

SPECIAL ISSUE OBSERVATION

Observing to Coproduce a Collective Narrative: Emplotment of Multiple Parallel Stories

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Abstract

Observation captures complex organizational phenomena *in situ*. The literature on this method explains the possible data collection methods but says less about the use and organization of the data collected. As a result, the question of the meaning of observation data remains open. This article explores that question with the focus on a specific form of observation, dynamic observation, which can grasp indeterminate situations whose meaning is elusive for both practitioners and the researcher. Drawing on the work of Ric eur, we propose a conceptual tool kit founded on *mimesis*. We show that organizing observation data into a plot and narrative, through an inquiry conducted by researchers and practitioners together, can shed light both on the observation data and the situation observed. We embody our method by applying this tool kit to a dynamic observation conducted in a high-risk industry. We discuss the methodological issues of this co-construction of shared meaning and its role in restoring centrality to observation in the management sciences, and resituating the situations and the actors as core concerns.

Keywords: *Dynamic observation; Co-construction of meaning; Narrative; Emplotment; Ric eur*

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This article looks at the key role of observation in management sciences to capture complex, indeterminate situations. The methodological literature on this topic proposes a 'dynamic' data collection strategy (Journ e, 2005, 2012), but says very little about the use and organization of the resulting data. To break the silence, we propose a way of using and organizing data collected by dynamic observation, to make them meaningful and co-construct a shared narrative. This widens the potential of dynamic observation, and an illustration of that potential is provided.

Observation is a data collection technique in which the researchers themselves personally observe processes or behaviors taking place in an organization during a defined time period (Baumard et al., 2014). More broadly, it is a specific strategy for interaction with the field of study (Journ e, 2012). It is part of a protocol for collection of qualitative data that are rich and complementary (Cunliffe, 2011), allowing discursive data to be contextualized and embodied in action (Bardon, Brown, & Pez e, 2017). Various forms of observation exist, able to capture many organizational phenomena *in situ*. Examples include participant and nonparticipant observation (Bastien, 2007; Journ e, 2012), and covert or overt observation (Roulet et al., 2017). Despite these promising perspectives,

few management research articles use observation methods as the central data collection method (Barley & Kunda, 2001). This is partly explained by the complexity of data collection during long or short observation phases, and also by the difficulty of reporting those data (Journ e, 2005). Yet, several authors stress the key role of observations to capture work activity (Journ e & Raulet-Croset, 2012; Mintzberg, 1970; Orvain, 2014; Th eron & Pez e, 2014), processes (Baumard, et al., 2014), corporate strategy formation (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; La Ville (de) & Mounoud, 2004), and complex, indeterminate situations that require work to (re)construct meaning, that is, an inquiry in the pragmatist sense (Dewey, 1938[1967]; Journ e & Raulet-Croset, 2008). The richness of observation should cease to be an obstacle to its use, and instead be considered a good opportunity to clearly grasp contemporary organizational issues and bring the situation and the actors back to the core of the analysis.

The methodological literature proposes a form of observation called dynamic observation (Journ e, 2005, 2012) that is able to capture those issues through a proposed data collection protocol built on four strategies. This literature states that dynamic observation can obtain 'plot-rich narratives,' but how? More broadly, the question remains of the meaning of data

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collected. Ethnographers, who are the great specialists of observation research (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Cabantous, 2015; Musca Neukirch et al., 2018), have underlined the importance of the way the material collected from field studies is organized, generally into narratives (Van Maanen, 1983). The aim is to 'stick' as closely as possible to the notes taken as things were happening, and succeed in giving them meaning. Narratives can make connections between concepts and bring out the shared meanings (Fenton & Langley, 2011). This question of bringing out/producing meaning is all the more salient when the observed situations are complex. The first work required is thus to transform the raw observations into narratives able to present the plot of the indeterminate situation and the different ways of acting involved. Elaboration of those narratives can be done by the researcher, who may report on inquiries resolved by practitioners. The narratives aim for plausibility and are acknowledged as plausible by the principal actors they include (Journé, 2005). But this elaboration becomes more complex when the practitioners are unable to remove the uncertainty; the events collected remain poorly organized and at first sight make little or no sense.

This article proposes to adopt Paul Ricœur's concepts of emplotment and narrative, and to explore them as methodological and conceptual tools that can make sense collectively, working together with practitioners, of observation data. Paul Ricœur defines the narrative as a "mimetic activity," the "creative imitation, by means of the plot of lived temporal experience" (Ricœur, 1984, p. 31). Some research has used narratives as a source of data: the narrative is often produced by the organizations, and then collected and analyzed by the researcher (Boudès & Browning, 2005; Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004; Dion, 2012; Mercier & Deslandes, 2017; Robinson & Kerr, 2015). Few articles to date, however, have emphasized the methodological contribution of Ricœur's thought to transforming observation data into narratives that are rich in shared meaning. This article therefore proposes to answer the following question: how can a Ricœurian approach to emplotment and narrative help to make sense collectively of dynamic observation data by enabling analysis of that data, and in doing so, clarify the complex situations observed?

This article comprises two major sections. First, we show the relevance of dynamic observations (Journé, 2005) to grasp complex situations and give them meaning through 'plot-rich' narratives. To enrich the potential of dynamic observation, we provide more details of data organization by reference to the Ricœurian approach to narrative and emplotment. In the second section, we illustrate this potential by 'giving voice' to our observations conducted at a nuclear power plant – observations that led to collection of conflicting accounts, and their emplotment during an inquiry involving both researchers and practitioners. We present the key role of such collective emplotment and discuss the contributions and limitations of this methodological reflection.

Making sense of data collected by dynamic observation: A proposed Ricoeurian perspective

After highlighting the questions and challenges posed by observation, we consider the issues associated with dynamic observation when capturing complex situations and resituating the actors at the center of management science analyses. The methodological literature sets out data collection strategies, but says less about how to use and organize the data collected, even though that relates to the crucial question of the meaning of observation data. Having stated the possibility of organizing data into 'plot-rich narratives,' we propose to take a detour via Ricœur's work to define the emplotment and narrative dynamics and put them forward as methodological tools for creating collective meaning from observation data. We set this proposal more broadly in the narrative stream of management science research, which defines the established links between narrative and construction of meaning, notably through the inquiry process in which emplotment plays out.

Dynamic observation: Grasping complex situations and producing plot-rich narratives

Questioning, critiques and the issues raised by observation

Observation is defined as a data collection technique, and more broadly, as a special strategy for interaction with the field of study (Journé, 2012). Observation raises many questions about (1) the observation methods and subjects' consent (Roulet et al., 2017); (2) the practices, for example, concerning the observation recording techniques, relations with the people observed, use, and organization of the observation data (Bruni, 2006; Langley & Klad, 2019; Roulet et al., 2017); (3) the researcher's identity: role, stance and involvement (Anteby, 2013; Silverman, 2006). The method has numerous pitfalls: trying to report too much, getting swamped by data, and the difficulty of observing 'at the right time' (Pezé, 2012). Its 'immediacy' (Journé, 2012) generates difficulties that explain the limited use of this method, and the limited analysis of data collected. Due to the questions and critiques associated with observation research methods, they are often abandoned (Barley & Kunda, 2001) in favor of semistructured interviews, or secondary data, for example, from archives (Banks, 2007; Leonard-Barton, 1990). When the observation method is chosen, it is generally used as part of a broader research 'design' such as a case study; research articles making this method the central topic are more unusual and in those articles, the authors focus less on the technical details of direct observation of work and situations (Journé, 2005) than on the relations with the field of study and the people observed (Anteby, 2013; Langley & Klad, 2019; Roulet et al., 2017). The technical details supplied shed more

light on the question of collection strategies (Journé, 2005) than the use and organization of the data collected.

And yet observation appears to be a key approach for understanding and studying organizational and managerial phenomena (Bernstein, 2017), particularly indeterminate situations that call for an inquiry in the pragmatist sense of the term (Dewey, 1938[1967]; Mead, 1938; Peirce, 1903[1998]). Dewey (1938[1967], p. 169) defines an inquiry as “the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified whole”. It begins with an indeterminate situation that disturbs the normal course of action (Lorino, Tricard, & Clot, 2011). Observation can capture these inquiries and thus restore the actors and the concept of the ‘situation’ to the core of organizational analysis (Journé & Raulet-Croset, 2008). The observation method provides a solution to the need, in management sciences, to consider situated action “as a central object of study, taking seriously the disruptive power of situations and the complexity of collective meaning-making” (Lorino, 2018, p. 324).

Dynamic observation as an opportunity to capture complex situations: Collection strategies and production of narratives

One specific type of observation, called dynamic observation (Journé, 2005), has been described to detail the way the observer can, concretely and technically, capture these inquiry processes (Journé, 2005, 2012). Based on the principle of methodological opportunism (Girin, 1989), dynamic observation combines strategies that are flexible enough to evolve in response to developments in the situation. The first of these strategies consists of undertaking long, systematic observations within a specified physical perimeter (unity of place) so as to build familiarity with the field of study. The second consists of intense but short-term observation of a specific point (unity of time and place) so as to collect detailed data, for example, relating to individual or collective microactivities. The third strategy focuses on the actors engaged in a particular process, systematically monitoring all the activities of one actor in the course of 1 day (unity of actor). The fourth strategy concentrates specifically on unforeseen problematic situations, plots that develop, play out, and evolve as the action advances and the actors’ thinking progresses (unity of the problematic situation). Strategy no. 4 takes precedence over the other three strategies, but needs them for the collected data to be analyzable and meaningful. At any time, the first three strategies can be replaced by the fourth when an indeterminate situation emerges that is sufficiently disturbed to require the actors to work on definition and interpretation of the situation, in other words to conduct an ‘inquiry.’

To report on and analyze observations while preserving the ‘situated’ nature of the data, Journé (2005) states the need to turn raw observations into narratives able to reflect the plot of the situation and the differing ways of acting involved. The first three strategies can describe the pace of activities, and at best, write individual stories (Journé, 2012), but most of the fundamental material needed to write ‘plot-rich’ narratives (Journé, 2005) is supplied by the fourth strategy. However, Journé remains vague about the concept of “plot-rich” narratives (Journé, 2012, p. 195) and how they are produced. He also observes situations whose future developments cannot be known by anyone, and have an unforeseeable outcome. Writing a narrative is generally considered feasible when the outcome is observed in real life; but what if that is not the case? What should we do when the dynamic observation data give rise to incomplete stories, possibly containing contradictions (Journé, 2005) – stories that reveal the difficulty of making sense of a situation, and thus making sense of our observation data?

This article considers the possibility of seeing how collectively researchers and practitioners can give observation data a plot and organize them into a narrative to inquire together. The concepts of ‘story,’ ‘narrative,’ and ‘plot’ are presented below, drawing on the writings of Paul Ricoeur, and their use in management sciences is discussed, particularly in the processual and pragmatist approaches to organizations that closely link narrative, plot, and inquiry.

Story, narrative, and the employment dynamic in Ricoeur

With the exception of some authors who attempt to differentiate them (Czarniawska, 2004; Gabriel, 2000; Küpers, Mantere, & Statler, 2013), the terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ are generally used interchangeably, but the writings of Ricoeur (1984) clarify their differences. A story is a sequence of actions and experiences, an enumeration of events: each individual ‘tells’ a story, their version of events. A narrative, in contrast, organizes the action via a plot, arranging the events accordingly. Ricoeur defines the narrative more precisely as a “mimetic activity,” the “creative imitation, by means of the plot of lived temporal experience” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 31). A distinction must thus be made between the narrative – Aristotle’s concept of *mimesis* – which is an imitation or a representation of action, and employment – *muthos* – which is an arrangement of the events.

Ricoeur (1984) develops a connection between three mimeses, and proposes that the narrative, a creative imitation of action, should be considered as a mediation between:

- *mimesis I*, a preunderstanding of the action by identification of its structural features, symbolic connections, and temporal natures;

- and *mimesis III*, a postunderstanding of the action, the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader;
- via *mimesis II*, an emplotment that “brings together” the variety of action in the universe of the plot: “the configurational arrangement [that] transforms the succession of events into one meaningful whole which is the correlate of the act of assembling the events together and which makes the story followable” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 67).

According to Ricoeur (1984), questioning the emplotment dynamic is the key to the problem of the relationship between time and narrative. He proposes to “show the mediating role of the time of emplotment between the temporal aspects prefigured in the practical field and the refiguration of our temporal experience by this constructed time” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 54). As noted earlier, narration is thus a ‘mimetic activity,’ the “creative imitation, by means of the plot of lived temporal experience” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 31). Given the ‘discordant’ nature of lived temporal experience, narration rearranges events creatively to make the action intelligible: “this mimetic reproduction is therefore not a passive copy, but a rearrangement of events and time” (Lorino & Nefussi, 2007, p. 80, our own translation). Ricoeur (1984) considers the plots we invent as our primary way of reconfiguring our confused, unformed, sometimes even mute temporal experience. By freeing us from chronology, the narrative reconnects us with the very essence of temporality that underlies the meaning of action (Lorino, 2005). This mimetic activity finds completion in the hearer, the reader or the spectator, *in situ*, and in the actions taken: “who is telling the story, when, in what circumstances, where, to whom, for what purpose, with what effects?” (Lorino, 2005, p. 205, our own translation).

This Ricoeurian perspective is mobilized in a certain management science approach considering narration as a process, in which the narrative is a way to link meaning and action, and can be used as an instrument for intervention.

Mobilization of the Ricoeurian approach in management sciences: The narrative as an instrument for intervention and inquiry

Ricoeur’s reflections have been used in management sciences to define what a narrative could be in a firm (Boudès & Browning, 2005; Dion, 2012). Mobilization of the Ricoeurian approach in a narrative ‘stream’ or ‘paradigm’ of management science research (Cunliffe, 2002; Czarniawska, 2004; Giroux & Marroquin, 2005) takes us out of the ‘narrative object’ approach that sees narrative as a fixed representational object (Lorino, 2005), and consequently, the narrative ceases to be a

way to draw conclusions about the organization, its structure, culture, and practices (Boje, 1991; Boje & Rosile, 1997; Ott, 1989). Under the Ricoeurian approach, narration can instead be conceived as a process in which the narrative is a way to connect meaning and action (Lorino, 2005). In this dynamic approach, the narrative is a situated, socialized, socializing, and dialogical process. The narrative, particularly the organizational narrative, thus becomes the outcome of an inquiry in the sense of the approaches developed by the pragmatist philosophers (Dewey, 1938[1967]; Mead, 1938; Peirce, 1903[1998]). It is born of an inquiry triggered by a surprising, indeterminate situation that requires many practitioners to convert “the elements of the original situation into a unified whole” (Dewey, 1938[1967], p. 169).

The inquiry is a place for emplotment, that is, the search for order and an explanation for disordered, enigmatic events. Listening to the narrative is also an inquiry: “when listening to the narrative, I look for elements that will enable me to project the plot onto my own experience, or to recognize my own experience in the plot of the narrative, at the risk of destabilizing the view of it I have held so far” (Lorino, 2005, p. 205, our own translation).

The inquiry, in turn, leads to a collective narrative. The function of that narrative is to make experiences – past, present, and future – intelligible to subjects engaged in an organized action (Lorino, 2005); it is central “to meaning-making and re-interpreting the relationship among actors, events and contexts” (Ripamonti et al., 2016, p. 56). As Journé (2005) shows, dynamic observation can help to collect this type of ‘plot-rich’ narrative; it is important to observe how the actors inquire together, starting from an indeterminate situation.

But the events collected can remain in disorder, and the stories may remain parallel if the actors are unsuccessful at inquiring jointly, or achieving emplotment of the situation encountered. In the latter case, dynamic observation can collect multiple parallel stories and emplot them with practitioners in order to ‘inquire together.’

Practitioners and researchers create meaning and make sense of their experiences in their narrative discourses with others (Cunliffe, Luhman, & Boje, 2004). Narration is thus not only a source of data, but it also becomes an instrument for intervention (Giroux & Marroquin, 2005).

This methodological article seeks to show the key role of dynamic observations to collect narratives, but also and most importantly, disordered events, parallel stories that cannot make the action intelligible: the plot still needs to be developed. These undeveloped plots could be constructed in a collective inquiry that sheds light on the following question: how can a Ricoeurian approach to emplotment and narrative help to make sense collectively of dynamic observation data by enabling analysis of that data, and in doing

so, clarify the complex situations observed? How can we make the research material derived from our observations 'speak' and co-construct a collective narrative from narrative fragments that are partial and initially discordant? That is precisely what we propose to illustrate in the following paragraph.

Narrative construction and emplotment from dynamic observation data collected at a nuclear power plant

This section describes our emplotment of the traces of our observations, and how we co-constructed a collective narrative with the actors in an inquiry.

Research setting

The research took place at a nuclear power plant in Europe during 'on-line' periods, that is, times when the plant's two units of power generation, each unit including a nuclear reactor, were in operation. We completed five periods of observation, each lasting between 7 and 10 days, in November 2014, March 2015, June 2015, December 2015, and February 2016, timed to coincide with our availability.

The initial invitation came from the head of the Plant Operating Department, who wanted to restore some margin for maneuver to the Shift Superintendents (SS) and Deputy Shift Superintendent (DSS) in his teams. Long phases of observation in the Plant Operating Department and other departments, and the possibility of participant inquiries, were negotiated and agreed at the outset. It was thus possible to conduct overt observation, in which "the observer is accepted as such in an organization governed by formal, hierarchy-based rules; he stays among the participants in full knowledge and sight of everyone, or nearly everyone. He can take simultaneous notes, circulate freely, consult documents" (Peretz, 2007, p. 69, our own translation). Before further consideration of the observations, we provide some details of the departments studied and the actors mentioned throughout this article (using quotation marks and italics for the departments and actors most frequently mentioned in what follows).

The departments and actors observed at the nuclear power plant

Plant Operating means the real-time running of the plant to execute the electricity generation program in accordance with security and safety rules, and environmental standards. The members of the Plant Operating team are "at the centre of a very heterogeneous torrent of activities (...) that deal in real time with the very varied problems caused by the normal day-to-day operation of a power plant (...) operating a unit

means striking a balance between two essential goals: safety and capability (...) and coordinating (immediate or later) work by specialists called in from very different disciplines (chemists, boiler engineers, automation experts, etc) whose services are vital for the plant to operate properly" (Girin & Journé, 1997, pp. 2–3, our own translation).

The Plant Operating team studied is led by a head of department who has support from the technical, safety, and human resource functions and specialist hubs, particularly the *Planning Unit* that is in charge of documentation (technical drawings and test procedures). The head of department works closely with the SS who manage two teams (one for unit 1 and one for unit 2) that work shifts to ensure continuous operation: a morning shift from 6 am to 1.15 pm, an afternoon shift from 1 pm to 9.15 pm, and a night shift from 9 pm to 6.15 am. Each shift team has a DSS, who is the technical supervisor; a Tagout Officer (TO) in charge of preparation and safety of tests and work, Operating Staff (OP) in charge of real-time monitoring of installations from the control room, and Site Staff who are the Operating Staff 'eyes and ears,' the people who are closest to the installations and perform regular rounds.

To fulfill all these missions, when the reactors are in operation, the Plant Operating Department is assisted by the *On-line Maintenance (OM) project*. The OM team involves the actors in charge of preparation of preventive maintenance (9 weeks ahead) and unplanned maintenance activities and the actors responsible for performing those activities in liaison with the available 'Work and Maintenance' resources. A special team called the *Facilities Team* prepares and applies the 'modifications' decided at national level by the Engineering Division for continuous improvement of plant safety and security: for example, post-Fukushima safety improvements, or more recently, changes required to extend the plants' operating lifetimes.

Figure 1 summarizes the general organization of Plant Operating activities.

The dynamic observation conducted at a nuclear power plant

The observation system proposed by Journé (2005) was chosen from the very first week, to (1) develop familiarity with this complex field of study (strategy 1), and then (2) gain an in-depth understanding of the collective microactivities, particularly shift handovers, management of control room alarms, daily meetings, and scheduling meetings involving the Plant Operating Department and the OM project team (strategy 2), and (3) observe the actions of different actors in the Plant Operating team, and also of actors who interact with them during the day: OM project actors, specialists from very different disciplines, etc.

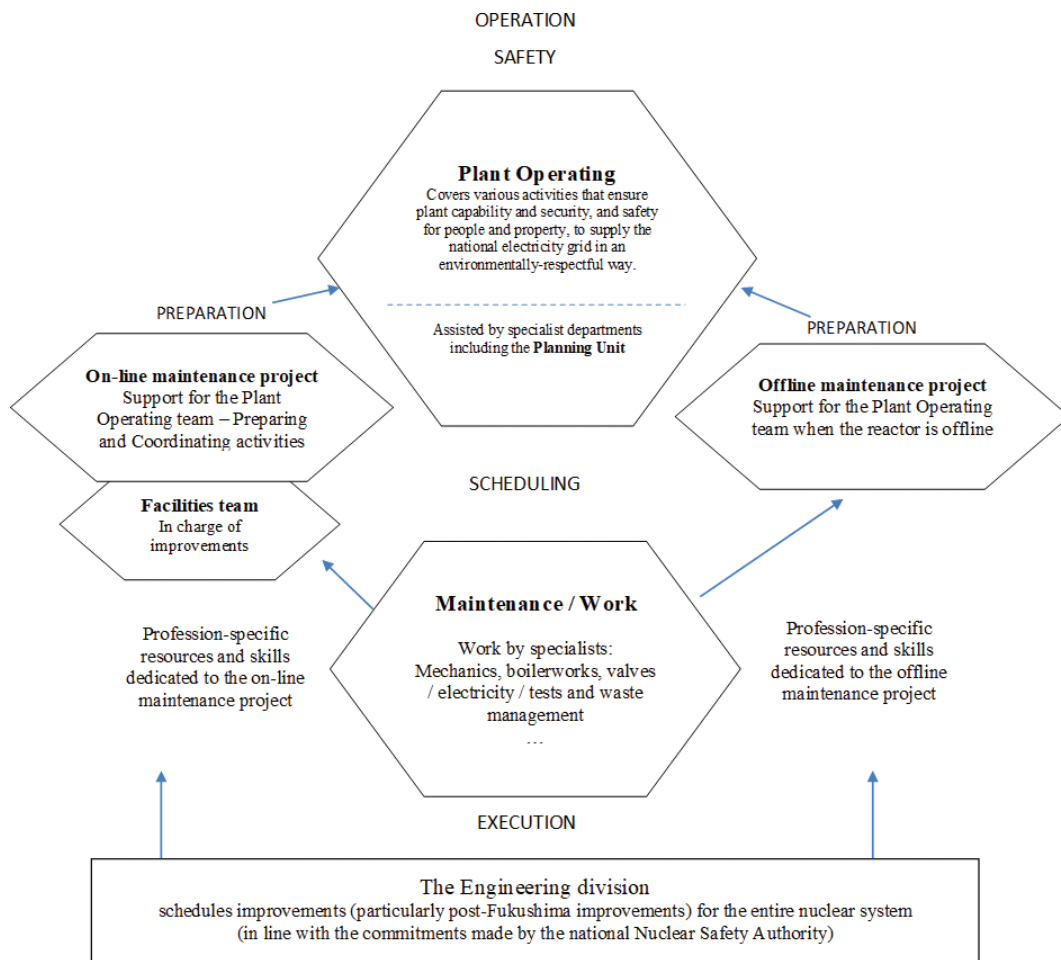


Figure 1. Diagram illustrating the Plant Operating Department and its interconnections (diagram codedeveloped with the head of department and his HR unit).

We repeated the first three observation strategies several times until we encountered an indeterminate situation: the introduction of new, specific modifications to extend the power plants' operating lifetimes. The Engineering Division had asked all power plants to apply changes (reorganizations, work, etc.) that had never been done before, were complex, and took longer than the normal work projects. The power plant studied was the first plant to bring in these modifications and could not therefore benefit from the experience of other plants. The members of the Facilities Team were in charge of the modifications, with the assistance of the OM project team and the Planning Unit, which was called in to compile the documentation and act as an interface between Plant Operating and the Facilities Team.

Using the terms 'Plant Operating,' 'Facilities Team,' and 'Planning Unit,' the rest of this article illustrates – in a present-tense account – how the first stories collected were gradually emplotted and turned into a meaningful collective narrative.

Mimesis I or the preunderstanding of the world of action

As Ricœur notes (1984, p. 55), "to act is always to act 'with' others": in the situation studied here, the new interactions are complex and can take the form of battles or tensions. The symbolic connections of this collective action are new and seem meaningless to the actors: members of the Plant Operating team ask, "Why doesn't the Facilities Team respect the way we're organized?"; the Facilities Team wonders, "Why are Plant Operating always obstructing our work?" The Planning Unit tries to create meaning and reconcile the members, with some difficulty. The action is consequently unclear.

The practitioners find themselves facing challenges to the usual frames for understanding their activity, and the stories they usually use to make sense of their cooperation fail. In such a setting, our dynamic observations can collect enigmatic, disordered events for both the researchers and the

practitioners, who cannot get a general grasp of dispersed elements able to pull them all together into a coherent whole, a narrative with an 'ending'. We do not observe any collective inquiry, and employment must still be developed.

Mimesis II or the collective arrangement of disordered events: Collective employment

Disordered events

Organizing our observation notes reveals a series of events that mainly took place during our observation period in December 2015. These events particularly relate to 'PNPP 2311', an acronym designating the first work done on the 'Modifications' required by the Engineering Division, which are a source of complication and tensions. Panel 1 below presents an extract from the disordered events collected chronologically during our observations of Plant Operating actors and various collective activities, including handovers and meetings (strategies 2 and 3).

These events are submitted to three actors from the Plant Operating department, one person from the Planning Unit and two from the Facilities Team, initially to guide our understanding of the problem and the stalemates observed. The conversations soon show that the plot still remains to be developed for the practitioners themselves: the PNPP2311 problem is still unresolved, and a lack of understanding persists, particularly regarding other activities that are being held up. When the practitioners observed are confronted with these dispersed events, individual, parallel, noninterconnected stories are collected: everyone tells the story as they understand it,

particularly the reasons for the PNPP2311 problem, and the actors tend to see the problem from the point of view of their own activity and put the blame on the actors belonging to the other activities.

Collective employment, and rearrangement of the events

In February 2016, we decide to contact members of the Plant Operating Department, the Planning Unit and the Facilities Team whom we had previously observed, to begin an inquiry: an initial conversation takes place, lasting 3 h and involving seven volunteers from those teams. We ask the participants to draw the way 'Modifications' are currently being handled, stating for each stage concerning them 'what I do, the difficulties I encounter, and who receives the output of my work...' When the disordered events are not spontaneously mentioned, we return to the events collected via our observations with the participants.

Constructing a drawing is a way to involve all the actors, each one having a specific role in the situation, and to describe a sequence of activities in chronological order; everyone tells their 'own' story, but this time it is addressed to the other actors present in the same place, and the stories connect to each other such that a certain ordering is possible: 'we [the Facilities Team] are just about to start when I get the complete file, but it comes from the Engineering Division that isn't on site (...) it's a computer file (...); So then, we [the Planning Unit] get a scan from the Facilities Team...', etc.

Panel 1. Collection of disordered events in relation to the PNPP2311 modifications

Event 1: During an informal conversation between Plant Operating department actors on 2 December 2015, there is talk about PNPP2311 being "not properly prepared" and the Facilities Team "bypassing the organization procedures, they don't even know how we organize our work (...) they don't fit into our way of organizing things," and concerns are expressed: "if things carry on like this, it's going to be awkward, especially as there are loads of other PNPPs after this one..."

Event 2: Given the difficulties created by the work, the members of the Facilities Team are hastily called to a meeting on 7 December 2015: "the Facilities Team has to come and see us, they should come and look at the block diagram with us rather than doing it all by phone and paper!" Three members arrive the same day, and a discussion about a diagram takes place. At the end of the day, the Plant Operating Shift Superintendent calls his counterpart at the Facilities Team: "I wanted you to say thank you to your guys who came to see us, it defused the tension, that's a good thing."

Event 3: On 8 December, we observe conversations about modifications needing further work at a handover between DSS.

Event 4: On 10 December, we observe the TO questioning a specialist who has been called in to do work, and refusing him permission to make modifications even though they were planned.

Through observation, we are able to identify these events that reveal dysfunctions in an unusual, complex situation. Individual actors try to find a solution, but cannot organize the events in a way that finds one. The collective meetings organized reduce the tensions, but do not lead to collective reflection on "how to do things and do things better together." Other events observed during our February observation further illustrate the stalemate over the modifications to be made. The actors are unsuccessful at inquiring together into this indeterminate situation concerning the changes to be made to extend the power plants' operating lifetimes.

Panel 2. Collective narrative of the PNPP231 I problem

Researcher – perhaps we can come back to the problem observed, PNPP 231 I...

(Everybody laughs)

Facilities Team (participant 1) – Well the fact is, regarding that project (...) we didn't necessarily feel very concerned by it, because it was something that had been worked on by the Mechanics specialists and the Plant Operating Department months in advance, to do the tagout! (...) it was a really big job, with pipes to be emptied and so on. (...)

Planning Unit (participant 1) – The sticking point was the tagout...

Plant Operating Department (participant 1) – There was the tagout, there were services done on the circuit that didn't go well...

Facilities Team (participant 1) – So then, anyway, to finish on the PNPP231 I, if we had to do it again... I think that for the specialists called in, there should have been (...) a document where you could see the whole sequence of operations, that's where maybe we should have done something, but in fact we hadn't realized the complexity of the operation, clearly... In my case it was the plug, I didn't expect it to...

Facilities Team (participant 2) – Look, the key thing is still that the other equipment was no longer leaktight, that's the key thing, without that risk of leaks, we'd never have heard of this PNPP problem...

Plant Operating Department (participant 1) – There were still plug removals that weren't always spotted by the teams from....

Facilities Team (participant 2) – Yes, in the tagout...

Planning Unit (participant 1) – What's more, the program dates back a bit, it started in spring and then got suspended... It was deferred three times (...) and it never went through us, at least...several people involved, communication problems... I mean...

From the discussion, launched by the researcher, of observed events in connection with the PNPP231 I modification problem, each participant tells their story: "The sticking point was the tagout"; "the key thing is..." but here, the stories are addressed to the others and gradually lead to a rearrangement of the events, with new suggestions: showing the sequence of operations, support for the specialists called in... The events collected by our observations are plotted; the narrative reorganizes the events creatively to make the observed situation intelligible.

This description is intercut with narratives that can be called 'diagnostic' or 'utopian,' in line with Lorino and Nefussi (2007, p. 81): 'this is how, collectively, we are prepared to describe the explanatory origins of the current situation...' and 'this is what we're going to do...' The reminder of the PNPP 231 I problem triggers this kind of narrative, giving meaning to what has happened (insufficient support, unforeseen difficulties, a communication problem, etc.) – while also projecting into a future present: 'if we had to do it again...' Some extracts are presented in Panel 2.

Collectively, the actors begin to recount an explanatory origin of the situation regarding the initial work. Listening to the narrative, other participants project this plot onto other lived experiences, particularly the experiences that resulted in work being held up. The panel below illustrates one of these narratives, which were frequently inspired by true stories that

enable individuals to *recognize their own experience or a lived experience in the plot of the narrative...* For example, the Facilities Team tells the story of an operator who for the first time in 20 years is faced with a request to 'cut two leads': this is an unusual request and raises questions that need to be clarified (cf. Panel 3).

This narrative combines 'diagnostic' and 'utopian' narratives; the actors progressively try to find ways to collectively construct meaning, in order to apply the modifications together.

Mimesis III or the intersection with the world of hearers and readers

At their own initiative, the practitioners take a photo after 3 hours of discussion and posted a statement on the intranet about the content of their conversations. They thus turn their meeting into an internal narrative. Observation facilitates production of this narrative by employment of discordant events, giving rise to a collective project and an action plan: the Facilities Team want to provide better support for the

¹ Tagout concerns the management of equipment being put offline or online. It defines the approved methods for organizing work permits, that is, special instructions to protect the personnel doing the work. If the equipment cannot be put offline, a 'special' work permit is required with very strict formal instructions for the operators concerned.

Panel 3. Cutting 'two' leads? The collective narrative about a 'sticking point'

Head of the Facilities Team – (...) there was one operator who'd worked there for quite a long time. He said, in 20 years this is the first time I've seen both leads being cut. So he didn't know what the temperature behavior would be (...) it was a Thursday, we went to tell the Shift Superintendents, look this is what'll happen with the temperature, you'll have a sudden jump, then afterwards it'll go down little by little. So then we went into more detail, because they didn't know what they were going to have to deal with. In the end that's where we ought to do more work, when the specialists come to get a work order, to start the work they need to be able to explain the background to their intervention and how they're going to do their work. And in many cases, they aren't equipped for that (...)

Plant Operating Department (participant 1) – Absolutely. Often, when we ask questions, we don't get an answer... it's not very reassuring...

Planning Unit (participant 1) – The idea is that the answer to those questions, obviously, you should have those answers beforehand, that's exactly what we're working on, you know...

Facilities Team (participant 1) – Yes, that would be good... (...) My own feeling is that, well, when they turn up and they say, we're going to cut two spent fuel cooling cavity leads, of course that's scary (...). I remember the discussions we had during the plant outage, loads of discussions (...) everything was in place, the only thing was that you get to a point where people need reassurance. And to do that, you sometimes have to spend half an hour or an hour with them to reassure them.

Plant Operating Department (participant 1) – That's right, yes, physical meetings, I think they're really important (...) explaining what's going to be done, how it's going to be done, etc, that often clears up a lot of stuff and helps to simplify the representations we have (...). And in real time, you don't necessarily have half an hour or an hour to spend explaining one modification, you know...

In the plot of this narrative, all the individuals recognize their own experience or a lived experience, and these experiences help to construct a plausible narrative in which the modifications situation is acknowledged as unusual and requiring new actions. Telling the story of the 'two leads' makes it easier for researchers and practitioners to perceive the origins of the problems encountered in connection with the modifications to be made; this event complements the first events observed and is gradually integrated into a complete narrative, leading to an intelligible meaning for the situation and paving the way for new action.

specialists called in, and are considering drawing up a document showing the sequence of operations; there is agreement on the usefulness of spending time with the teams to reassure them, and facilitating face-to-face meetings; and more broadly, on the need for a new organization of work incorporating these new changes. The events collected are turned into narratives that then become events (Gabriel, 1991). The researcher, meanwhile, can analyze the observation data emplotted with practitioners: for example, by recording and transcribing the conversation and preparing a report, or by putting an arrangement of the events into writing and submitting the resulting narrative to the participants and the academic community. A new emplotment is thus developed by this arrangement of events and the writing of this article, which has the potential to influence academic practices, even if only by shedding light on one form of collection and use of events collected through observation. The collective inquiry was triggered thanks to these observation data, and the inquiry clarified our data, making the initial material analyzable.

Discussion

Our dynamic observation at a nuclear power plant shows how emplotment of our observation data and organizing them into a collective narrative can confer meaning on them and clarify

an indeterminate situation. This study is one response to the call for a diversity of qualitative approaches in management sciences (Cunliffe, 2011) and the call for more frequent use of observation (Barley & Kunda, 2001; Journé, 2005). The discussion clarifies how a conceptual tool kit founded on the work of Ricœur can meet the need to construct meaning in a dynamic observation approach. The limitations and extensions of this methodological reflection are also considered below.

Dynamic observation and construction of collective meaning

Observation is an immersive approach whose principal contribution is the richness of the data collected: in addition to words – and the risk of recreating sense – the researcher can observe interactions and the implicit mechanisms inherent to organizing: "most work practices are so contextualized that people often cannot articulate how they do what they do, unless they are in the process of doing it" (Harper, 1987; Schon, 1983; Suchman, 1987 in Barley & Kunda, 2001, p. 81). One difficulty with observation, identified in the literature review, is that it is often difficult to make sense of all the material collected (Allard-Poesi & Perret, 2004; Czarniawska, 1998; Robinson & Kerr, 2015). In such cases researchers may: (1) be tempted to exclude observation from their methods;

(2) simply collect observation data that make immediate sense to them; and (3) reconstruct/overinterpret the meaning of the data collected, individually and with hindsight. We discuss how Ricœur's mimeses offer a way to make sense of dynamic observation data and avoid these pitfalls.

Mimeses, a conceptual tool for making sense of observation data

Mimesis I: Capturing stories that do not appear to make sense. *Mimesis I*, a preunderstanding of the world of action in which emplotment is rooted, enables the researcher to contextualize the organizational phenomena observed and thus bring out their richness and complexity (Prasad, 2002). The researcher can organize the data collection in relation to the three structuring features of *Mimesis I*, and thus, capture the whole experience in all its complexity, shedding light on the related interactions, and their purpose and context. In a similar vein to phenomenological studies, the researcher can then identify signs, rules, and norms of action. By identifying the symbolic conventions that shape the interactions, he/she can refocus on the experience as the starting point for constructing a collective narrative (Gill, 2014). This first stage structures the dynamic observation so as to capture the practitioners' experience and study the situations, in order to generate meaningful narratives (Easterby-Smith, 2005). This experience is often complex to observe and instead of narratives can generate parallel, coexistent but nonconvergent stories, revealing the difficulty of inquiring and constructing meaning – inquiries being defined as collective narrative processes (Lorino & Nefussi, 2007) and narratives as “spontaneous acts of meaning-making” (Cunliffe et al., 2004, p. 262). In such cases, the researcher collects stories (Rosile et al., 2013) that initially make little or no sense to him/her. By combining and crossing those stories, he/she can emplot them and configure his/her own arrangement of events. Awareness of the risk of derationalization and overinterpretation of the meaning attributed to those stories should lead a researcher to prefer to work with the practitioners, and instigate a collective inquiry to emplot stories in a rearrangement that gives rise to a narrative with shared meaning. What plays out in the collective inquiry is emplotment, that is, the quest for order and an explanation for disordered, enigmatic events (Lorino, 2005, 2018).

Mimesis II: Emplotment to make meaning. Emplotment arranges previously disordered events collected into a ‘meaningful whole’ (Ricœur, 1984). The researcher questions the events observed and plots them, with “the active sense of organizing the events into a system” (Ricœur, 1984, p. 33 in Cunliffe et al., 2004). Dynamic observation thus involves two key issues when parallel stories are being collected. By observing ongoing inquiries conducted by practitioners, the

researcher can identify collective narratives, or conversely the actors' difficulties in inquiring together. Observation also makes it possible to trigger and conduct inquiries. The inquiry then becomes a methodological approach that gives meaning to the observation data and the indeterminate situation. This transforms the inquiry from an observable ‘organizational practice’ to a ‘methodological research practice,’ enabling emplotment and narrative-building from the dynamic observation data obtained in connection with an indeterminate situation that remains unresolved. The expected outcome of this inquiry is a collective narrative through which practitioners and researchers can make the situation intelligible. The inquiry makes it possible to make a meaningful whole out of a succession of configurations, as called for by Ricœur in defining his *Mimesis II* (Ricœur, 1984).

Mimesis III: Co-producing and sharing the created meaning. *Mimesis III* relating to the interaction between the text and its receiver offers an opportunity to produce a meaningful artifact for the teams and a narrative for researchers and the academic community. As Ricœur notes, the reader completes the work. A new configuration thus emerges: the practitioner (the ‘reader’ in Ricœur's writings), faced with parallel stories, fills in the gaps, clears up the uncertainties, and ultimately contributes to the emplotment. This configuration varies in its sensitivity: taken to extremes, “it is the reader, almost abandoned by the work, who carries the burden of emplotment (...)” (Ricœur, 1984, p. 77). Practitioners are thus both producers and receivers of plots. As Prasad (2002) stresses in a reference to the philosopher Gadamer, the text produced, whether oral or written, and then becomes a conversation. Like the conductor of an orchestra, the researcher can put the practitioners' improvisations to music, to borrow the organizational metaphor developed by Weick (1987, 1993, 1998). There may be some difficulty in making a coherent whole of the narrative, but the purpose of the inquiry, the shared feeling of ‘we can do better together,’ leads to a convergence of meaning that provides an opportunity to go beyond the unusual nature of the action and thus propose a partial solution. Partial, because it belongs to temporality as defined by Ricœur (1984, p. 21): “the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present”. Construction of the collective narrative is only valid in a given unity of place and time. The meaning created is only arrived at through interaction between the practitioner community and the academic community. Resolving the inquiry by emplotment is therefore also temporary, and opens out onto new inquiries.

Towards a new epistemology of dynamic observation

Staying close to hermeneutic approaches and placing experience at the core of the analysis, the researcher must always

move forward in doubt, while creating a trusting relationship (Prasad, 2002). Langley and Klag (2019) note that academics' involvement in qualitative research must meet the contradictory aim of taking advantage of close proximity with practitioners while keeping a professional distance and retaining a researcher's stance. Emplotment and narrative-building from the data collected by dynamic observation, and the insistence on the transparency characteristic of *mimesis III*, lead to production of credible, confirmable narratives that are up for discussion (Gill, Gill, & Roulet, 2018). Transparency needs co-construction of a narrative. The fact of involving the actor observed in the whole meaning-making process, together with the researcher-inquirer's stance, produce a break from the supposedly 'objectifying' nature of observation. A trusting relationship is created (Prasad, 2002). As Bonnemain, Perrot and Kotulski (2015, p. 104, our own translation) observe: "we also try, through the observation phase, to reverse the status of the professionals in the research-intervention: from an intervention 'about them' to an intervention 'for and with them'".

Through this intervention for and with them, stories can be collected and a narrative emerges (Boudès & Laroche, 2009). Dynamic observation makes co-construction of this shared narrative possible. While observation is often associated with the search for truth, the meaning created through emplotment and narrative-building reveals a new relationship to the field of study by the search for shared meanings. Researchers can, for example, collect data that initially make little or no sense to them, opening up a broader spectrum for their observations. Dynamic observation, as well as producing rich data, can thus limit the risks of reconstructing a phenomenon with hindsight: observation avoids the "deceptive phenomenon of retrospective coherence" (Snowden, 2002, p. 106), particularly because practitioners are themselves actors in the process. This constitutes a shift away from a form of epistemology of truth to a form of epistemology of meaning and experience.

Limitations and extensions

Which voice(s) for which narrative

Our experience confirms the essential role of immersion and observation to collect several stories carried by several different voices (Allard-Poesi et al., 2014). Considering the 'unheard' (Easterby-Smith, 2005) becomes a possibility due to dynamic observation (Journé, 2005, 2012): strategy 4 facilitates a meeting of many actors concerned by an indeterminate situation. Also, immersion and *mimesis I* encourage us to not only look at the change from the strategic actors' point of view. This approach encourages us to look at everyday actors in their interactions. In the words of Easterby-Smith (2005, p. 345), it "(is) both for looking at social process over time and for looking

at the experiences of those lower down the organizational 'food chain'." It is often difficult to hear the voices of nonstrategic actors (Asmuß & Oshima, 2018). Dynamic observation will be the starting point of emplotment, and enables us to integrate a group of actors into inquiry processes. Nonparticipants in the inquiry can also, through *mimesis III*, participate in the common narrative even if they are unwilling or unable to contribute to emplotment of the indeterminate situation. Through their reception of the resulting text, they take part in the construction of meaning and the collective narrative.

The question of an integrating narrative

The transition from several stories to this integrating narrative raises questions about the role played by the researcher in the convergence toward the narrative. There may be concerns about the dominant or potentially overbearing nature of this narrative. It is important to remember that we are conducting research *with* practitioners, not *about* practitioners (Heron & Reason, 2001). Here, this is defined more as a process in continuous construction and questioning. New events appear, giving way to new plots. The researcher's intervention with practitioners thus enables construction of meaning in a given space time. *Mimesis I* enables us to contextualize the experience in its temporality. In reconstructing this temporality, the researcher, like a midwife, receives the events and sets them in a constructed temporality. The collective narrative is only unique because the participants give it a shared meaning. For the practitioners, this collective narrative helps to construct a new actionable situation, which will be subjected to later inquiries when a new doubt sets in; for the researchers, it gives meaning to the observation data and thus increases the relevance of the research.

Conclusion

Through this reflexive report of a dynamic observation, we have presented a meaning-making exercise based on observation data, while highlighting the pitfalls and potentialities of such an approach. The Ricoeurian approach can take us beyond an epistemology of truth with which observation is rather facetiously associated – the researcher's immersion in organizational life, the immediacy of observations – to an epistemology of meaning, relating to the meaning of situations, but also the meaning of data. Reinterpreting dynamic observation by the connective movement between Ricoeur's three mimeses questions the meaning lost and given by actors to their activity, and reveals its richness while proposing a conceptual tool kit that enables the researcher-observer to make sense of the observation data, providing encouragement to adopt this currently still underused method.

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