Documenting the invisible – on the ‘how’ of process research
(Re)considering method from process philosophy
Pallesen, Eva Holdflod

Published in:
Methodological Innovations Online

Publication date:
2017

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record with the publisher's layout.

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Download policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.
Documenting the invisible – on the ‘how’ of process research: (Re)considering method from process philosophy

Eva Pallesen

Abstract
Currently, there is a growing field in organization studies, reflecting a stream in social science more broadly, which seeks to encompass a process philosophical view of the world as multiple and in constant becoming. However, this raises new questions and challenges to the field of methodology: If movement and process are the basic forms of the universe, then the vagueness and multiplicity that come with the flux of the world are not to be ruled out by rigorous research designs; rather, relating to vagueness and multiplicity may be the very precondition of approaching the studied phenomena. For some scholars, this has been an occasion for deeming the discipline of methodology ‘dead’ or ‘emptied’. In contrast to such claims, this article argues that the scholar doing empirical research from approaches drawing on process philosophy to no less extent than other scholars must deal with problems of methodological character. However, he or she may need a renewed understanding of traditional methodological categories such as documentation, validity and variation. Rather than cancelling such concepts, this article experimentally reconsiders them in a process view, using a piece of observational material to think from. The article suggests that process philosophy may open up a methodological thinking that has room for a more connotative, playful way of relating to research material – which does not demand from a method to overcome the gap between what is there and what is captured but makes use of this gap as a space of invitation and play. Rather than adhering to the promise of ruling out vagueness and filling out a gap, the article, therefore, in itself aims at being such an invitation for a connotative, playful methodology.

Keywords
Methodology, process philosophy, organization studies, play

Prologue: entrance
To tell you about Penthesilea I should begin by describing the entrance to the city. You, no doubt, imagine seeing a girdle of walls rising from the dusty plain as you slowly approach the gate, guarded by customs men who are already casting oblique glances at your bundles. Until you have reached it you are outside it; you pass beneath an archway and you find yourself within the city. If this is what you believe you are wrong; Penthesilea is different.

In this way, the traveller in Italo Calvino’s novel Invisible Cities begins his tale of Penthesilea, one of the cities he describes for the old emperor Kublai Khan. Khan’s power is in a state of decline, he fears his empire is falling apart, but in the traveller’s descriptions, he seeks the lost order: ‘One day when I know all the emblems’, he asks the traveller, ‘shall I be able to possess my empire, at last?’ But the traveller answers. ‘Sire, do not believe it. On that day you will be an emblem among emblems’. Still, the emperor asks the world to show itself as a mapped territory of land, resources, buildings, cities and so on; by knowing it all, he hopes to regain the power to possess and master it. However, Marco Polo, the Venetian traveller, does not bring back this overview; rather, he brings in the details, the unusual, the infinite, the dreamlike, that which is only half glimpsed from the

Centre for Leadership and Experience Design, University College Absalon, Roskilde, Denmark

Corresponding author:
Eva Pallesen, Centre for Leadership and Experience Design, University College Absalon, Trekroner Forskerpark 4, 4000 Roskilde, Denmark.
Email: pallesen.eva@gmail.com
corner of the eye. After a while, Kublai Khan starts to doubt the reality of the traveller’s tales of the cities: Is it actually the territory out there – the cities of his empire – that Marco Polo is describing to him? Or has it been one and the same city he has been describing all along? Is it simply Marco Polo’s own city, Venice, that the emperor has begun to know through Marco Polo’s many tales?

Hereby Khan poses a question that has been foundational to the discipline of method in social science: How can we be sure that the descriptions and information we receive from research in the world ‘out there’ actually correspond to the world they are claimed to describe? How can we be certain that it is not simply the researcher’s own world – habits, taste, inclinations – that we are learning about, rather than the world out there? The discipline of method has been given the role of establishing this guarantee of correspondence between the world and what is stated, claimed and described about it. The more rigorous the method that guides the work process, the stronger the link between reality and statement and the more solid the ground on which we stand when we claim something. Method is here a matter of developing and mastering procedures and techniques that can provide some kind of guarantee of the link (or absence of a link) between a statement and a reality. Is it like this or is it not?

Trying to overcome this problem of correspondence, the emperor claims that from now on he will describe a city and then Marco Polo can go out and see whether it exists as he has conceived of it. But the cities that Marco Polo has travelled to are always different from those conceived by the emperor. Khan, impatiently, moves on by suggesting a model from which he can deduce all cities: ‘It contains everything corresponding to the norm. Since the cities that exist diverge in varying degrees from the norm, I need only foresee the exceptions to the norm and calculate the most probable combinations’. Marco Polo, however, takes this reasoning to its ultimate consequence by reversing its logic. He thereby shows how such models may serve us so well in terms of describing the general and the probable that we at last ‘achieve cities too probable to be real’. In this way, he shows how a correspondence reasoning – regardless of whether it starts from the general model and moves towards the particular or vice versa – may produce averaged-out themes and descriptions, too probable to be real. In searching for regularities and patterns while eliminating outliers, unexplainable phenomena and the half glimpsed, the ‘reality’ is lost, since the real lies in the multiple, elusive and constantly unfolding nature of the researched: Describing the city is describing a multiplicity of invisible cities.

**Introduction: process thinking and method**

Currently, there is a growing field in organization studies that seeks to encompass this premise of the world as multiple and in constant becoming (Helin et al., 2014; Hernes, 2014; Hernes and Maitlis, 2010; Hjorth et al., 2015; Langley and Tsoukas, 2017). All things that we might study have multiple becomings; there is always a multiplicity of incipientness pressing against the actuality of the studied phenomena (Massumi, 2002). These are not less real; they are real in their virtuality (Bergson, 2010). In other words, they are not actualized presently. However, if everything has multiple becomings, then the discipline of method, if it is understood as creating correspondence between ‘what is’ and ‘what is claimed’, becomes problematic. If movement and process are the basic forms of the universe, then the vagueness and multiplicity that come with movement are not to be ruled out by research design; rather, relating to vagueness and multiplicity is the very precondition of approaching the studied phenomena. This leaves us with the question of what method is – if it is at all. Throughout the past two decades, the death of method has been announced in different ways, for example, by suggesting that method is emptied and must be replaced by analytical strategy (Andersen, 2003) or that we have reached a time of ‘after method’ (Law, 2004).

However, the scholar conducting empirical studies on the basis of process thinking must still relate to ‘the how’ of research. And here, questions of a methodological nature tend to leak in again, surprisingly unaffected by the claimed ‘death’ of method. When process researchers go into the field, they must still decide whether to do observations, interviews, document studies and so on; how to do them, what to include, how to do with the material afterwards; how much material they need, how to treat the material, how to write about it; and what the basis is for pointing out or claiming anything from the material that is gathered. Such questions have traditionally been treated in the context of terms such as ‘documentation’, ‘validity’ and ‘variation’. This article suggests that we need to revisit and discuss such fundamental methodological categories framed by the correspondence thinking in order to advance the ‘how’ of process research in organization studies. The article is an attempt to contribute to such moving further.

Thus, the interest of the article is, ‘Can we think of method in organization studies without asking the world to reveal itself to us as distinctions, categories and causal regularities that we can map and master?’ ‘Can we know without this demand for overview, explicitness and explanatory closure?’ The role of method here would not be about overcoming the gap between what is captured and what is there but would rather be about relating to this tension, playing with the gap itself. However, this still leaves the researcher with the question, ‘If studying something is about relating to its multiplicity – if process research means relating to the virtuality of the studied phenomena – then what does this actually mean in terms of gathering, processing and writing about empirical material?’ In this article, I aim to address this ‘how’ of process research on the basis of an example of a specific piece of empirical material and on this background discuss and reframe classic method categories.
The structure of the article is as follows: I start by briefly introducing process thinking in organization studies and then discuss current contributions to thinking about method that go beyond correspondence thinking. Next, I inquire into ‘the how’ of process thinking using a specific piece of empirical material as an example. On the basis of this, I revisit and rethink traditional methodological categories, particularly the concepts of documentation, validity and variation.

**Process thinking in organization studies**

To provide some clarity about what I refer to as process research here, it might be useful to draw a basic distinction between two different meanings of ‘process research’. According to one, the term *process* refers to the study object; according to the other, *process* reflects a basic understanding of the world. In the former sense, process research means studying process as something contrasted to a stable situation before and after the process (e.g. the implementation of new legislation or the translation of strategy into new practice). In the latter sense of process research, which I take up in this article, the term *process* reflects a basic understanding of the world, on which we must understand all kinds of activities we might study. Hence, ‘the processual’ in the latter approach does not lie in studying process as something that has to be explained; instead, process refers to an understanding of the world as continuously and relationally under construction.

Thus, process research in this sense is characterized by drawing on process philosophy, that is, on thinkers who do not take their point of departure in subjects and objects but in an ever unfolding middle of becoming. Heraklit, Bergson, Whitehead and Deleuze are often seen as process philosophers, but also thinkers associated with American pragmatism, such as Mead, Peirce, Dewey and James, have been associated with process philosophy. A relatively recent handbook on process philosophy and organization studies includes processual readings of 34 thinkers; among them are central philosophical figures in the history of continental philosophy, such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Ricoeur and Foucault (Helin et al., 2014). This long list of names indicates that process research is not easily nailed down to a few main points; however, it seems reasonable to say that giving becoming ontological primacy over being lies at the heart of it.

Thus, understanding the nature of becoming and movement is central to process philosophy. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1910, 2007 [1946]) is a key figure here. To understand the order of reality that characterizes movement, we must understand the difference between qualitative and quantitative multiplicity, he points out. To illustrate the difference, musical scores are a quantitative multiplicity, marked separately as notes on staves that succeed and exclude each other in space (on paper), whereas music is a qualitative multiplicity – the experienced passing of tones that interpenetrate each other but cannot be sliced into pieces or represented, since what music is cannot be separated from this indivisible sensation of movement. Scores exist in space, while music exists in time. It does not exist out there but in our experience as a felt duration. Thus, while space can be measured and divided into quantitative entities, movement is a dynamic unity (Massumi, 2002), which is why we cannot change one tone in a melody without changing its whole. Later in this article, I will return to the methodological consequences of this different order of reality of movement, pointed out by Bergson.

On this ground of insisting on the link between process philosophy and process research, there is a growing field of processual reframing of established organizational concepts: Hjorth and Steyaert rethink the concept of entrepreneurship (Hjorth and Steyaert, 2009; Steyaert, 2007) by introducing process philosophical concepts such as ‘affect’ and ‘desire’ into the dominating entrepreneurship discourse. This also opens up for a rethinking of social entrepreneurship as public entrepreneurship, thus emphasizing the desire for the social (Hjorth, 2013). Chia and Holt (2009) rethink the concept of strategy and emphasize strategy as emergent from local coping actions instead of an intentional outcome of a grand plan and link this to a Heideggerian notion of ‘dwelling’. These contributions, in line with the reframing of the category of organization as organizing (Weick, 1979), distinguish themselves from previous processual rethinkings of organizational categories (e.g., Stacey, 2007) by insisting not only on the primacy of relation and process but also on the link to process philosophical concepts such as ‘affect’, ‘desire’ and ‘becoming’ that question the subject–object division and the purposeful (causally ordered) being in the world as ontologically fundamental.

**Methodological approaches in social science inspired by process thinking**

In the attempt to move further the focus on the ‘how’ of process research, I do not intend to claim that method in social science has been unaffected by process thinking. An increasing number of contemporary scholars strive in different ways to deal methodologically with the world as multiple and in constant becoming. We might even speak of a wider methodological shift in social science (Coleman and Ringrose, 2013): a growing call for methods that are messy (Law, 2004), affective and sensory (Pink, 2009); that are performative (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, 2008; Steyaert, 2012); and that see research as creation (McCormack, 2008; Massumi, 2002, 2008; Murphy, 2008).

These attempts to rethink method emphasize in different ways that research is a matter of not only studying what is ‘already there’ but also actively creating and adding to the studied world. All of these contributions in some way call for a move from understanding research as representation (i.e.
reflecting/illustrating what is there) towards understanding research as creation. However, it is worth noting that creation is here understood differently than in the constructionist sense of ‘creating’ as constructing the world through perspectives of the world.

In contrast, scholars within this shift towards performative methodology tend to understand research as something that not only changes how we think about the world but also alters the world ontologically. Or more precisely, the whole idea of perspective (i.e. how we see the world) as something that exists at another level than reality (i.e. what the world is) is fundamentally questioned. Instead, method, as well as theory, is located on the same flat plane as the studied practices. They are practices themselves and thus add to the world. This problematization of the distinction perspective/world is not new, however. Already in 1920, the philosopher Alfred Whitehead critically considered what he labelled ‘the bifurcation of nature’: the split between the world/things out there (separated from any subject) and the subject, the perspectives in here (separated from the world) (Latour, 2004: 208).

Hence, method, as well as theory, does not exist on a purer or more ordered level than reality – it is always an intervention in the messy, continuously practised world. This rethinking of methodology as performative, messy, creative and so on shares with constructivism a basic scepticism of the ‘correspondence idea’ of method referred to above. They both reject the positivist ideal that method can provide us with some degree of certainty that the world is what the statement/theory says it is. However, it tends to have another consequence: Instead of limiting research to a question of epistemology, it implies a return to ontology – not ontology in the positivist sense as a question of what the world is, but rather an ontology of becoming. Reality is not inaccessible (we cannot access reality since we are always already in the midst of it); rather, reality is constantly enacted and performed in situated practices, and therefore constantly enfolding, expanding and multiplying. It is not just our perspectives of the world that are multiple but the world itself. Therefore, method must necessarily deal with the impossible closure of knowledge. In other words, method now becomes a matter of how to keep knowledge open and multiple when we do research (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Law, 2004; Murphie, 2008).

The methodological task therefore becomes to ‘imagine methods when they no longer seek the definite, the repeatable, the more or less stable’ (Law, 2004: 6) – in other words, methods that are ‘tentative, hesitant, intuitive, slow and uncertain’ (Law, 2004: 6). Law even compares it to a blind person with a stick: His blindness handicaps him, but he also has the force of the more intense feeling of the stick as he moves forward (Law, 2004: 10). Clearly, this account of method implies another idea of clarity and rigour. The methodological task is ‘to find ways of knowing the indistinct and slippery without trying to grasp and hold them tight’ (Law, 2004: 10). In opposition to common connotations of knowing (e.g. providing some kind of guarantee, being sufficiently sure about something), Law talks about knowing as something that calls for ‘techniques of deliberate imprecision’ (Law, 2004: 3). He even often leaves the language of techniques behind and talks of a sense of method. The words he offers the reader for this kind of methodological understanding (i.e. ‘quieter’, ‘more generous’, ‘broader’, ‘looser’) tend to designate an attitude rather than a technique.

Interestingly, this (performatively) account of method often cancels the promises of conventional method (e.g. precision, tempo, order) and suggests the exact opposite (e.g. imprecision, slowness, mess). Law invites the reader to an interesting tour beyond current methods, but not to a new method. This might be his whole point (with the title ‘after method’ in mind): When the idea that knowledge should reflect a stable reality is left behind, the concept of method is emptied. However, it is worth noting that the discipline of method has been claimed to be dead before – without dying. For example, it has been argued that method should be replaced by analytical strategy on the basis of the constructivist reasoning mentioned above (Andersen, 2003): Since we cannot access reality directly, all we can do is to be precise about our epistemological ground. In other words, we must account for the perspectives through which we create reality. However, as academic debates have since shown, scholars within this paradigm continued to struggle with methodological questions that could not be limited to a matter of analytical strategy (Andersen, 2005).

Since the suggestion of methodological ‘imprecision’ or ‘looseness’ does not mean that anything goes, scholars doing empirical research in a process philosophical perspective must still consider the ‘how’ – and, in that sense, still need some concept of method, albeit somewhat different one than the ones offered by correspondence thinking. Therefore, the challenge for the scholar doing empirical work inspired by these processual approaches is, ‘If studying something processually is about relating to its multiple becomings – and hence the vagueness and slipperiness of the studied phenomena – then what does this actually mean in terms of gathering, processing and writing about empirical material?’ In the next section, I will discuss this on the background of a specific piece of empirical material.

**Studying entrance – an example**

The piece that I will now take up stems from observations made during 3 days that I spent at the entrance of an activity centre for citizens who are in contact with the social psychiatric system. In Danish, this activity centre is called ‘værested’, which can be directly translated to ‘being place’.

‘Being’ refers to the fact that the users of the centre do not get medical or any other treatment at the centre. It is a place where users can come and get something to eat, take part in activities or just hang out. The centre is organized by the
local municipality and run by a social psychiatric team, who also visit users in their homes. I have been allowed into the centre to study the encounter between users and the centre as part of a research project focusing on the dynamics of welfare creation in the encounter between professionals and citizens – and how welfare management can be (re-)understood in this context. The observations are therefore part of a wider material, including interviews with five other leaders, preceded by observations or other preparatory material and succeeded by four collaborative sessions with employees and leaders in three other institutions. From previous interviews in this centre, we know that the team manager currently places high priority on maintaining focus on the user in the organization of the team’s work (e.g. by adapting the opening hours to the rhythm of the users’ lives) and with enhancing the team’s attention to the users’ resources, which is also inscribed in a wider political agenda of seeing ‘the citizen as resourceful’.

Already in explaining the research focus, as I just did in these lines, a number of categories are implied: the user, the manager, the entrance, the centre, and so on. However, in the interests of process research, we are concerned with how they come into being in an organizational context (Hjorth et al., 2015): their multiple becoming, the vagueness of incipiences by which their ‘realness’ lives. So, rather than starting with entities, categories or places, assuming that they are already there and then trying to find regularities in how they relate to each other, the challenge of the empirical work is to find ways to connect to the multiplicity and vagueness of these categories. In the process described here, this was attempted in various ways, some of which were planned and others which grew more spontaneously out of the process. In the next section, I will try to stay with the category ‘entrance’ – which is both the site of observation and an activity in focus for it – through five vignettes (entrance and absence, entrance and hesitation, entrance and becoming-other, entrance and space, entrance and habit) made from rewritten observation notes and inspired by Calvino’s Invisible Cities. Subsequently, I will discuss the ‘how’ of process research from this example and take up some methodological issues in relation to it.

Entrance and absence

The first day the researcher arrives at the activity centre to do observations, she is led upstairs and into an apartment that has been converted into an office. The staff tell her that after the announcement of her arrival, some of the users had expressed concern about someone coming from outside. They had started wondering: Could it be the municipality that is behind this? Were they thinking of closing down the place since they have sent someone from outside to observe? She states that she will interfere as little as possible in order to reduce unnecessary anxiety as much as she can. The staff and the researcher go down to the activity centre in the basement of the building. Ten or fifteen minutes pass without anyone entering the room except for three staff members. One of them, a young woman, says, ‘It’s strange. Normally they would have been here’. Her colleague nods at the researcher: ‘Maybe it’s because of the announcement of you being here, they might have been frightened’. The researcher feels bad about having interfered and having caused anxiety for these (in her mind) vulnerable, ill people before she has even entered their centre. Ten more minutes pass before the first user enters: an elderly man. By this point, the researcher has withdrawn to the office area of the room, where she can be on the sidelines, but his eyes immediately seek into her corner behind the staff members. However, since she is ‘not there’, she does not know how to greet him. A staff member, the young woman, notices their searching glance and takes a step back as an invitation for them to connect. The researcher steps out of the office area and the man approaches her. He starts asking questions in an open interested way. He knows a bald professor: Does she perhaps know him? She laughs a bit and says that there is a majority of bald professors, she guesses. But the staff member persists, asking ‘Which institute was it?’ As they slowly walk along the oblong entrance, the user and researcher talk about the institute and the professor that it actually turns out that she knows.

Entrance and hesitation

More users enter the room. A scraping of chairs blends with voices to create a steady and soft background noise. The researcher is already aware that she is not observing in the way she had planned. Rather than observations from the sidelines, she is observing from within activities and conversations. As a consequence, a lot of things happen around her that she does not grasp. However, becoming part of the steady, slow rhythm of the centre, she starts to notice small changes in it. Later, numerous users have found their way to the centre. Two users are entering the room. They keep standing at the step down to the room. One member of staff, a middle-aged woman, gets up and starts walking towards them, but then something apparently makes her hesitate approximately 5 m in front of them. The staff member greets them and sends a ‘Happy New Year’ through the room across the distance between them. Then she waits for a long moment. The users do not take the expected step down into the room; they just keep standing there, a bit stiff. The staff member raises her hand, and one of the users lifts his hand slightly. Then the staff member takes a step back and returns to the kitchen. After a while, the two users enter the room and blend into the crowd.

Entrance and becoming-other

The staff meeting is about to begin in the usual meeting room on the third floor, equipped with an oval table and a whiteboard covered with words and arrows in red, left over from
the previous meeting. The researcher is given the floor by the manager. She has promised to present the observations from the entrance of the centre and therefore start by describing situations she has noticed, among these the two users hesitating at the doorstep. She also describes, to the participants’ amusement, how the strategy of observing from the sidelines totally broke down as she was approached by the talkative users and she thereby became another observer than the one who had arrived in the morning, a guest. She asks what these observations might evoke about their encounters with the users. One member of staff immediately says that it makes him think of entering the living room of an elderly woman he once made home visits to. From the moment he entered her home, he could sense her condition, but he also knew that the home changed when he entered. It was a home, but when he crossed the doorstep, it became something more than a home. The point that what it becomes depends on a number of circumstances is emphasized in the dialogue that follows: ‘for example, how we physically approach the citizen’, one member of staff adds. Another situation is evoked by this discussion: A participant who works at the activity centre tells about a time he went to the sports hall with a group of users of the activity centre. He recalls how he was struck by how much entering the sports hall changed the contact among the users and even his own way of approaching them. ‘At the activity centre they sometimes can seem apathetic, and I have to use all my energy to get them to be active. But here another kind of energy was going through them’, he adds. A discussion emerges: The role of the social psychiatric team is not to make users not-ill or less-ill, but rather ‘more-than-ill’. Hence, the point of the activity centre is to create a context in which users can become more than their mental illness, all the other things that they are apart from being ill, for example, a chess player, someone who cooks or a basketball player.

Entrance and space

The participants, previously sitting around the meeting table, now go silently down the stairs that lead to the activity centre in the basement. There is some awkwardness in this silence, yet it seems to create a pause in which they sense the passage from the meeting room into the activity centre. As they enter the linoleum tiled room, one member of staff immediately says, ‘Already here I notice that there’s a certain smell in here that I would always recognize’. They all pause and sniff at the entrance, and others reply, ‘Yeah, you are in a completely different place now’. ‘A public institution’, one says. ‘Well, I smell dinner’, another one adds. A third exclaims, ‘I just got the thought that this is a difficult room to enter – it’s like a long, narrow tunnel seen from here’.

They are now standing at the doorstep where the two users were standing, hesitating for a long time. The researcher returns to how she was struck by the situation, when one of the staff members approached the users, but stopped at a distance of 5 m and waited for a long moment. Now, she goes down the room and stops 5 m in front of the staff member, who is still standing at the doorstep where the users hesitated. ‘What made you stop here?’ the researcher wonders out loud. The staff member is not sure. ‘But it varies a lot’, another one adds, ‘Some users look for immediate contact’. The group now tries, two by two, to approach each other and then try to notice whether we feel we are being approached too close, too fast or too hesitantly.

Entrance and habit

Two months later, this ‘slowing down’ at the entrance is reinserted in another context: a working seminar with a municipal office north of Copenhagen that was part of the same research project. However, while the first ‘slowing down’ emerged spontaneously from the pause created by the (artificial) silence in which they entered the centre and thereby intensified the event, this time the researcher tries purposefully to recreate this slowing down. At the entrance of their usual meeting room, she reads a piece from Calvino’s Invisible Cities, with which I started this article – to make participants stop, wonder and slowdown in the habit of entering a meeting with their colleagues – in other words, to make a pause in the continuity of expectations.

Then, how is the entrance of Penthesilea different than what we habitually assume? The traveller continues his tale in this way:

You advance for hours and it is not clear to you whether you are already in the city’s midst or still outside it. […] If you ask the people you meet, ‘Where is Penthesilea?’ they make a broad gesture which may mean ‘Here’ or else ‘Farther on’, or ‘All around you’ or even ‘In the opposite direction’. ‘I mean the city’, you ask insistently. ‘We come here every morning to work’. Someone answers, while others say, ‘We come back here at night to sleep’. ‘But the city where people live?’ you ask. ‘It must be that way’, they say, and some raise their arms obliquely toward an aggregation of opaque polyhedrons on the horizon, while others indicate, behind you, the specter of other spires. ‘Then I’ve gone past it without realizing it?’ ‘No, try going on straight ahead’.

Discussing ‘the how’ of process research from the example

Like the entrance of Penthesilea, the entrance of the centre is not just a place that is already there; it only becomes an entrance from someone having entered – it emerges from the process of entering. And vice versa: The entrance actualizes the one who enters the centre in a particular way. Certain memories and experiences come to the surface (e.g. ‘dinner’ or ‘public institution’) and actualize the user, the employee and also the researcher in certain ways (e.g. as ‘hesitant’, ‘walking in a tunnel’ or ‘a guest’ that does not just observe
from the sidelines). Thus, ‘entrance’ is constantly emerging from relationally, materially, affective forces that entwine with each other and affect us as a dynamic unity: the architecture of the building, the smell of the room and the sounds in it resonate with the experience of those entering. Thus, the entrance of the centre continuously comes into being in multiple ways. Hence, studying entrance as dynamic unity implies opening up the qualitative multiplicity of the categories of those entering: how the citizen may ‘become other’ when he enters the centre (e.g. a ‘user’ in the social psychiatric system or a chess player), just like the researcher became someone else than the person who arrived in the morning.

Thus, studying entrance, not simply as extensive passage (a space that the user traverses) but as intensive passage (a process of becoming-other), opens up the question, ‘How does the space of becoming “more-than ill” emerge through daily encounters?’ Hereby, the theme of the resourceful user, introduced by the manager in the introductory interview, starts to deviate: Throughout the collaborative process, the question is reframed from ‘How to implement an optic of the user as being resourceful?’ to ‘How the space for becoming-other (more than ill) is actualized/enacted in daily life of the centre?’ In that sense, the return to the observation site together with employees forefronts the genuinely processual in the team’s task – in terms of creating a space for the user’s multiple becomings: mentally ill, chess player, quiz winner, basketball player, someone cooking Indian food and so on.

Hence, through this process, the observations at the entrance become observations about how the ‘being place’ is entered as a ‘becoming place’ – in other words, What are the material, affective, bodily details of the event of entering the centre that hold open this space of intensive movement/becoming-other? Method here becomes a matter of finding ways to be attentive to these entwined materially, bodily and affective forces by which entrance into the centre actualizes users and employees (and the researcher) in certain ways and – to relate to the multiplicity of it – the crowd of pressuring incipiencies that Massumi (2002) speaks of.

In the process described here, this was attempted in various ways. One is by intervening actively by adding a drop of ‘otherness’, that is, introducing something artificial, creating a pause (‘the awkward silence’ or ‘the piece from Calvino’) that intensifies the event of entering and how it is sensed. Another way, also conditioned by this ‘otherness’, is slowing down, partly by literally, physically slowing down at the entrance when we return to the observation of the users hesitating at the entrance. The sequence at the entrance can be seen as a technic of ‘slowmotioning’ (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012), which allows us to zoom in on the multiple micro-life of the encounters that had just been in focus in the meeting room. In other words, the physical slowing down becomes a way to extend a piece of everyday life and pay attention to what is more in it by slowing down our perception of small everyday details, for example, how the entrance emerges from the scent, sound and architecture of the centre. A third way was repetition, that is, staying by the event of entering and relating to it in different ways. The observation of ‘the users hesitating at the doorstep’ is here multiplied by returning to this observation repeatedly in ways that differ in form: First, the observation is made and noted by the researcher; next, it is narrated at the meeting with the team (where it opens up other narratives about encounters with the users); then it is ‘relived’ by actually going back to the entrance, where it happened, where it opens up an attention to the material, spatial aspects of entering the centre. At last, it is reinserted into another context. Thus, there is a series of ‘slowing downs’, starting from the two users slowing down at the entrance that opens up to intensity and multiplicity.

‘The how’ of this small piece of process research could therefore also be described as a process of slowing down, intensifying and multiplying: First, there is a slowing down at the entrance conditioned by a drop of otherness, which intensifies and brings to the forefront sensations and feeling-thoughts (Massumi, 2002; 2008) that are less likely to show up in reflecting sessions and thereby opens up for multiplying, that is, opening up to the qualitative multiplicity of the categories involved. Thus, method here also becomes a question of how to move beyond habitual practices of how we approach the categories in focus. In line with Andrew Murphie (2008), process research is arguably precisely not about analysing habits and making them the basis of a new taxonomy of experience but to ‘remake relations, changing our habits as we go along’ (Murphie, 2008: 11). Hence, it somehow involves what Helin et al. call exposing ourselves to the strange ‘that which invites us to open up and move along lines of flight’ (Helin et al., 2014: 9).

Rethinking existing methodological concepts: documenting, variation, validity

In the example discussed above, ‘documenting’ takes on another meaning than it has in the framework of correspondence thinking, where documenting means capturing what is there as precisely as possible. Massumi (2008) has reminded us that we always perceive double: We see an object (e.g. a chair, but we also see what we do not see (the back of the chair, its weight, our body’s capacity to move around the chair or to stretch out the arm and feel the soft velour at the hand). That is, we sense our own aliveness – the dynamic, on-going, processual aspect of our relation to the object. In process research, documenting is about finding ways of putting that aliveness in front.

Thus, relating only to what we see is not something we can do; we always see what we do not see, the city is multiplied by the experience of those entering, and it is always a multiplicity of invisible cities. Process research is a call to take this seriously in the practice of documenting – to relate to what we ‘double see’, to invoke the invisible and attend to
the ‘aliveness’ of the researched phenomena. That requires methods that leave room for relating to the multiple registers of sensation (Beyes and Steyaert, 2012; Dirksmeier and Helbrecht, 2008; Pink, 2009). In the example above, doing observations in many ways excesses the visual sense (Pink, 2009). Touching, hearing, smelling, tasting were also part of being in the activity centre — sensations that are indivisible and interpenetrating each other in experiencing a situation and forms the sensation of being present, of being a part of its liveliness. In Bergson’s terms, they are a qualitative multiplicity that forms a dynamic unity of becoming.

To grasp the ‘realness’ of the researched, we need ways of documenting that does not immediately split apart that which forms a dynamic unity in our experience of it just to reconnect it into generalizable descriptions and models that may be – to use the words of Calvino’s traveller – too probable to be real. In the process discussed above, ‘documenting’ what happens rather means to put the liveliness of entrance in the foreground – to forefront its changeability, its openness. It is not so much about documenting the entrance that is already there, but to connect to its multiple becomings, to invoke the invisible entrance.

However, this has implications for how we can understand the classic methodological categories of validity and variation. In classic methodological thinking, ‘validity’ basically means applying a transparent method that measures what it claims to measure, which allows another researcher to repeat the study with the same result. In qualitative approaches, however, this concept of validity has been modified. For example, in Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1997), validity means that the study has inducted the core categories systematically from the empirical material and that these categories are saturated. In other words, data collection must continue until there is no more variation in the categories. However, in process thinking, where the singularity of the experience is emphasized and multiplicity is seen as fundamental, this reasoning becomes problematic. Instead of searching for the point where variation ends, validity would instead be a question of actively pushing that point further.

As in the example above, that kind of ‘pushing’ can take different forms during the research process. It may be a question of intervening by adding a ‘drop of otherness’ to the researched practices; it may be a matter of making series of processings of the same piece of empirical material that takes it through treatments that differ in terms of form, or it may be a question of writing up empirical material in ways in which the openness and ambiguity of the material are affirmed. Hence, in methodological thinking from the perspective of process philosophy, ‘repetition’ becomes a way to stay with the research object and multiply it, rather than a way of testing whether the outcome stays the same.

However, this implies a fundamentally different way of thinking about variation. In classic methodological thinking, variation is a problem that is solved as a matter of statistical significance (in quantitative methodology) or saturation of categories (in qualitative methodology). However, in Bergson’s (2010) terms, one might say that both of these ways of reasoning are extensive ways of thinking about variation, that is, variation between states and categories that are separable and exclude each other in space. However, thinking of multiplicity as qualitative (i.e. indivisible, multiple states interpenetrating each other) paves the way for another way of thinking of variation: a fundamentally qualitative way, namely, thinking of variation from within, as intensive. One way to do this in empirical work is by welcoming the notion that the same piece of empirical material comes into being in multiple ways depending on the context it resonates with and the experience of those involved. In the analysis above, this is done by selecting a small piece of material that is returned to repeatedly, but in different ways: for example, as a narrative evoking other narratives, as a physical movement, as the sounds, scents and architecture of the place where it happened. Seen in this way, variation is not merely variation between cases, practices or statements but also a matter of revealing the variation immanent to the material – that is, of the places, situations and problems that we study — by repeatedly ‘documenting’ it in different ways and contexts.

**Conclusion**

Process thinking does not merely mean that movement and vagueness are a complicating premise, something we have to handle and take into account as a methodological challenge in research. In this article, I have aimed at taking the more radical point of departure that movement is the precondition of studying anything at all: All things, to be noticed, must be moving. That means that method becomes genuinely the task of describing, understanding and expanding the ways in which we connect with the world, how we connect with its vagueness, movement and multiplicity, rather than a discipline of techniques to disconnect from the world. I have suggested here that moving further this ‘how’ of process research in organization studies and social science implies rethinking central methodological categories like ‘documenting’, ‘validity’ and ‘variation’. Hence, moving further in the field of process research implies processualizing not only organizational categories but also how we relate to knowledge.

This implies a methodological thinking that has room for a more connotative, playful, way of relating to the material, that does not demand from a methodology to overcome the gap between what is there and what is captured, but makes use of this gap as a space for invitation, rather than for imposing, listing and classifying. This involves moving beyond habitual practices of relating to knowledge; method is in that sense inherently an ‘upstream practice’ and involves what Helin et al. call exposing ourselves to the strange ‘that which invites us to open up and move along lines of flight’ (Helin et al., 2014: 9).
That upstreamness may, however, be threatened by its own success. Put more precisely, there is always a risk of ending up chasing more or less settled (agreed upon) markers of ‘otherness’, which over time may become an ‘over-coded’ form of strangeness, which ceases to be strange and therefore changes no habits. In any case, it is not necessarily the very ‘loud-mouthed’ strangeness that enacts otherness. The simple activity of slowly entering a room in silence (a room you have entered innumerable times at work, but not in silent togetherness with colleagues that you are not used to being silent together with) and suddenly becoming attentive to the smell of the room can be a productive (but silent) stranger to habit.

In this light, it is worth stressing that the how of process research is a multiplicity of ‘hows’; the way of doing process research discussed in this article is one way, as it emerged in a corner of a research material generated in a specific context. However, this does not mean that there is no room for a common discussion about methodological concepts in a process perspective. We may see method as ‘dead’ or ‘empty’, but researchers will still encounter questions of a certain (‘methodological’) nature when they go into the field and afterwards when they present their findings in academic papers or presentations. These are questions often silently framed by methodological categories that have traditionally been defined by correspondence thinking. In order to move on and keep searching for the ‘hows’ of process research in organization studies, rethinking concepts such as validity and variation through a processual lens might not only be helpful for the researcher doing empirical studies in the field of process research – but also may help create some space for play in the field of methodology.

Declaration of conflicting interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
This article draws partly on thoughts elaborated in the author’s phd, which was co-funded by Copenhagen Business School and Metropolitan University College.

References


**Author biography**

Eva Pallesen is an Assistant Professor in Centre for Leadership and Experience Design, University College Absalon, Denmark. Her doctoral thesis focused on welfare management and on doing empirical research inspired by process philosophy. Her work is published in Organization Studies (SAGE) as well as in anthologies on welfare professions and management. She has previously worked as a consultant and head of methodology in the Danish Evaluation Institute and as head of section in the Danish Ministry of Education.