ARTICLES

Observation Methodology in Police Research: Challenges, Innovations and Contemporary Reflections

*Yinthe Feys, Ludovic De Vocht & Nikhaela Wicks**

Abstract

Scholars use different methods trying to understand aspects of policing and the police, among which observations such as field-based observations of police officers, systematic social observations and, since the twenty-first century, observations by means of body-worn camera footage, dashcams and even civilian footage. Each observation method comes with specific challenges. This special issue on observation methodology in police research focuses on (current) issues regarding police observational research, such as challenges that may occur when observing police officers, reflexivity, use of covert observations and more recent approaches to police observations such as the use of ethograms. The issue is a collection of six different articles, all of which discuss some pertinent aspects of observational police research. With this special issue, we wish to initiate further discussions on police observational methodology and innovative approaches in this regard. We want to stimulate reflections on these topics and enhance our understanding of police observational methods. We also wish to help police researchers in designing their observational research project and encourage them to set up such projects. After all, observational research on policing is still one of the most important methods to get a grip on different aspects of real-life police work and decision-making.

Keywords: police, research, observations, methodology.

Throughout the last decennia, a vast array of police research has developed, focusing on a variety of topics related to police work. Scholars use different methods trying to understand aspects of policing and the police, many of which fail to mimic real-world decisions. The approaches are useful, but, at the same time, they do not offer a robust understanding of police work. This resulted in the use of field-based observations of police officers, allowing researchers to also take into account situational and other factors and conditions that affect discretionary decisions (Schafer et al., 2024). Observations can provide detailed descriptions of police behaviour and decision-making (Aas, 2021).

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Early observational studies of police officers usually focused on ethnographic methods, with researchers accompanying police officers in the field and observing police work and police officers' use of discretion in real life, resulting in narrative fieldnotes (Huff, 2021; Schafer et al., 2024). Classic studies include those of Skolnick (1966), Bittner (1967) and Wilson (1968). Sausdal (2021) argues that from the 1970s onwards, police scholars started to pay ethnographic attention

> not only to the societal function of the police but more so to the everyday encounters the police engaged in and how such daily 'drama' was scripted, played out and affected the police and the policed (…) these early ethnographies' core sociological interest in the (mal)functions and interactions of, especially, the patrolling police laid the bedrock for many ethnographies to come that also examine issues such as frontline police discretion, culture and its consequences. (Sausdal, 2021, p. 9)

Examples of the latter are Westley (1970), Reiss (1973) and Muir (1977). Later ethnographic studies among others focused on detective work (e.g. Bacon, 2016) and covert or undercover policing (e.g. Loftus et al., 2016). See Sausdal (2021) for a limited overview of different studies initiated in this period.

In the 1960s, Albert J. Reiss Jr. was the first to use systematic social observations (SSO) in police research, describing how police officers interact with citizens. He laid the foundations for SSO and promoted the method as a viable option for studying police behaviour (Brunson & Miller, 2023; McCluskey et al., 2023; Schafer et al., 2024; Terrill & Zimmerman, 2022). SSO combines the quantitative approach and the qualitative approach to observations, using an instrument to provide focus and structure throughout the observations (Mastrofski et al., 2010; McCluskey et al., 2019). Two major studies in this respect are the Police Services Study (PSS) and the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPN), which resulted in a number of articles examining police behaviour (Brunson & Miller, 2023; McCluskey et al., 2023). Several smaller-scale SSO studies have been initiated since (see Brunson & Miller, 2023; McCluskey et al., 2023 for a non-exhaustive overview). Although SSOs have generated substantial knowledge on the impact of citizen and police officer behaviour on criminal justice outcomes, SSO studies remain sparse (Brunson & Miller, 2023).

Brunson and Miller (2023) argue that observational studies in general have been rather sporadic.[1] This may be due not only to the difficulty gaining access to police agencies and the time-intensiveness of the method (Brunson & Miller, 2023) but also to the cost constraints in conducting observational studies since such studies are usually expensive (Huff, 2021).

Since the twenty-first century, however, there have been more opportunities to observe police officers outside of the traditional ride-alongs (Brunson & Miller, 2023). Think for instance of body-worn cameras (BWC), dashcams (e.g. Dixon et al., 2008; Terrill & Zimmerman, 2022; Worden & McLean, 2014) and civilian

1 A recent scoping review on police decision-making found 526 empirical studies on this topic, of which 104 studies were based on observational methods (Feys, 2023b).

footage (e.g. bystander videos on YouTube, which can be used during interviews, for example, Keesman, 2022), which all allow researchers to analyse police behaviour. Especially bodycam footage is increasingly being used in police research (Schafer et al., 2024) and also in the course of SSO studies (e.g. Piza et al., 2023; Sytsma et al., 2021; Terrill & Zimmerman, 2022; Terrill et al., 2023; see McCluskey et al., 2023 for more examples). These types of footages allow for studying aspects of police work that were previously studied through (time-intensive) field observation. Using bodycam footage allows for more flexibility, allowing observers to choose when to watch and code the video fragments (Schafer et al., 2024).

Using BWC footage as observation material has multiple advantages. For one, it allows to study police behaviour without the need for a researcher at the scene. In-person observation may result in reactivity, that is, behavioural changes caused by the researcher's presence (Brunson & Miller, 2023). Reviewing videos is less intrusive and therefore results in less reactivity concerns, but police officers may change their behaviour because of the presence of cameras anyway (Schafer et al., 2024). BWC footage can be replayed or may even be transcribed verbatim, possibly resulting in more accurate coding. BWC footage also allows researchers to direct their attention to specific activities or encounters without the need for extensive observation of police work. After all, in-person observations can also include rather quiet shifts, potentially including events that are not really of interest to the researcher, which is why more observations might be needed to collect sufficient data on particular events or behaviours (Schafer et al., 2024). Disadvantages of BWC footage include temporarily fogging of the camera; microphones that fail to capture the entire conversation or situation, especially when the bodycam only starts recording after it has been activated by the police officers; and the difficulties analysing rapidly moving images (Brunson & Miller, 2023; Schafer et al., 2024; Verhage & Feys, 2019). The most important limitation, however, is the inability of the researcher to ask follow-up questions or organize a debriefing. This may result in an incomplete understanding of the situation and the police officers' motivations and decisions, as well as the impossibility to identify and code all relevant variables in the video (see Schafer et al., 2024 for a fuller discussion of the [dis]advantages of using BWC footage for police observations).

Regardless of the mode of observation, there are some more general challenges and ethical considerations that apply to police observational research. Examples include transparency about what is being studied, whether or not it is allowed to covertly observe, and voluntary participation of the respondents. Observers might for instance not be able to ask for permission of the civilians involved in family violence incidents (Aas, 2021). In her PhD study, Feys (2023a) specifically chose not to ask civilians for consent in each encounter as this could greatly affect the police-citizen interaction. When using BWC footage for observations, asking for consent may be even more challenging as the involved parties (including the police officers) might not even be aware of the research project and the researcher might not know the identities of these persons. Some other challenges are more specifically related to in-person observations, such as safety concerns and moral dilemmas regarding the observer's role. Whereas Brunson and Miller (2023) refer to occasional requests for non-law-enforcement assistance during ride-alongs (e.g.

helping to hold equipment), Feys (2023a) refers to a situation in which she was asked to frisk a girl because of the absence of female police officers at the station. She also discusses other situations in which her role as an observer was somehow challenged.

Overall, academics seem to be more attentive to the role of the observer in police research. Such reflexivity aims to "create a better understanding of researchers' roles in knowledge production" (Brunson & Miller, 2023, p. 213). In order for reflexivity to be achieved, introspection is needed: researchers need to acknowledge and examine their own biases, beliefs and backgrounds (e.g. racial background, gender, having a PhD; see Brunson & Miller, 2023 for some examples). This is important as researchers' positionality affects knowledge production; after all, police officers might react differently depending on the observer's characteristics. The observer's role will be a recurring topic throughout this special issue, in which some of these issues are more fully discussed. This is essential as Brunson and Miller (2023, p. 213) argue that "Recognition of researchers' individual characteristics rarely extends beyond general discussions of officers viewing them as outsiders."

This special issue on observation methodology in police research focuses on (current) issues regarding police observational research, which include challenges that may occur when observing police officers, reflexivity, use of covert observations and more recent approaches to police observations such as the use of ethograms. The issue is a collection of six different articles, all of which discuss some pertinent aspects of observational police research.

The first contribution in the special issue, by **Thomas Marriott**, explores the potential for design research methods in ethnographic policing research. More specifically, the author argues for the use of "design things" as a methodology, based on empirical research on the use of BWC. While the interdisciplinary connection between social research and design, as the author describes, is "somewhat unusual", the article establishes to convey the notion that technology is overly simplistic and instrumentally discussed, without paying attention to different ways in which specific designs may impact police practices. There is a critique in contemporary policing research where knowledge gaps exist surrounding the social and ethical complexities of technological devices. The author subsequently advocates the use of physical objects during ethnographic studies, as it allows participants to voice their opinions or thoughts, adding a form of stimuli to the research setting. Using "design things" as a methodology within an ethnographic research design could help researchers engage with their research object and may help highlight the complexities of technologies in policing.

In her contribution, **Leah Molyneux** reflects on political and ethical dilemmas during her ethnographic police research, through the feminist killjoy lens. This relates to the process of exposing sexism and racism, while being criticized for "killing" the joy of other people. There are plenty of challenges of employing a feminist methodology when observing the police. The author reflects on her attempts to resist or mask these "killjoy urges" and how she dealt with ethical, political and personal dilemmas in doing so. These dilemmas arise when researchers are forced to choose between their opinions, their research goals, gaining trust

from participants and gaining access to the field. The author provides tools to the reader for dealing with emotional complexities of ethnographic research as a feminist. For instance, a secondary diary could help regulate these emotions, separate from the observational fieldnotes, and a correct appearance may help one get along in the field. The author further argues for the critical empathy framework, where the central approach to conducting observational research lies in both understanding others and maintaining distance that allows for critique. Critical empathy could help researchers in their struggles with ethical tensions when conducting research on powerful institutions, such as the police.

Diving further into female perspectives on police research, **Laura Danique Keesman**'s contribution discusses the positionality and reflections from a female police scholar. Police research being traditionally male-oriented leads to knowledge gaps on how gender-related challenges arise during observational fieldwork. The author discusses strategies to navigate discomfort, while building rapport and gaining access to their research population. An important takeaway is that scholars should be weary of dilemmas that may arise related to their age, sexuality, race, ethnicity or gender. These characteristics may affect the data collection and may lead to specific dilemmas related to those characteristics. Challenges may include gaining access to the field, gaining trust and overcoming discomfort. The author reflects on these challenges, based on fieldnotes from her own observational research. One key takeaway from this contribution is that researchers should be aware of their positionality in order to use strategies to overcome aforementioned challenges. Such a strategy is the confession of ignorance, which helps researchers gain a sense of power, while dealing with discomfort. Openly admitting a lack of knowledge or understanding demonstrates willingness to learn from participants, which in itself creates new interactions and opportunities.

Mara van Dalen, Virginia Pallante, Hans Myhre Sunde, Lasse Suonperä Liebst, Peter Ejbye-Ernst, Carlijn van Baak, Melissa Sexton, Fabienne Thijs, Lea Echelmeyer, Steve van de Weijer, Laura Pighini, Gabriele Chlevickaite, Jo Thomas and *Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard* discuss an innovative variant on SSO, namely, covert systematic social observations (CSSOs). One of the main arguments for a spin on traditional SSOs is the criticism of observer bias. Overt observations of the police may lead to social desirability and involuntary influence on police-citizen interactions (referred to as "reactivity"). In the case of ethnic profiling, the authors argue that previous research had difficulties in evaluating the existence of socio-demographic bias. Based on their research in Amsterdam in 2022, the authors conducted covert onsite observations in order to realistically perceive police weapon controls, without introducing observer bias. Based on hot-spots and hot-times, the researchers positioned themselves in the locations provided by the police department. Using this method, the interactions unfold without the influence of researchers, and no additional police perceptions (such as self-reported data or accounts from post-interaction interviews) are required. Reactivity is also minimized, as both police officers and citizens were unaware of the researchers' presence. Despite ethical questions regarding covert observations, this article presents an interesting and promising alternative to answer methodological

critiques on SSOs, useful for any researcher thinking about implementing this methodology.

Continuing on alternatives to SSOs, *Hans Myhre Sunde, Lisa van Reemst, Camilla Bank Friis, Peter Ejbye-Ernst, Lasse Suonperä Liebst* and *Marie Rosenkrantz Lindegaard* discuss an ethogram approach to describe, quantify and compare behaviour in police situations. The ethogram method originates from behavioural biology and offers a measurement instrument that focuses on describing rather than interpreting behaviour. It further separates the measurement of behaviour from the outcome and is signified by an ambition to compare across cases, context and species. The authors demonstrate the value of this method based on their own fieldwork on BWC and CCTV videos. At face value, the ethogram resembles video-based systematic social observations (VBSSOs) or video data analysis (VDA). However, as a video analytical tool from behavioural biology, the ethogram's methodological addition lies in the precise and reliable measurements of police-citizen encounters, which enables comparative research. One of the aforementioned critiques on SSOs – the observer's reactivity – returns in this contribution as an argument to implement different ways of observing the police. Further structuring the analysis form, for example, through a structured inventory (the ethogram), may allow the study of patterns as they naturally occur, rather than focusing on specific types of behaviour through SSOs. Descriptive coding is preferred to avoid conflicting interpretation between researchers, increasing intercoder reliability. The ultimate goal is to create validated ethograms that can be applied or adjusted to different local policing contexts.

The final contribution by *Miriam S.D. Oostinga, Virginia Pallante, Fleur van der Houwen, Nick van der Klok, Tahnee Otten* and *Lenneke van Lith* delves into a practical example of using an ethogram to qualify concerning behaviour in police-citizen encounters. Police first responders are confronted with a plethora of concerning behaviours which require expertise in order to make the right decisions. The authors argue that traditional methodologies (interviews, police data analysis and case studies) were already used to explore this topic, yet lacking one crucial element: the direct observation of these concerning situations. The authors introduce the novel combination of the analysis of BWC footage using an ethogram as a method of analysis. This bodycam-footage-based human ethology may be an inspiring methodology for scholars seeking an innovative approach to observe police-citizen encounters. The authors show the benefits of increasing observation reliability and repeatability while also accounting for observer bias and how an ethogram-based approach may counter some of the aforementioned shortcomings of traditional observational police research.

With this special issue, we wish to initiate further discussions on police observational methodology and innovative approaches in this regard. We bring together interesting articles relating to a diversity of methodological issues police researchers are currently facing, with the purpose of stimulating reflections on these topics and enhancing our understanding of police observational methods. We also wish to help police researchers in designing their observational research project and encourage them to set up such projects. After all, observational research

on policing is still one of the most important methods to get a grip on different aspects of real-life police work and decision-making.

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