions are inconsistent with their beliefs and values, discomfort and stress will occur, possibly in response to a threat to self-image, and the person will 'adjust' in order to reduce the discomfort by changing beliefs or avoiding the circumstances causing the inconsistency. Festinger's theory supports the research study data suggesting that MEPs attempt to achieve psychological consistency between their expectations and the 'reality' of parliamentary life, by adopting pragmatic responses ('that's politics', 'going outside politics') in an attempt to reduce stress. Thus, to resolve the complex demands of the institution the MEPs are required to change, and are in effect, shaped by the parliament.

Handy (1993) proposes that role theory is about how we perceive others and suggests that 'roles and perceptions of roles underlie all interactions between individuals' (p. 95). Handy

suggests that people attempt to fit the other into a stereotype so that they become more predictable and easier to deal with. However, if the 'stereotyped' person does not conform to stereotype, there ensues 'bewilderment and frustration on the part of [both]' (p. 79). Handy's theory may help in understanding the hostility experienced between some MEPs within the adversarial political group structure of the parliament, as evidenced in the study. It may also help explain the anxiety around identity in an institution without clear role definition, and no stereotypes ('we are all different').

A significant finding within the study was 'uncertainty of role' which contributed to loss of a clear identity. Handy points to role ambiguity (uncertainty as to one's role), role incompatibility between one's role and one's self-concept, and conflict within roles, as sources of stress. The study suggests that role conflict arises from the need to compromise on principles, and the differences between national and European politics.

In the study the participants all described experiencing raised stress levels. The initial response is described as 'protesting' and 'trying to be heard'. Handy (1993) suggests that stress may arise from adopting "strategies that worked in previous roles [which] no longer work in [the] new role". Handy also points to 'complex communication networks' as a source of stress which accords with the study's findings around the difficulties MEPs may experience in negotiating within the EU structures. Another source of stress described by Handy is being in an organisation in which boundaries are unclear (p. 72). This stress is associated with difficulties defining one's role. MEPs described stress around a sense of being in a 'spaceship' with loss of boundaries. Thus, Handy supports the study's proposition that the amorphous nature of the European Parliament can contribute to difficulties around role definition and establishing identity.

The interaction between an individual and the context or environment is explored by Glass (2012), who proposes that "participants come together to construct the setting". Glass suggests that the setting or space is constructed through 'shared activity' and 'shared meanings' which shape the context. Albeit a single case study, this lends support to the study's findings that there is a reciprocal 'shaping' process between MEPs and the parliament. Handy (1993, p. 69) points to a common strategy of dealing with stress through

‘rationalisation’. This appears to accord with a common response of participants that they must live with the situation (‘that’s politics’).

A theme that was not explored in depth, yet did emerge in the study, was the polarisation of political groups and an inability or unwillingness to listen to other views. Goldsworthy (2020), a former digital campaigner, suggests that tribal politics ‘bind identities together’, and politicians ‘in leveraging divisions lose the ability to listen’. Obholzer and Roberts (1994) suggest that collaborative groups (which is an apt description of the European Parliament), with overlapping boundaries, and accountability to different bodies and having no formal managerial structure, have the tendency to ‘split along pre-existing fault lines’. This appears to offer a possible explanation as to why a body of MEP coming together to collaborate, but having different political agendas, mandates and expectations, and no clear role definition or boundaries, can resort to tribal politics.

The study suggests that MEPs undergo a socialisation process to the European Parliament. Bale and Taggart (2005) however, citing Scully (2003), suggest that there is little empirical support for the widely held assumption that “those sent to Europe end up going native”, and point to the fact that, due to the high turnover in its membership at each election, “the European Parliament is numerically more of a new institution than an old one”. They hypothesise that as the Parliament consists of the sum of its parts, as roles change so too will parliament, and possible its place within the European Union

The transition into the European Parliament for newly elected MEPs can evoke responses which may limit the effectiveness of the Parliament which remains unchanged despite the regular election of MEPs with democratic mandates for change. Despite the limitations within the research process, the findings point to the experience of the newly elected MEP as losing a familiar identity and seeking to regain an identity. The proposed theory suggests that MEPs are themselves shaped by the institution that they themselves are trying to shape. Due to the small number of participants, particularly during the theoretical sampling phase, this study would need to be replicated with a greater number of participants before it could be relied upon to predict future patterns of behaviour.

However, if the theory is valid, it suggests that the Parliament, despite regular elections, may not be democratic, if a regular throughput of newly elected MEPs leaves the institution

unchanged. This final idea appears to contradict our deepest feelings of what is a democracy: the practice of regular elections. This intriguing idea cannot be explored further within this study. However, this could be explored in future research.

The author has several other suggestions for future research and recommendations.

The initial purposive group provided rich data around the subjective experience of the participants and provided a solid basis on which to develop a theory. It was difficult to ensure an unbiased purposive group sample as the MEPs that responded to me were enthusiastic, interested, and to a certain extent had self-selected. However, I required that the interviews be conducted in English. This may have prevented some MEPs from contacting me. This suggests that the study be replicated in the national language of participating MEPs.

The study did not include sufficient participants in the theoretical sampling phase to claim theoretical saturation or sufficiency. This was because government restrictions during a Covid 19 pandemic precluded face to face interviews and therefore limited theoretical sampling to interviews held pre-implementation of the restrictions, and to phone and email contact during restrictions. The findings therefore require that the study be replicated in a consistent format, with sufficient participants to achieve data saturation. Due to the small number of participants, particularly during the theoretical sampling phase, this study would need to be replicated with a greater number of participants

Although not a specific focus of the study, the adversarial nature of some of the political group structures formed a background context to the study, and may contribute to the polarised nature of debates around immigration, and whether or not the EU countries should proceed with further integration. The author would recommend that the polarising effect of the political groupings be addressed via initiatives such as Goldsworthy's (2020) 'Depolarization Project' designed to "create space for people to change their minds".

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Charmaz (2012, p. 135) suggests that “theory generation continues to be the unfilled promise and potential of grounded theory”. In forming the research question the author considered the limits of a person’s ability to understand another’s subjective experience (Nagle, 1974), and the usefulness of that limited understanding in relation to understanding the experience of a group. Fortunately, unlike bats, it is possible to ask MEPs about their subjective experience, but their answers and the researcher’s interpretations remain subjective. However, an approach that explored ‘multiple perspectives’ was felt to provide a degree of ‘objectivity’ within the ‘subjective’ focus of the study.

The question around whether a study is objective or subjective is complex. It could be argued that only scientifically validated findings are objective, whereas the counter argument contends that all experience is open to interpretation and therefore subjective. Nietzsche lends support to the latter view and argues that it is not possible to hold an ‘objective’ view or have an unthinking eye that is “turned in no particular direction” (Nietzsche cited in Kaufmann, 1969, p. 119). Glasser (2002) suggests that interpreted data can be “rendered objective by looking at many cases”. Anderson (2017) supports this view, suggesting that differing perspectives can overcome each other’s limitations, and achieve objectivity.

The author initially adopted a ‘traditional’ grounded theory approach as it was felt that its more structured approach would be helpful to guide the author as a novice researcher. However, following the axial coding process and the identification of an emerging core concept around ‘identity’, had the study focused solely on this concept, as per the ‘traditional’ approach, this would have considerably narrowed the field of study and, in the author’s view, neglected other significant concepts resulting in a theory which was merely an explanation of patterns and connections.

However, the worldwide implementation of the COVID-19 restrictions necessitated a change in the direction of the study to a broader focus, encompassing more categories and concepts. This resulted in a final theory which, although arguably more subjective, is also more abstract and imaginative and could form the basis for further research.

The findings in this study are subjective in that an ‘interpretivist’ paradigm is used to seek to understand the participant’s experience. The author began with an ordinary explanation to describe the experience of new MEPs on entering parliament and being uncertain of their role. The vast size and complex structure of the European Parliament presents a significant challenge to new MEPs who are trying to develop their role. The author then developed a more abstract explanation to help understand the MEPs experience. This involved developing the concept of identity within an environment with unclear boundaries. Through successive levels of analysis, the author developed more abstract connections between concepts around time and space, and around identity, to construct a theory. The final theory suggests that while MEPs attempt, largely unsuccessfully, to shape the Parliament, the Parliament is simultaneously, and largely successfully, shaping MEPs.

However, due to the limitations of the study regarding participant numbers, the resultant theory cannot be given the status of a ‘Grand Theory’. It could be described, as in the words of Charmaz (2012, p. 135), as a ‘Middle Range Theory’ or ‘theoretical framework’ which she defines as an “abstract rendering of specific social phenomena that were grounded in the data”. This perhaps provides a more accurate description of the findings of this study.

The author was a novice researcher and the process involved a steep learning curve whereby insights emerged around both the process of grounded methodology, and the findings of the study. A constant challenge was differentiating between the author’s confusion around the theory and the confusion inherent in the exploration of another person’s subjective experience. This ‘twin’ approach of ‘traditional’ and ‘constructivist’ grounded theory perhaps accurately reflected the position of the author, as a novice researcher, who will inevitably alternate between ‘objective’ systematic collection and analysis of the data, and ‘subjective’ immersion in the data.

Although the change from a ‘traditional’ to a ‘constructivist’ approach resulted in the author becoming more immersed (subjectively) in the data, rather than being ‘an objective observer’, the author did attempt to focus on the subjective experiences of the participants rather than her own interpretation of the participant’s experience, and as such would argue that the resultant theory is ‘grounded’ in the experience of the participants.

In any event, Charmaz (2012, p. 149) suggests that “whether we adhere to positivist or interpretive traditions, we do not gain an autonomous theory... rather we are part of our constructed theory whether or not we are aware [of it]”.

Such is the essence of a grounded theory.

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Appendix 1

The initial codes are placed in the following 26 descriptive groups (these groups are have similar meanings/patterns).

Group #1

'never was in politics before', 'first time to get a mandate', 'strange mandate (to get) into the European Parliament', Not what I expected, Working over here is more collaborative. (not oppositional like national parliament) Different dynamics

Group #2

'very very interesting', 'great', 'a very good experience', 'I'm happy now to be here and to work for this', 'I was happy and I said ok let's start new', 'give itthe best I have' it's all functioning, it's very well organised', 'positive was the help I got from the people here in the Parliament', Orientated to environment, building, systems 'I deeply appreciated this', 'I feel quite at home, not really at home, but quite at home', 'very good to have a place to stay' where family can come to visit, 'Another thing which is positive is to have our group, our delegation, with all the assistants and the political advisers we have in our group.... good people', Joyful, enjoyable working with others, enjoying it because it's about politics, very young age politics, kind of passion, a duty. Wanting to bring about change, I always want to do better, try something new, taking an initiative, wanting to improve, change the debating culture in plenary and committees, 'Ideas' (Erasmus, digital platforms, Changing seating order, Ideas around integration),

Group #3

Role in an area in which I am acquainted on a committee 'that is very easy for me to work there', Getting into the right committee for my academic background, skillset, Choosing what to work on- working on something familiar (it helps to have an area of expertise, For me personally the big win , it was like the bonus's so to speak, my party won the elections, now I'm responsible and I'm accountable for my own initiatives., people put their confidence in me, expressing what the voters want to hear, so you are defending their interests here in Parliament, look for leverage with other MEPs, how can I amplify my activities here for the benefit of my people and the voters, I'm in a different role so nowthis is the only difference to me, more in a supporting role, now it's more a cooperative role I believe, but it's a different way of cooperating actually so...., looking for ways to strengthen the work of the MPs. , from a different perspective that you are looking for co-operation, they are a mix bag and you are struck by that when you come over at first, It is much more...I suppose the walks of life that people come from to be a member of the European parliament, That's interesting, you know , they are not professional politicians, now that is good, and it is bad, and you see the calibre of some of the people, the mix is completely different here, which is good and bad, "...it is definitely different ...", "So you

are kind of dealing with a different type of a politician here, slightly different, politics between here and home is different ...”, obviously people (national politics) like to know the candidate, but that is not the case here, in some ways the ceremony of the parliament is much less, like in the (national parliament), people would know TD, but here, the APAs [MEP’s assistants] would be better dressed than the MEPs! being a member of the European parliament actually counts a lot more there in other non-EU countries, there are good and bad in all the group, But there are people here, you could call them experts in their field, who come from civil society, who come from different niches, who are the type of people that should be here.

Group #4

Feeling that political group is not popular in EU, Political grouping ‘we are outsiders, we’re like pariahs’, ‘we are not accepted (by) other groups’..... ‘there are some exceptions’ , . Frustrating, Fighting against right wing populism, Gliding with the right, Working together with other political groups is not the norm ‘national delegations are not close, when you become an MEP, especially as part of the ID group , seen as ‘bad guys’ ... hostility, and I think, well to be bold, they are marching us to the graveyard. This will result in conflict it is even really a bit childish. MEPs that refuse to even shake hands for example... It’s just being polite, I think it is a bit childish, pitiful to be honest, we also have contacts in other groups, so it is not as if everyone on the left is hating us, within our group we have a very warm atmosphere to be honest and I think this reflects the way that we look at the European Union as a whole, you need to respect the institution of parliament, you need to respect the rights of another MEP for example, or another groups, even if you don’t agree, because you agree on the reason why they are here , because they are democratically elected, groups got a list with the journalists attending the Strasbourg session, yes, except our group, I have serious question about this....Well this a disgrace of course. This is a complete disgrace..., this ‘cordon sanitaire’, the devils from the right are excluded from this normal behaviour. But they will adapt. Because otherwise it will collapse, Because we are hurting the centre right christen democrat parties everywhere in Europe. just by giving our voters the information, we do not even have to give them an opinion! ‘we are friends of Europe - we want to help Europe and to strengthen it’, ‘EU gets more and more like a super state , like a big organisation which is mostly....bureaucratic’, ‘Parkinson's law’..big organisations looking after itself... getting no output... ‘that's the problem’, ‘Commission, the Parliament, the Council and all the other institutions they are.....they are cooking in their own soup and ... it is not very ...effective, there needs to be a kind of basic respect and open dialogue and this what we do not see on a political level, this is really a big different if I compare, at a cross road of money and power so...this isn’t the nicest of all environments, that logic, there is a struggle here. It is like a pool full of sharks.

Group #5

it is incredibly cumbersome and hard to see how it could be made less cumbersome, It is mad in some ways and it is incredibly bloody time consuming,

Group #6

But actually the structures in that sort of mind set, yeah, it is not bad, but it takes you a while to adjust into it, The beginning was very difficult/hard, We are still only here six/seven months, we have learnt a lot in that and I think we will, if we find our feet a bit more, "I think we are kind of used to that now, but that took a lot of time "

Group #7

But it's not all bad, even though it is incredibly bad, it is not all bad"

Group #8

'it's very dangerous because youlose your connections..... your relationships at home', being in a bubble, we are living...in a big.... spaceship, 'you can live here in your own world in your own bubble', 'going (home) every weekend..... my solution..... it would be very difficult to (always) live here, it's a really strange world....Wanting to explain reasons for EU regulations to own national constituents, the importance of the issues being dealt with, Doing political campaigns in other member states, communicating a lot on social media because an information gap between the European Parliament and the voters, a lot of people don't know what happens here, because you need to belong, and you need to fit in, "the disconnect between the ideas- if some of them have them [the MEPs] and half of them don't – of the MEPs and the actual work being done by the staff" we do as I say get exposure to a lot of stuff that is going on, but how do we get that message back? Everywhere! that is going to be the hard thing...

Group #9

"...even the discourse around it sort of does because the people here are feeding into the situation back home, and they are interacting with national politics so I suppose, it is a bit more messy here.

Group #10

Committees not working, views not being listened to, old MEPs accept, new MEPs criticise, Hierarchy very strong, seniority principle, new MEPs cannot chair meetings, But I'm elaborating (eagerness to express and explain position), "we do actually tend to listen to people at the committees, and take that as quite important, or in the plenary, so it is not just a case of coming in and doing your own minute and then leaving!"

Group #11

But here in the European union it is, and this is should be the beacon of light, of democracy and values, Emotional reasons to remain in EU, Holding onto EU spirit, Practical reasons to remain in EU, believing in the EU project, in cooperating, but not further integration, And I think this (migration issues) is really sad because, personally, I believe in the European project, the project of free people cooperating together, I did not grow up in a narrow-minded vision of the world, after the disaster of the second world war, we should work together in Europe and I think this is still a good thing, but the EU is evolving into something that has nothing to do with...the um.. cooperation and promoting sovereignty, liberty and freedom , it is in my opinion evolving into some kind of dictatorship and this is what uh an example uh the climate law now, So it's not up to the European commission to decide what policy happens in every country in Europe, well this is my opinion, I'm just sitting here to voice the opinion of my voters, 'I believe in my own convictions of course and in democracy we have different opinions ', it's our sovereignty our liberty our freedom to have different points of views, 'it's a sense of duty (working here), it is clear that European union will collapse sooner or later, It's logic, im not applauding for the Brexit, im trying to understand the motivation behind the Brexit referendum for example, and this is what we see in different countries, not only in Great Britain, European Union has a big problem, a big deficit in democratic legitimacy, democratic accountability of the EU commissioners is very weak. ...unelected bureaucrats Nobody, literally nobody, I've asked before maybe two 300 times, and asking in debates to other politicians... They don't know this guy, he is responsible for migration framework, so this is quite absurd, so we get a decisions made here by the EU commission or in parliament and nobody actually knows who is responsible or who is accountable , I think this a major problem for the European Union . ..to give more power to t European Union was voted down, a fundamental problem, reasons why Brexit happened , EU has a very weak democratic legitimacy, the constitution of Europe , it was voted down in Holland and in France and in Ireland, had a second referendum, if people the first time don't vote right in the first way, you know, when people are voting pro more powers for the European union then everybody says here, it is really a magnificent example of how democracy workswhen people vote against more powers for the European union, you know what people say, this is the result of populism [laughs]. So this hypocrisy is so...huge, it's like an elephant in this room, because more and more people are rejecting it. and rejecting the evolution of this European union, should cooperate closely, I think everybody agrees but the way you want to cooperate is not by creating a super-state, we do not need a European democracy deciding on what happens in my country for example, what we do need and that the subsidiary principle, which was fundamental to the construction of Europe, is that free people or free countries, be they small countries or large countries like Germany for instance has 80 million inhabitants. this is imperialism. now it's becoming the European union who wants to do so, In any other parliament, you do not have seats in a committee by unelected officials, here you do , 1/3 or something like that, This parliament isn't really a parliament. I would like to abolish this parliament, committee or in the vice presidency and so on. Well this is just a

disgrace. denied legitimate seats in the committees. this is just unbelievable hypocrisy, but nobody is accountable, nobody knows where decisions are made, is why for example Holland and Denmark and Sweden and Austria, they don't want to budget to expand, so my actions, to preserve what is good and what can be better, this is the job for everybody, not only for politicians, and I think, well to be bold, they are marching us to the graveyard. This will result in conflict, It is interesting when you see all that, and in all of that, there is big contexts for a diverse Europe, parliament has got more powers and it has had more influence, on paper no, but a bit, it is exerting itself a bit more, But this parliament isn't a real parliament, it's kind of phoney parliament actually. So I cannot vote down one of the commissioners for example, So you cannot, the way it is organised, you cannot make law here. As a mep. I cannot a motion designed for law... is not how it works here, you have the council and different institutions when it comes to law making.

Group #12

Shock chaotic, Free time limited, busy, more than expected, No chill out time, Enriching but lack of time to reflect or think, Quoting Bill Gates, Steve Jobs..... necessary to have 'thinking time', it was a little overwhelming at the start, I have to be honest, it was absolutely rotten when we came here first, trying to find your feet...yeah, very difficult, asking self what are we doing here? is harder (not having time) because it means you can't dig deeper

Group #13

So I think its very meaningful job, its not a job actually, its not a career being in politics , it's a sense of duty and that's why I'm trying to do my best here and then we'll see what the voters have to say about that in a couple of years, politicians have a certain responsibility to society, because they are also accountable, they get elected so they need to do exactly this, protecting society

Group #14

cannot take this from us, that we can speak out for our interests in parliament' European bureaucracy is um kind hypocritical to be honest, there are different rules, an inter-mingling between the political and the administrative level here in the EU. And this is simply not right because in a ...a normal democratic society there is a separation between powers, You see that MEP who did not get elected now suddenly wind up in the bureau of some commission for example so this is...democracy you have the rule of law , that same rule is applied to everybody in the

same manner...this is not a once in lifetime experience. So this simply isn't right,.....

Group #15

the longer you are in this house. The more cynical you get [laughs]...when I'm not getting out of bed in the morning, joyful to do what I want to do here, then I will quit, I don't think I will change the world for example... this is not how it works, so it goes very slow, theoretically the outcome, should be balanced, they get cynical because they lost faith in being able to change things, You could say, is that worth it, all the fighting over a single line? I actually think it is, in a sense, ...it does inch change ...it is inching it in the direction... when you think of the amount of backbreaking work that goes into the legislation, probably over a period of two years and then at the end of it, the council or the commission can block it. it may not go anywhere.

Group #16

politics is about defending interests. in this environment where there is a lot of power, and a lot of interests come together, there is a lot of conflict, this is just how it is. So you need to be strong to survive in this environment, You need to work together, you need to cooperate, just to get your interests better promoted.

Group #17

a lot of information passing here, you have high quality people coming to speak at conferences, you don't have to agree with people, what their point of view is, casual meetings, the more open the debate is, the more political it gets, which is logical, the more antagonist it gets, I like this political struggle, or else I wouldn't be in politics, we always look at, for example, not who is proposing something, but (what) is he proposing. I have voted myself, I have supported letters and initiatives, of the communist for example, because I can agree on certain issues, not on everything, but on certain things.

Group #18

this is one of the big problems. they take off their national jacket and they put on a European jacket and they are suddenly saying other things, so it is weird, really weird

Group #19

A personal challenge- "I wanted to see if I could"

Group #20

Being the Ideal MEP

Group #21

Learning how to get work done- Learning unwritten rules

Group #22

[on who to work with] , you immediately identify the others who are going to the meetings, So you listening to what is going on, and begin to here who is saying what, and other people begin to do the same, and they kind of identify you outside afterwards, from interventions from the plenary, people come up to you and said you spoke very well on that...

Group #23

'do you feel like a fish out of water' or too small to make a difference? No. I would believe that.

Group #24

the girl was useful in terms of directing us...but it is so vast and so big...you don't even know the right questions to be asking to get the help, yeah, they were helpful and they were experienced ...but you can't really learn until you are in the middle of doing it.

Group #25

they are politically correct [MEPs in some of the committees] in a derogatory way, because maybe what's wrong is that too much of politics is formalised, but at the same time the knowledge in terms of legislation isn't really there

Appendix 2

A ‘free writing’ summary of data from the theoretical sampling group.

- MEPs being grateful for being in parliament, leading them to wanting to do their best/ and being happy/enthusiastic to be in there. This seemed to be the case regardless of the MEP’s personal position on the EU in general.
- In the beginning, when first coming to parliament, many MEPs report feeling overwhelmed/very confused/disorientated. The scale of the institution is daunting for many, as well as the unfamiliar role itself. In addition to getting set up in a professional capacity, there are also personal challenges that MEPs will find difficult – such as finding housing, opening banks, and being separated from their families.
- MEPs describe stepping onto a roller coaster – they are busy, but to a large degree this is a personal choice, with what they take on being down to themselves.
- It is possible to see how intense the ‘buzz’ around MEPs is, when they go to Strasbourg for plenary week. The Brussels parliament is extremely quiet (even though of course there is still lots of staff that are working there). It appears like the chaos is attached to the MEPs and follows them around.
- Initial supports were limited. Established MEPs who had ‘been in their (new MEPs) shoes’ do not show a particular interest in helping new MEPs find their feet, unless from the same national delegation. However, it is often those working closest with the MEPs- such as their personal team or staff for the political group- that become the greatest support for the MEPs.
- MEPs will rather quickly have to decide which political group to join or remain non-aligned. Initially, there will be a battle with other MEPs in their group to gain a seat on their desired committees. Thus, in this new unfamiliar role, MEPs will often gravitate to familiar subjects/ areas of work- and what they are ‘most qualified for’.
- Political groups can provide a lot of support to new MEPs in the beginning and can often support MEPs in finding their feet but may present challenges to MEPs down the line in the form of group dynamics and political expectations. MEP may not be fully in line with the group on all issues. Some MEPs choose the group for strongly ideological reasons, as they fully identify with the group. However, others are more pragmatic- and will choose a party that is ‘close enough’ to their world view or will prefer to join a larger group as it has more power, despite it not

being a good ideological fit. A MEP may vote differently on what other member may see as 'core values' of the group, choosing to support national interests over the group's political interest.

- Other tensions that may arise as being part of a group include 'having to fight to have your concerns heard', pressure/expectation to vote in certain ways, internal clashes and divisions within the group, finding that the group is dominated by a particular nationality, which can steer a particular agenda, and the existence of a strong hierarchy. This can result in MEPs adopting a range of 'positions' from co-operation to resistance, but often more pragmatic and nuanced.
- MEPs will find that they cannot be told everything they need to know at the start; and that they will have to learn by 'doing'/ learn to adapt/ learn what is useful for them specifically/learn written and unwritten rules.
- Some find the cooperative atmosphere a relief from the national politics scene. Many MEPs said that working with other Europeans and others from diverse walks of life, was one of the best parts of the job. Many found there was a great deal of cooperation and openness and being able to rise above party lines, and that this was what is part made the work in EP special/unique, a felt sense of 'being in this together'.
- MEPs were disappointed and expressed frustration with the degree to which the national dimension played out in parliament, including the dominance of certain nationalities in particular groups who then controlled the groups political agenda, often voting against the group line in plenary without an internal discussion first.
- New MEPs outnumber long-time MEPs, by nearly 2/1. However, MEPs come to learn that, some MEPs 'are more equal than others', and that there is a hierarchical structure, based on the 'principle of seniority' and the holding of influential positions in parliament. (eg president/ VP / chair / coordinator).
- Participants expressed views that the seniority principle lacked a certain legitimacy. New MEPs said they could see signs of institutionalisation and cynicism amongst some older MEPs. When asked what might cause MEPs to become cynical, many suggested that MEPs had perhaps become worn down and frustrated with the overall process, the length of time it took and the difficulty bringing about change.
- New MEPs as bringing a freshness to Parliament and an ability to initiate change.
- MEPs will find that everyone wants their time, and that every minute can allotted for; and that their position affords them a great many opportunities to meet with important figures, in a great number of fields. The limit will be their own

curiosity/stamina and hours in the day. Some MEPs are clear about what they want to work on, others find that their curiosity brings them in different directions.

- Many felt that the Council and the Commission often have a great deal more power, which prevents the EP from making substantial changes. It is felt that the commission can often elude questioning in the plenary or in committees. In terms of the Council, some MEPs felt that national governments have too much say over how the EU is run, however others strongly disagreed. Furthermore, they can find that years of hard legislative work can potentially be shut down by both the Council and/or the Commission .
- MEPs felt that the EU had a very high level of output, especially in consideration of the language barriers.
- There are unwritten procedures and ways to get things done. There is an imposed ‘cordon sanitaire’ within Parliament which means that others political groups must not deal with the far-right groups, as far as possible. This means that the other MEPs will vote down legislation submitted by these groups, and often, show open hostility towards the members. This status quo is more or less accepted by MEPs. However, some disagree and argue that it is undemocratic. Political groups were described as a ‘mixed bag’ and the lines were often more blurred than the group label suggested, and barriers were able to be broken down by working together informally on specific issues. Interpersonal factors were also felt to be important.
- MEP often have to project a particular public image ‘to save face’ but can be more ‘honest’ in informal settings. This suggests both a public and a private identity, which may result in internal conflict and compromise. Two ‘becomings’ – becoming an MEP (i.e being voted in/elected) and ‘becoming’ an MEP- a process socialization (learning how to be an MEP). It appears to be easier (and necessary) to socialise in a ‘spaceship’ environment
- The issue of ‘not listening to each other’ came up in many forms, with MEPs feeling it was possible to get ‘lost’ in the great many voices trying to speak.
- MEPs adjusted approach to work within different ‘scales’. At the big scale they ‘worked small’ (detailed). On the short scale they worked ‘fast’.
- Some MEPs spoke about wanting to achieve the ‘greater good, despite it sometimes hurting your own country [“politics would be very small if you only cared about you and your own constituents’]
- MEPs concerned around becoming disconnected if they stay a long time in a parliament that is like a large object that draws things closer/has a greater pull