

SpringerBriefs in Criminology

John McCluskey · Craig D. Uchida · Yinthe Feys ·
Shellie E. Solomon



Systematic Social Observation of the Police in the 21st Century

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Systematic Social Observation of the Police in the 21st Century

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Preface

From February 3 to February 5, 2020, Dr. John McCluskey was invited to provide a three-day lecture on the application of systematic social observation (SSO) methodology in Ghent, Belgium. This course was co-organized by Dra. Yinthe Feys as there was a lack of observational courses in the doctoral training program. This course allowed Yinthe to receive proper training in SSOs and set up her own SSO project as part of her PhD.

In the academic literature, a comprehensive and clear overview of the SSO method was lacking at the time of the aforementioned SSO project. To fill this gap, Yinthe took the initiative to write an academic article on this matter, outlining the different steps to be taken in such a project. She then contacted Dr. McCluskey to collaborate on this, resulting in discussions on what to include in such an overview and which format to publish it in. Eventually, this resulted in a productive collaboration that expanded to include Drs. Craig Uchida and Shellie Solomon, also experts in SSO methodology. A SpringerBriefs book was considered the perfect outlet for our ideas and thoughts.

This book outlines the history of SSO, its advantages and disadvantages, and the type of research projects that fit with the method. A number of chapters focus on different modalities of SSO (i.e., in-person SSO and image or video-based SSO) and the application of SSO to place-based criminology. A compelling discussion regarding the future of SSO research and policing is provided at the end of this SpringerBriefs.

Throughout the book, tips and tricks concerning how to prepare for, perform, and report on SSO are provided. Overall, we believe this book adds value to the current literature as there is currently no overview offering a detailed and systematic overview of the current state-of-the-art on SSOs. This work offers clear guidance on the different steps to be taken when performing SSOs and reference from which

potential users may launch further inquiry into the details and commitments required for a successful SSO project.

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This book could not have been accomplished without the help of many different persons. Colleagues have offered help and insights which inform this book in several ways. In 2020, Drs. David Makin and Dale Willits provided insights into their ongoing work at Washington State University using body-camera footage as data and sparked our interest in codifying lessons learned for the larger field. Drs. William Terrill and Logan Somers generously lent time to a structured conversation regarding their experiences in coding sequential use of force data from videos in a project at Arizona State University. Drs. Robert Worden and Sarah McLean, along with Hannah Cochran and Beau Holladay, offered insights from their experiences with data coded in a large-scale project studying supervision and procedural justice at the Finn Institute in Albany, NY. Drs. Oral “Nick” Robertson and Cynthia Perez McCluskey read drafts of chapters and offered editorial and substantive comment throughout the project. John McCluskey’s work on this project was supported in part by the RIT Paul A. and Francena L. Miller Research Fellowship from the College of Liberal Arts.

We wish to thank Prof. Dr. Antoinette Verhage (Ghent University), as Yinthe Fey’s supervisor, for supporting the application of the SSO method in her PhD and providing feedback on the how-to chapter of this book.

For Dr. Uchida, the in-person and video-based systematic social observations in the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) were conducted with the unwavering support of Chief Charlie Beck, Chief Information Officer Maggie Goodrich, and Deputy Chief Sean Malinowski (all retired at this time). We also thank our funders for this effort: The Bureau of Justice Assistance (Grant No. 2019-BC-BX-K001) awarded to the CNA Corporation with Justice & Security Strategies, Inc. (JSS) and Arizona State University (ASU) as sub-recipients and the National Institute of Justice (Grant No. 2014-R2-CX-0101). BJA and NIJ are components of the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs. Points of view or opinions contained herein do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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Overview

This book focuses on systematic social observation (SSO) methodology by identifying the different steps to be undertaken when performing SSO (a how-to-guide), its benefits and disadvantages, challenges associated with using SSO, when to use it, etc. Discussions are provided on different aspects related to the method (e.g., access to the field or footage), including ethical considerations. After outlining the history of SSO in police research and criminology, the general features of the method are discussed, outlining when SSOs can be a useful addition to other research methods. We then focus on three different modalities of SSO research: in-person SSO (IPSSO), video-based SSO (VBSSO), and environment-based SSO (EBSSO). Clear guidance is provided on the different steps to be taken in an SSO project, from preparing such a project to finally reporting about it. Comparisons between IPSSO and VBSSO are provided. The concluding chapter sets forth a discussion of the future of SSO methodology in terms of technology and possible reach into new questions for criminal justice, criminology, and police managers.

The primary audience of this book are researchers and students interested in conducting SSO; however, we would argue that police departments, as learning organizations, could benefit from launching SSO projects to answer important questions aimed, for example, at understanding how officers handle certain situations, or how training affects the handling of situations.

A detailed presentation of the method and the steps it involves is currently absent in the literature. This book fills this gap and aids researchers in understanding choices and tradeoffs when conducting SSOs. It will also assist researchers in outlining their research frame (e.g., research questions, in person SSO vs. VBSSO). Finally, given the burgeoning proliferation of body-worn cameras, the book introduces researchers to this new tool for launching inquiries in policing using SSO-derived research techniques.

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