

M@n@gement

Special issue

*The business of observation, and the observation of business:
Reflections on the plurality, power and limitations of observation.*

Guest editors

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Call for papers

The goal of this special issue is to enrich existing knowledge about observation, understood both as a research method used to investigate organizational settings *in situ*, and as an organizational phenomenon that occurs within organizations. Both researchers and practitioners have long observed organizational settings, and both aspects of observation need particular attention. This special issue welcomes academic contributions on one or both of these two aspects of observational practices.

Observation as a research method remains under-engaged by management scholars, certainly compared with interviewing or quantitative analysis. The use of extended rich observation is also occasionally over-stated by researchers. As Bate (1997) argued about ethnography in particular, much of its use at the time in organisation studies could better be described as “quasi-anthropological”, that is more “quick description” (Wolcott, 1995: 90) than “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). While many more extended observation-based studies with an “ethnographic consciousness” (Linstead, 1997) have been published since then, the potential of observation as a research method remains great. This is unfortunate because observational practices enable researchers to investigate phenomena which can difficult to investigate otherwise, and can also be helpful for reactualizing our understanding of more familiar phenomena that have already been extensively studied using other research methods (Bernstein, 2012). It is particularly the case since observation refers to a great variety of research methods with their own potentialities. There are a number of observational practices, such as participant, non-participant (Bastien, 2007), dynamic (Journé, 2005), incognito or with different degrees of covertness (Roulet et al. forthcoming). Each of these approaches opens its own research possibilities, raises its own methodological challenges and has its own limitations that need to be discussed. For instance, non-participant observational practices such as shadowing (Mintzberg, 1970; Théron and Pezé, 2014) offer opportunities to understand decision-making processes and organizational practices

as they ‘naturally’ occur but let no room for researchers to influence the phenomenon under investigation (Anteby, 2013). Dynamic observational practices can be useful to capture both the planned and the unexpected (Journé, 2005; Bardon et al., 2017) but can be difficult to implement in practice. Undercover observational practices can be necessary for studying certain phenomena that could hardly be studied otherwise, such as ethically reprehensible organizational behaviors for instance (Stenger and Roulet, forthcoming; Morales and Lambert, 2013). However, they also raise issues regarding subjects’ consent (Roulet et al., forthcoming), and may lead to other unintended consequence, for instance on further constraints being subsequently placed on other scholars attempting access to similar settings.

More generally, observational practices generate a lot of practical issues that need to be discussed, such as those related with entering or withdrawing from research fields, recording observations (simultaneous or retrospective note taking, audio or video recording, use of photography and visual representations, etc.) or issues that concern relationships with research subjects before, during and after observation time (Bruni, 2006, Roulet et al., 2018). Observational practices can also raise questions linked with the identity of the researcher who is conducting observation: Should observers fade into the background? (Silverman, 2000) If yes, how can they achieve this and how far should they go? (Roulet, et al. forthcoming) If not, what would be the implications? (Bruni, 2006) Can subjects 'forget' that they are observed? Should they? Are there things we in turn should not see?

Modern management has also been built on the idea that managers should observe organizational functioning, and in particular organizational participants, in order to improve corporate functioning and increase performance management (e.g. Taylor, 1911, Fayol, 1918). In line with this, mainstream studies tend to approach ‘observation’ as a monitoring practice for managers in order to observe organizational participants and how they “perform” in the organization. As an extension, digital technologies – including CCTVs, computer and phone tracking systems or even personal data collection devices such as Fitbits – now offer unprecedented possibilities for watching (and ultimately, controlling) organizational participants compared with direct observational methods.

Beyond studying the technological and non-technological means used by managers to observe employees, this also raises questions about how the latter experience and respond to such observational practices. Although observing people at work can contribute to aligning their behaviours with corporate expectations (Aiello and Kolb, 1995; Stanton and Barnes-Farrell, 1996), it can also involve negative consequences including feelings of privacy intrusion and unfairness, decreases in job satisfaction and commitment, and increases in counter-productive behaviors (Stanton, 2000; Bernstein, 2012; Tomczack et al., 2017). Still, most of existing studies on this matter are either experimental or theoretical. There is therefore a need for comprehensive qualitative pieces that render in more rich detail the observational practices as they are implemented in organizational settings, as well as the inner experiences of organizational participants being observed. At the collective level, it also raises questions about how such observational practices influence firms’ performance, since observing ‘too much’ or ‘too little’ organizational participants can have paradoxical effects on productivity and efficiency (Bernstein, 2012; Bhave, 2014).

In a distinct but related way, critical scholars approach observational practices within organization settings in terms of surveillance. This perspective opens interesting research possibilities to investigate observational practices in relation with power relationships (Sewell and Barker, 2006; Ball, 2010). In particular, it raises questions about how observational practices used in organizational settings contribute to disciplining organizational participants, but also how they can lead to self-discipline (Sewell, 1998). Indeed, existing studies show that technological and organizational innovations can increase employees' surveillance by their hierarchy, but also by electronic devices, by their peers if not by themselves (Zuboff, 1990; Sewell and Wilkinson, 1992; Barker, 1993; Sewell, 1998; Munro, 2000; Iedema and Rhodes, 2010; Bardon, 2011). This critical perspective also leads to investigating how organizational participants experience such exercises of power, given that being observed can lead to reactions as diverse as conforming to corporate expectations, hiding deviant behaviors (Burawoy, 1979), managing impressions (Bardon, 2011) or even engendering a particular ethics of the self (Iedema and Rhodes, 2010:199).

This special issue will thus welcome contributions that adopt different perspectives on observational practices: ours (as researchers) of organisations, and those happening within organisations, with or without the simultaneous presence of researchers. We welcome (but do not limit ourselves to) the following types of papers in the context of this special issue:

- We welcome empirical articles that demonstrate how observational practices enable us to investigate phenomena that are difficult to study otherwise, or to renew existing understandings on a somehow familiar phenomenon. We also encourage experience-based critical and/or polemical papers about the following (among other topics):
 - What is observation in scholarship?
 - How is observation achieved as a practice?
 - What should or should we not observe?
 - What happens to us when we observe?
 - What are the societal benefits of our observations (beyond publication)?
- We encourage submissions that investigate observational practices as they occur within organizational settings. Submissions with a critical perspective on observation methods within organisations, and their uses are also welcomed.

The above list is not exhaustive. In addition, while much observation-based or oriented research remains qualitative, particularly ethnographic, we welcome other approaches if they speak in an interesting and meaningful way to the Special Issue theme.

If you have an idea for a possible paper that may fit this call, and would like to speak to us about it initially, please contact one of the guest editor.

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Submission Process

Deadline for submissions: October 15th, 2018

Submission period: From September, 15th, 2018 to October 15th, 2018.

Submissions should be prepared in accordance with M@n@gement author guidelines available on the M@n@gement website. Submissions are to be made online via the M@n@gement website. <http://www.management-aims.com/pg-40-article-submission-rules-of-the-scientific-review-of-management-strategy-and-organisation-m@n@gement-.html>

Please mention in your letter that your submission is for the special issue.

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