Shadowing in organization – Lessons from studies of managerial work

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Introduction

Over a decade ago Barley and Kunda (2001) noticed a widening gap between organizational theories and reality, and made a strong call for bringing work back in organization studies to close this gap. Together with several other scholars (Barley and Kunda, 2001, Fineman, 2000, Van Maanen, 2011, Watson, 2011) they pointed to the merits of observational field methods, like ethnography and shadowing, to secure a sound empirical foundation for future theories management and organization.

In response to this, Czarniawska (2007) suggested the use of three ethnography-inspired techniques shadowing, keeping a diary and following objects. Of these shadowing is the most commonly applied within the field of social science and has been used to study as diverse topics as CEOs (Mintzberg, 1973, Mintzberg, 1968), a school principal (Wolcott, 1973), consumer behaviour (Miller, 1998) urban studies both at the ground level (Sclavi, 2007) and at the city management level (Czarniawska, 2002).

Shadowing basically means to follow a person or object wherever and whatever the object is doing, and can be considered a form of fieldwork on the move (Czarniawska, 2007). Within the social sciences, McDonald (2005) distinguishes between three different forms of shadowing: as experiential learning, as a means of recording behaviour, or as a means of understanding roles and perspectives. Further arguing that this latter form of shadowing “has the greatest potential for extending the reach of current organizational research” (McDonald, 2005). This is also evident by several recently published studies behaviour (Vásquez et al., 2012, Nothhaft, 2010, Gill, 2011, Quinlan, 2008), which often uses the term organizational shadowing to highlight their subjectivist approach and their grounding in an expressly qualitative epistemology. This approach of shadowing, as a means of intersubjectively studying organizing, has been recently contrasted to shadowing as a means of recording behaviour (Vásquez et al., 2012). However, such contrasting exercises tends to be somewhat biased against the value of recording behaviour, even despite calls for the value of grounded quantitative data to supplement qualitative field studies (Barley and Kunda, 2001). It is perhaps time to reconsider research on managerial work and
behaviour (Stewart, 2008), which for a long time have had their share of methodological debates on what is the most appropriate way for studying managerial work.

The first study of managerial work, the pioneering work on executive behaviour by Sune Carlson’s (1951/1991), was methodologically motivated owing to the lack of earlier descriptions of executive work. An empirical and inductive orientation is still distinctive for managerial work and behaviour studies (Noordegraaf and Stewart, 2000). Scholars within this approach focus on what managers do and how to understand such work. Studies have focused on the form and content of managerial work by collecting behavioural data about individual managers to understand managerial work as a whole. This approach takes a positional orientation to management by studying those who are formally appointed as managers (Noordegraaf and Stewart, 2000).

The purpose with this paper is to give an overview of methods that could be used to study managerial work and behaviour, with a special focus on shadowing. The focus on shadowing is chosen because this method is the most particular for the managerial work and behaviour approach compared with other fields of management research. Through a review of the field of managerial work and behaviour studies it will be possible to compare and differentiate shadowing with other methods. Restricting the focus on shadowing within this field also restricts the scope of the paper without losing issues of general interest. Shadowing is a good starting point for discussing issues like combing structure and openness and making theoretical contributions based on qualitative empirical material and through a process of abduction.

**Keywords:** Shadowing, Observation, Managerial work and behaviour, Abduction