The “risk culture,” an expression that has enjoyed much success in both academic and management circles, has been the source of some confusion when one considers relations between the authorities and local populations in the context of natural hazard prevention policy. Rather than retrace this category’s journey from the world of scholarship to that of public action, the methodological approach I have chosen here begins with local uses of the expression in order to examine the issues it puts into play. On-the-ground observation of flood risk management in the Rhône valley reveals discrepancies between the intentions associated with the discourse of the risk culture—which promotes exchange and consultation between experts and laymen, decision makers, and residents—and its conditions of discursive enunciation, which are characterized by a marked asymmetry between author (institutional actors) and audience (the population). To better understand this discrepancy and grasp the issues involved in it, it is therefore useful to consider the implementation and consequences of this discourse by closely observing interactions between managers and populations for whom the risk culture constitutes an a priori frame of reference. In such circumstances, the investigative methodology must allow the investigator access to both institutional actors and the population by way of ethnographic immersion.

Such social omnipresence poses a methodological problem, for acceptance by one group may often result in exclusion by another. In
seeking to respond to this issue, I have drawn upon my experience. After completing a doctorate in ethnology, I took a post as operational engineer, in charge of overseeing flood prevention policy projects on the Rhône. I was in this way able to observe public action from within. Much like the “covert” form of participant observation practiced by researchers who take a job in the organization they wish to study without revealing their intentions, the question of access to the field arises less for an individual who is already present in it as an actor. Given the investigator’s fully legitimate presence, the obstacles that usually stand in the way of those from outside the administration seem to disappear. Rather than misleading the multiple gatekeepers who control access to the field, the investigator may thus consolidate a research posture that, in the everyday course of affairs, allows him or her to gather original empirical data exceeding the scope of individual testimony as well as open fields of inquiry that may be difficult to discern from the outside. These two stances lead to the articulation of complementary fields: on the one hand, “participant observation” of consultation dispositifs; on the other, remote supervision of monographic studies of the territories where local mobilization develops. By adopting multiple observation points, it is possible to set the manner in which the consultation dispositif is understood in the context of an analysis of the local dynamics taking place outside of it.

Since 2005, regular meetings have been held in the framework of Plan Rhône. Known as “Territorial Consultation Committees,” these meetings bring together hundreds of people, including residents, managers, association members, elected officials, and representatives of the state. Organized on behalf of the population by institutional leaders, these arenas are interesting sites for observing the discourse of the risk culture in action. In particular, a close analysis of consultation leadership methods reveals how managers apprehend the local population—that is, the manner in which the latter are represented by the former. Access to the heart of the operational sphere constitutes a privileged position for observing public policy in the making, a “view from below” that simultaneously allows one to follow the genesis of the dispositif, get a behind-the-scenes look at preparations, and participate in all meetings. In particular, my participation in this dispositif allowed me to observe how the consultation was conducted as well as follow the evolution of its rules. Initially structured as a post-disaster consultation, the meetings subsequently took the form of a more classic consultation centered on hydraulic infrastructure projects. Yet an analysis of the consultation dispositif must be complemented by an examination of what takes place