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Patricia Genoe McLaren, Albert J. Mills, Terrance G. Weatherbee

Varieties of history in organization studies

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Diego M. Coraiola, William M. Foster, Roy Suddaby
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Varieties of history in organization studies

Diego M. Coraiola, William M. Foster, and Roy Suddaby

Introduction

A large part of the argument for historicizing management and organizational studies is based on the recognition of the ahistorical character of most research done in management and organizations (Zald, 1990; Kieser, 1994). This can be more clearly seen through the existing divide between the fields of organization studies and business history. This argument usually relies on an assumption about the incommensurability of history and science, which can be traced back to a widely shared practical realist view on the nature of history. We avoid this common argument and advocate for a temporary suspension of the discussion of the incommensurability of science and history to focus on the assumptions about history that guide both ‘historical research’ (e.g. business history) and ‘scientific research’ (e.g. organizational theory). As Lorenz (2011) argues, any attempt to define history will raise ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical controversies. With this in mind, we embark on an open discussion about the contributions to be gained from an enriched view of history for management and organization studies.

We adopt a critical view of the widely assumed ahistorical character of empirical organizational research. Instead of approaching management and organizational history (MOH) research on the grounds of the incommensurability of scientific and historical modes of knowledge, we start by recognizing that researchers might have different assumptions about the nature of historical knowledge. That these commonly implicit and generalized assumptions contribute to the ‘invisibility of historical research’ (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2013) is a generally overlooked historical critique of organization studies. The general lack of interest in historical issues is not only a reflex of the inherited ahistorical condition of the scientific project of social sciences (Zald, 1993), but also a consequence of generally overlooked ontological and epistemological assumptions of the nature of history in organizational research. The ahistorical character of most organizational research seems to be much less the consequence of a decision taken by an informed scholar interested in developing scientific explanations than the result of an unreflexive espousal of a specific view on history.

We illustrate our argument by discussing the use of history in institutional theory research. Organizational institutionalism is one of the most prominent approaches in organization studies and has already been the focus of researchers interested in the potential benefits of relating
institutional theory to historical research (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2013; Suddaby, Foster & Mills, 2014). We analyze some prominent historically-oriented institutional theory papers and identify their manifest or latent views on history. The examination of these papers demonstrates that when history is done ‘under cover’, or is treated as a variable, it is not necessarily because of a misunderstanding of what history is or what history is intended to accomplish. Instead, the understanding of history is the product of the researcher’s ontological beliefs. Identifying these assumptions and bringing these to light will help to clarify how history is used and is presented in organization studies. This clarification will, in our opinion, help produce more historically reflective studies on management and organizational phenomena.

In the following sections we will first outline and synthesize the current debates on the role of history in organization studies. Next, discussion will focus on the existing assumptions about the nature of history and how it can be studied. We use Munslow’s (2006a) typology of ontological positions in history as our guide and we classify how history is used in institutional research on the basis of his description of the three main ontological positions on history. Discussion then turns to the implications that arise when assumptions about the nature and access of historical reality are surfaced. Finally, the chapter concludes with suggestions about some possible avenues for future, historically-informed, MOH research.

**History and the social sciences**

For many social scientists, there is the belief that historical research involves rummaging around in a dusty archive to find evidence of the past so that the historian can paint an accurate picture of the world as it used to be. This common misconception of what history is and what it involves (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004) is grounded in practical realism. The past is seen as a site where scholars can find traces of evidence. Moreover, it is possible to recover the reality of the past in the present and discover the ‘truth’ through the empirical analysis of historical sources. History, then, is produced through the skilful reconstruction of the past as it actually happened, without bias or prejudice. Thus, to social scientists, studying history means describing how people used to live, what they used to do, what they used to think, and why. It also involves identifying and demarcating distinct historical phases or periods, capturing sequences or chains of events over time, and identifying critical events. This caricature of what history is and how it is produced closely resembles the popular understanding of the work of historians and it can be argued that this is a widely held belief among many scholars in management and organization studies.

Social scientists also tend to accept the historians’ accounts of the past. It is characteristic of the academic division of labour that historians are considered ‘experts’ about the times past and are best suited to discover the ‘truth’ from the remnants from the past (Weatherbee, 2012). For this reason historical knowledge is not deemed problematic for the study of social science (Zald, 1996). The historian has authority to explain and convey the lessons of the past to others. This authority is grounded in historians’ professional training and their adherence to the professional norms of verification, impartiality, and personal detachment.

The historian’s authority over the past also clouds the relationship between historical and social sciences research. History and historical research is generally thought of as data that social scientists can use as evidence for historical case studies and/or as illustrations aimed at testing theory (Zald, 1990). However, the role of the historian has been placed under scrutiny and questions have been raised about what it means to be a historian. Some have argued that a historian’s ability to produce valid historical knowledge depends on his or her ability to raise questions and develop hypotheses about historical data (Bloch, 1953). Historians in this camp believe that the past can speak for itself and their task goes further than identifying, criticizing, and arranging the
sources in a timeline. The research process is emphasized, as is the selection of relevant sources and how these are interpreted. The selection and interpretation of the sources is motivated by a series of questions based on the historian’s previous experience and beliefs as well as on shared common social knowledge, which includes scientific knowledge. This pseudo-scientific approach to the work of the historian brings the social scientist and the historian closer than ever before. Thus, there is an unsteady ‘agreement’ on the set of problems and tools they could use to understand the past.

The same discussion has taken place on the side of ‘science’, where a debate on social sciences evaluated the possibility of creating a history-as-social-science (Abrams, 1980; Abbott, 1991). During the 1970s and 1980s social scientists engaged with epistemological and methodological issues regarding the historicity of social phenomena and the ways history could inform the practice of research in social sciences. In both cases, the historical search for the contribution of social sciences, and the social sciences analysis of the benefits of a historically-informed discipline, were looking for a synthesis (Abbott, 1991), for a unified historical social science. A series of divergences and incompatibilities prevented this from happening.

A similar divide between social scientists and historians exists in organizational research (Rowlinson, 2001). In fact, a theory-testing function of history has, more than once, been posed as one of the most valuable contributions for more historical analysis in the study of organizations (Kieser, 1994). This supposed divide between organizational theorists and business historians still remains (Greenwood & Bernardi, 2014), although as Zald (1996: 257) pointed out, the meaningful debate that has occurred in history and the social sciences has “somehow … bypassed organizational studies”.

Yet, the fact is that both organizational theorists and business historians often share the same ontological and epistemological view on history (Rowlinson & Delahaye, 2009). The ‘historic turn’ (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004: 336) in organization studies is used to refer to at least three different positions on the role history should play in relation to the theorization about organizations: the supplementarist, the integrationist, and the reorientationist (Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004). But looking closely we find that in each of these three positions history seems to acquire a very precise meaning that is sometimes aligned, and other times conflicts, with the social scientific model.

In summary, we assume that despite claims to the contrary, business history and organization studies are not necessarily at odds nor are they based on incommensurable divisions. We have shown that the apparent divide between history and science in MOH is predominantly ontological and not epistemological. Next we explore how ontological assumptions about history led to particular treatments of historical research in MOH. In the following section we present a more detailed account of Munslow’s (2006a) three major ontological orientations over the nature of historical knowledge. This is followed by our illustration of each ontological position with the research developed in institutional theory and our discussion of the implications of an increased awareness of different varieties of history to the development of research in organization studies.

**Defining history: three perspectives on the nature of historical reality**

The basis for our classification of different varieties of history is Munslow’s (2006a, 2006b) ontological positions on the nature of historical reality. We distinguish between the three approaches based on two main dimensions: the extent to which historians consider history to be equivalent to the past, and the extent to which they recognize historical sources as being already a narrative (see Figure 15.1).
Reconstructivist ontology

The reconstructivist assumption about history can be broadly characterized as a position whereby it is accepted that historians are able to make a truthful assessment of the past in their historical accounts. They do so through “technical and detailed study of the sources through the process of verification, comparison and colligation” (Munslow, 2006a: 181). Also used is the process of the historian empathizing with historical characters to reconstruct the thoughts and decisions taken by the historical agents in a given historical context (Collingwood, 1993). Historians are very careful not to allow their prejudices to get in the way for the writing of the true history. They avoid the interference of their own thoughts about the past reality and focus only on the evidence registered in the sources. They might also expend some effort to block the imposition of presentist agendas of interests. Historians work to let the sources speak for themselves and adopt a referential language that treats events and actions as empirical facts. In other words, reconstructivists believe in their ability to write the past as it has really happened.

Reconstructivists also believe in history as a distinct theory of knowledge, or epistemology. They assume they are able to access and reconstruct the reality of the past in their narrative accounts through an inductive process of impartial selection and critical evaluation of documentary sources. It does not mean that reconstructivists do not recognize the importance of interpretation in historical writing. They concede that history is always an interpretative reconstruction based on some given sources, but they view the historian as an impartial observer whose skill is the ability to access and reproduce the content of the sources objectively. Much like how a forensic scientist approaches physical evidence and attempts to reconstruct a crime scene, a reconstructivist historian pieces together evidence from the past until a picture of some historical event is complete. Throughout this process of discovery, reconstructivist historians sublimate their personal interests, methodological biases, and ideological positions to concentrate on only the data and historical sources which are the final evidence by which the veracity of their historical interpretation must be judged.
In addition to the conservative reconstructivist historians there are some historians who occupy a middle-ground reconstructionist position. The most important difference these researchers exhibit is their refusal to accept the possibility that they can access the past as it once was. These historians accept the central role of interpretation in the production of history. Moderate or practical realist reconstructivists (Munslow, 2006a) diverge from more conservative reconstructivists in that they embrace the process of historical writing that is the result of abduction (Douven, 2011). Their understanding of the historian’s use of evidence usually follows Carr’s (1961) formulation of the creation of historical facts. Historical facts are not given a priori. Thus, the creation of historical meaning is a product of the interaction between the historian’s knowledge and the content of the sources. Accepting that the historians’ interpretations intervene in the selection of pertinent evidence to create historical facts brings this group of reconstructivists closer to the constructionist interpretation of the historian’s work.

**Constructivist ontology**

The constructivists, as a group, approach history from a number of perspectives. The most significant departure from a reconstructivist approach is the assumption that it is not possible to revive the totality of the past as it once was. Constructivism is the most complex ontological position put forth by Munslow (2006a). It encompasses a great variety of researchers who accept that historians create evidence through the imposition of historical interpretation on empirical sources. But the application of theoretical frames to the past is not an unbounded project. It is still dependent on the sources and on the professional norms of good historical practice. For constructivists, the past is the past and cannot be retrieved in its entirety. Their knowledge of the past is, then, always partial and bounded by the questions they are able to formulate and the answers the existing sources can provide. Although they recognize the active engagement of the historian and the importance of context to the production of history, they still believe that history is more fact than fiction; to them history is not simply another form of literature and historical knowledge corresponds to the reality of the past.

A characteristic of a constructivist ontology is the belief that historical research is a scientific enterprise. Thus, when history is approached from this position, models and theories of the social sciences are brought to bear on the study of the past. Constructivists eschew the inductive method based on empiricist objectivism and, in contrast, adopt the deductive approach taken from the social sciences. The emphasis on events is replaced by an emphasis on the structures that underlie these events and a focus on a problem-oriented approach to history (Furet, 1984). To the constructivist, history cannot exist without theory and historical knowledge is dependent on the kind of questions the researcher is able to pose to her sources (Bloch, 1953). The production of history is, thus, the result of a “conceptual dialogue between the historian and the past” (Munslow, 2006b: 66). As a detective investigating a crime, constructivists start with a set of assumptions and hypotheses on the historical reality that will be discarded, changed, or reinforced through the progressive analysis of the evidence on the case.

Despite the great diversity in constructivist thought, it is possible to identify two major strands. All constructivists agree that historical sources are the primary way to access the past and validate any historical interpretation. Differences are visible when constructivists are questioned about their beliefs on the nature of the sources. The practical realist constructivists (e.g. Marxists), share the reconstructivist notion that the access to the content of the sources is unproblematic and follows directly from the theoretical questions researchers use to address historical problems. The post-empiricists, in contrast, embrace a narrative approach and have incorporated the linguistic turn into their reflection on the nature of history. This means that access to the past is always
enclosed by narrative emplotment. Furthermore, the sources are not in themselves exempt from ideological biases and from the characteristics of their context of production.

**Deconstructivist ontology**

Munslow’s (2006a) last ontological position, deconstructivism, differs from the other two approaches in the way that postmodernist thought is embraced and espoused. Broadly speaking, deconstructivism can be summarized by the widely-cited statement “‘there is nothing outside the text’ [il n’y a pas de hors-texte]” (Derrida, 1988: 136). Approaching history from this ontological position means that the narrative itself becomes fundamental for the understanding of history and of the work of the historian. History is understood as a narrative of a narrative and what we know about the past is merely a text that has been created and produced by historians, among other authors. The past is forever lost and cannot be retrieved through analysis or investigation. The historian is bounded to produce a historical account, instead of the historical account. The irony is, however, that the past only comes into existence when written by the historian. In this strict sense, we can say that the past equals history.

A deconstructivist ontological approach to history does not suggest that there is a finite and ultimate past when historians talk about the past. The past only comes into existence when it comes to be known through the historian’s emplotment of it in a narrative. Thus, the past is created though historicizing and can only exist as “the-past-as-history” (Munslow, 2006b).

Deconstructivists do not distinguish between history and literature, subsuming the former under the latter. When history is not distinguished from literature and it is accepted that history is always a narrative representation of the past in the present, then history becomes politicized and ideological. Moreover, history becomes subject to a similar set of issues that affect the production of any kind of narrative, i.e. the emplotment of a story, the use of persuasive and tropological language, and the appeal to the verisimilitude of the story. As clearly stated by Munslow (2006a: 21), “deconstructionist historians tend to view history and the past as a complex series of literary products that derive their chains of meaning(s) or significations from the nature of narrative structure (or forms of representation) as much as from other culturally provided ideological factors.”

The rise of deconstructivist thought has shifted the role of the historian away from producing “a truth-finding discourse” to one of producing a “truth-making” discourse (Munslow, 2006b: 11). The task for historians is no longer to discover the truth of the past by inductive or deductive methods, but to disclose possible pasts by applying different lenses to the sources. The sources themselves are seen as “meaningful historical explanations … rather than plain vehicles with which to explain the past as it actually happened” (Munslow, 2006a: 62). The past is not given within the sources but is created by the representative frame chosen by the historian. “The written historical narrative is the formal re-presentation of historical content” (Munslow, 2006a: 27). For deconstructivists, all texts (historical, literary, evidence, or interpretation) are but one possible representation of the past, rather than the past itself in a written form. Historical sources and how these are used to tell a story define the possibilities of existence for the past.

A synthesis of Munslow’s (2006a) ontologies can be found in Table 15.1. This brief review of each of the three ontological positions demonstrates that history can be approached in different ways by different researchers. Munslow’s typology suggests that differences in how history is approached have had a fundamental impact on how history is researched, understood, and presented. This is more clearly seen when we look at the results of empirical research espousing different ontological assumptions on the nature of historical reality. In the following section we
illustrate these differences through an analysis of a sample of articles in management and organization studies taken from research in the tradition of organizational institutionalism.

**History in neo-institutional research**

To illustrate the importance of an increased awareness about the nature of historical knowledge in the development of management and organization studies, we chose to focus in more detail on the research developed under the label of neo-institutional theory. Our choice was informed by three criteria: (1) organizational institutionalism today is a dominant approach in the field of management and organizations; (2) institutional theory possesses a “strong historical component” (Zald, 1996: 257) that, to some, remains largely ignored and unarticulated (Suddaby, Foster & Mills, 2014); and (3) there are a number of recent attempts at specifying the connection between history and institutions (Djelic, 2008; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2013; Suddaby, Foster & Mills, 2014).

### Table 15.1 Synthesis of the ontological perspectives on history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Reconstructionism</th>
<th>Constructionism</th>
<th>Deconstructionism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>History</td>
<td>A theory of knowledge (epistemology)</td>
<td>A form of scientific research (investigation)</td>
<td>A form of literature (narrative)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical reality</td>
<td>Objective (given)</td>
<td>Interpreted (culturally constructed)</td>
<td>Represented (discursively produced)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical knowledge</td>
<td>Empirical</td>
<td>Theoretical</td>
<td>Literary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical truth</td>
<td>Correspondence Theory (primary sources + experienced craftsmanship)</td>
<td>Correspondence Theory (factual knowledge + interpretation)</td>
<td>Coherence Theory (interpretation = knowledge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical sources</td>
<td>Reveal the reality when studied appropriately</td>
<td>Reveal some aspects of the reality if problematized appropriately</td>
<td>Signpost some possible realities and interpretations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historian</td>
<td>Known but personally unimportant</td>
<td>Known and ‘personally’ important</td>
<td>Unknown or unimportant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historian’s work</td>
<td>Recover (i.e. discover) the past by being a vehicle for the writing of history</td>
<td>Mediate (i.e. interpret) past reality through social convention and ideological positioning</td>
<td>Represent (i.e. translate) past reality through the production of history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research metaphor</td>
<td>Forensic reconstruction</td>
<td>Detective investigation</td>
<td>Artistic painting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanatory logic</td>
<td>Discovery</td>
<td>Scientific research</td>
<td>Narrative making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Style of reasoning</td>
<td>Inductive</td>
<td>Deductive</td>
<td>Disclosive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal of history</td>
<td>Discover</td>
<td>Interpret</td>
<td>Represent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Output of historical work</td>
<td>Truthful History</td>
<td>Propositional History</td>
<td>Meaningful History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relation to social sciences</td>
<td>Distinct from Social Sciences – the raw material of history precludes the formulation of ‘theoretical constructs’</td>
<td>Affiliated with Social Sciences – research methods and hypothesis can help understand the past</td>
<td>Equivalent to Social Sciences – both enterprises develop literary practices that create the historical past</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Munslow (2006a, 2006b).
Our examination is not meant to be comprehensive. We did not intend to identify each institutional article dealing with issues of history and historicity. The goal was to identify specific papers that illustrate the different ontological approaches to historical knowledge. We do so to evaluate what distinguishes one from the other and to comment on possible advantages and disadvantages for the further development of research in organization and management studies. We chose ten articles as our main sample for developing this analysis. The papers were selected on the basis of the knowledge the researchers have about institutional theory and with the guidance of the works of Suddaby, Foster and Mills (2014) and Rowlinson and Hassard (2013). A list of the articles and their classification can be found in Table 15.2.

Interestingly all the articles we selected for further analysis were focused on some kind of institutional change, including major subjects such as institutional logics, institutional work, discourse, categories, identity, legitimacy, and power. Of the ten papers, only two dealt with levels of research other than the organizational field. Eight of the articles stated that they were based on the analysis of historical sources or were developed from some form of archival research. We found a widespread absence of a definition of history and there was little discussion about the possible problems that might occur when using historical sources in most of the papers.

We found that the reconstructivist ontological approach was most common in the papers we selected for our review. However the number of papers we slotted in each category did not vary widely. Nevertheless, a practical realist view of history was the dominant ontological position espoused in the papers analysed in our sample. This was not unexpected since practical realism tends to dominate the way organizational scholars understand and approach history in both business history and organization theory (Rowlinson & Delahaye, 2009; Weatherbee et al., 2012).

### Reconstructing history

The research that approaches history as a type of contextual information was classified as reconstructivist. These are the works generally classified as adopting an ahistorical view of organizational phenomena. They present what other scholars have called a “helicopter overview of the past” (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004: 335); this approach is a broad, straightforward and sterile view of the past. As Rowlinson and Hassard (2013) pointed out, there is a great, albeit invisible, problem in this common practice of offering general historical overviews of the phenomena to be studied, usually before the presentation of the methodological procedures used in the research. The exposition of a brief historical account has the role of providing an empirical
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contextualization of the theoretical problem under study so the reader can have a better understanding and an adequate interpretation of the phenomena and of the contributions generated by the research. The problem implicit in this kind of practice is that it does not do justice to the complexity of historical data and historical reality. History is conceived as an unproblematic and objective domain of reality and “historiography stands outside of methodological discussion … as if they are methodologically self-explanatory” (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2013: 119). The presentation of the ‘historical context’ is used as a literary device to contextualize the case at hand and create an elegant path to introduce the article’s theoretical problem. History in these cases is seen as unproblematic and inconsequential. It is reduced to a set of events that happened in the past that help us understand the actual present (Zald, 1996). If the events are still important today, and thus worthy of being mentioned, it is because their force can still be felt in the actuality of social structures and processes.

Reconstructivist research in institutional theory also uses history as a means of analysing events and things that happened in the past to understand how these events created lasting impressions in social and/or organizational situations. The assumption that is commonly shared in these studies is that significant events are the causes/reasons for present activities and behaviours. As well, these past events only exist in the past and in the traces that live on in the present. The task of institutional researcher is thus to understand how these things happened and to trace their effects on the present. This is the common understanding of the research on path theory and imprinting (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Schneiberg, 2007; Schreyögg, Sydow & Holtmann, 2011).

A good exemplar of this position in our small sample is the work of Rao, Monin, and Durand (2003). The authors developed a longitudinal (1970–97) analysis of the emergence of French nouvelle cuisine and the reconfiguration of institutional logics and role identities in the field of French gastronomy. In the paper, history was used as background to sociological analysis and to introduce the context of transformations to the reader. Their research was based on multiple sources of evidence, however, interestingly, the data and methods section come only after the historical narrative of the changes in French gastronomy. They did not mention having used any kind of ‘historical source’ other than the memory of the interviewees. Their practice suggests a very objectivist view of history and offers no place for the discussion on the role of the written history in reinforcing or maybe providing the answers to existing theoretical assumptions.

Constructing history

Some institutional research moves beyond a simplistic historical contextualization and a superficial account of the historicity of the phenomenon. In these cases the authors show an interest in using historical data to further develop social and organizational theories. One way this occurs is when the researcher develops a historical analysis based on primary data taken from archives and other sources from the past. Upon completion of the research a reconstructed history is used to test an existing theory. A second possibility is for the researcher to take an already existing historical narrative and use this as the main source of data for a research object. The alternative of generating their own historical account is generally a path not taken by researchers in organization studies, and some of the existing cases (e.g. Chandler Jr, 1984) raise the question about the historical veracity and accuracy of the historical account. The most common alternative is for organizational theorists to base their analysis on second-hand accounts developed by historians (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Zald, 1996), or to combine secondary accounts with some form of archival data.

The work of Rojas (2010) is a middle-ground position between the strict empiricism of non-theorized, descriptive reconstructivist history and a constructivist historical approach to organizational research. He analyzes different approaches to institutional work by focusing on
the case of the 1968 Third World Strike at San Francisco State College and his analysis shows
how the college president was able to convert normative resources at the individual level (e.g.
personal reputation and personal ties to political elites, and a personal network of allies sharing
worldviews) into coercive resources at the level of the organization, increasing his institutional
authority and his ability to counteract the actions of student activists.

Rojas seems to be well aware of the challenges in choosing to develop a historical case study,
and he states that he “consulted every known archival collection on the Third World Strike” (Rojas,
2010: 1268). The research used both primary data and secondary data. The secondary accounts were
used to triangulate the information found through the research on primary sources from archives,
newspaper accounts, and interviews. He took the care to look for multiple accounts or perspectives
about the event (outsiders, student and faculty groups, deans and faculty members, and governor’s
papers) and to attempt to capture the different perspectives of the multiple actors involved. These
procedures indicate his preference for first-hand accounts on the strike. Yet, after presenting a detailed
description of the data he collected there was no explanation of the methodological procedures used
to analyse the data. The historical interpretation of the evidence was enough to reconstruct the story
as it happened and to provide an illustration for the author's interest in discovering “how organiza-
tional fields affect the way actors transform authority” (Rojas, 2010: 1268).

The work of Wright and Zammuto (2013) provides an illustrative case of a practical realist
constructivist position on history. In this article, the authors attempted to understand the role of
different actors (marginalized, peripheral, and central) in multilevel institutional change based
on a longitudinal archival study of first-class County Cricket in England.1 The main difference
between this work and Rojas (2010) was the development of an in-depth content analysis of
the data gathered from the archives, which was interpreted as an attempt to merge historical
and social science research. The use of social science methods attached to the authors’ interest in
providing a truthful account of the past illustrate the espousal of a practical realist constructionist
view of history. For example, in two different places in the article the authors make specific ref-
erence to ‘the veracity’ of their interpretation and their criteria to be confirmed independently
by the archivist-historian that helped them in selecting the sources for their research.

Another article that adopts a constructivist position is the research by Arndt and Bigelow
(2005). Of the papers we analyzed, this paper is furthest removed from a strict empiricist mode of
knowledge collection, while still maintaining a constructionist position on history. The authors’
central problem was to understand “how a female occupation masculinizes” (Arndt & Bigelow,
2005: 235). They argued that much was known about the feminization of masculine professions,
but very little about the opposite situation. To analyze the boundary work developed by male
managers and professional associations on the masculinization of hospital administration, they
used both primary and secondary data. Their major source of data was a journal called Modern
Hospital, which, at the time, was considered an accurate representation of “the voice of the
American Hospital Association’s leadership” (Arndt & Bigelow, 2005: 238). Their analysis of the
data followed a qualitative interpretative inductive and deductive process, generating a chrono-
logical database of excerpts and the application of boundary work categories to the textual data.
Although they did not explore in detail the historical dimension of their case study they con-
clude their paper by arguing for a need to reclaim a “neglected history of women in hospital
administration” (Arndt & Bigelow, 2005: 255), by showing that the debates on the occupation’s
professionalization have generally overlooked gender implications. Presenting an argument that
would place them close to a new cultural history approach (Burke, 2004), they share an inter-
est in recovering stories and perspectives that “have been lost to history” (Arndt & Bigelow,
2005: 255). The notion of losing something to history suggests that it was still there in the past
to be recovered but has been forgotten in the present.
Deconstructing history

The deconstructivist ontological position is illustrated by Maguire and Hardy’s (2009) research on the deinstitutionalization of DDT. Their paper was the only one classified as a case of historical deconstructivism. The authors argue that the production, distribution, and consumption of texts are major forces behind the maintenance or change of an organizational field. They focus specifically on the role that problematization and translation play in outsider-driven deinstitutionalization processes. Their research was a single exploratory case study on the deinstitutionalization of DDT. They used a multitude of sources to develop their analysis, focusing on sets of texts associated with the cognitive, normative, and regulative dimensions of institutions. They collected data from both primary and secondary sources and created a narrative of the process through which practices of DDT use were deinstitutionalized. They do not provide a definition of history and do not analyze the case from a historical point of view although they are aware of the historical context of the production of the texts as a result of their discourse analysis. They do not discuss the sources as a historian would, but they did select them carefully and are able to expose the rationale behind it. Additionally, they recognize their own act of translation in the analysis when they say “although informed by systematic coding, this analysis was necessarily interpretive. In effect, it represents our translation of Carson’s problematizations and a simplification of the complex arguments in her book” (Maguire & Hardy, 2009: 174). At the end, even though they do not talk specifically about history, they recognize they are telling one possible history and not the history.

Overview

Our analysis has shown that instead of a generalized ahistorical view on management and organizations, the articles we selected for the analysis presented a more explicit or implicit understanding of history. For example, a more objectivist understanding of history was exemplified by Rao, Monin, and Durand’s (2003) longitudinal research. In their paper they approached history as a given and did not reference the background sources they used to reconstruct the historical context. In contrast, the deconstructivist view found in Maguire and Hardy’s (2009) discourse analysis of the deinstitutionalization of DDT explicitly recognized the interpreted nature of their account among many other possible ways of looking and narrating past events. Regardless, all the authors adopted an ontological view on the nature of the past and history, even though they might not have been completely aware of or would consciously agree with the position they were taking.

The data on our table show an apparent move away from reconstructionist positions in favour of more constructionist orientations of history. Although we cannot generalize from our small sample, this could suggest an increasing awareness of institutional researchers to historical issues and a willingness to incorporate archival research methods and other contributions from the field of history into their research. Even though the authors were generally not very clear about their ontological and epistemological assumptions regarding historical knowledge, we were still able to provide at least one illustration for each ontological position defined by Munslow (2006a). As expected, we found that most of the works we analyzed adopted a reconstructivist or constructionist position.

Our classification of institutional research into one of Munslow’s three ontological positions is not meant to be pejorative or didactic. As researchers we have our own ontological and epistemological positions that guide our ability to understand reality, even though we might not be fully aware of our assumptions and their implications. Adopting a reconstructivist,
constructionist, or deconstructionist perspective is a choice made by each researcher. To date, we believe that only a handful of scholars would be able to clearly appreciate and justify their ontological position on the nature of historical knowledge. We hope this chapter might provide some guidance for other management and organization scholars to reflect on these matters and more consciously adopt a position best aligned with his or her worldviews.

However, it should be noted that each approach to history implies an existing ‘consensus’ regarding the relationship between science and history. The reconstructivist approach sees the scientific and historical enterprises as distinct and, at best, complementary. The constructionist approach looks for the development of joint forms of research and hopes for a melding of historical and scientific research. The last perspective, deconstructionism, understands history and science as a narrative construction that is imbued with power, ideology and politics. Regardless of the approach, researchers should be attentive to the coherence of their philosophical assumptions and theoretical arguments.

Discussion

Throughout our chapter we have called for the need for greater ontological clarity in historical research. The superficial dichotomy between business history and organizational research has caused a tension between the members of both areas. We, however, feel that this tension can be minimized and eliminated if greater recognition is placed on the ontological approach of the researcher to problematize and call attention to their treatment of history in their research. As such, we have identified a number of contributions that we have made from our classification of different institutional theory research papers.

First, researchers must recognize that theoretical choices imply a commitment to a particular worldview and a particular way for it to be investigated. Our classification of research papers indicates that a possible shortcoming of espousing an empiricist view of history (i.e. of accepting history as an unproblematic set of events capable of being empirically discovered and ordered as they were supposed to have happened in the past), is that it causes an epistemological tension with some versions of institutional research. For example, to believe an objective view of historical reality would thus contradict the phenomenological and structuralist epistemologies that undergird the sociological branch of organizational neo-institutionalism. This inconsistency could undermine the conclusions drawn from research that does not identify and surface these contradictions.

Second, the choice of a historical approach or the development of historical accounts in organization studies needs to be reflexive. It will become increasingly difficult to draw on historical accounts when the only grounds of support are the professional status of the historians or the ‘official’ or ‘scholarly’ status of a given historical narrative. The choice of one version of the past over the other will have to be based on the conscious espousal of a view on the nature of history associated with a deeper analysis of historical texts and the purposes of its writing. The historical authority of the text or historian can no longer justify the use of history to inform scholarly research in organization studies; it will demand a proper justification by the social and organizational researcher.

Third, there is a need to recognize that the theoretical work of management and organizational researchers is itself a form of history. It is not only about ‘making’ history, but also about ‘doing’ history and ‘using’ it for its own purposes. Organizational researchers develop historical accounts about past organizational reality, and also use historical narratives about the past as evidence or as a laboratory for testing their own theories. But, often, their own research is also a valuable record of the past for future historical analysis of the theoretical development of the field and its influence on organizational practices. Also, at the same time, they privilege and endorse a specific
version of the past and provide a narrative on the present that could be used in the future to characterize and understand this period of time in the past.

Future directions

Our investigation and classification of existing research has led us to identify a number of ways that a variety of assumptions about the nature of history can be empirically investigated. The first possibility is an investigation of the rhetorical nature of historical accounts used in and by organizations and other important social actors (e.g. Foster et al., 2011; Suddaby, Foster & Trank, 2010). The current research on rhetorical history is focused on the production of history and the persuasive intent of history. New research in this area can further the current discussion about the content used to construct a persuasive history (e.g. Brunninge, 2009; Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) or how history is structured to be most persuasive and effective (e.g. Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Kroese & Keulen, 2013; Rowlinson & Hassard, 1993). Rhetorical research can also look at the different ways history is presented (Delahaye et al., 2009; Janssen, 2012) and how a particular medium or presentation of history can affect whether it is more or less persuasive and to whom. Approaching history from a rhetorical position will be a fruitful way to uncover how different ontological positions influence the production and construction of organizational history.

A second area of future investigation would focus on the professional work developed by historians and other history-telling professionals and institutions. This would include archives, museums, and libraries, but also the media, social networks, and websites on history. An approach that could prove useful in this investigation is ANTi-history. ANTi-historians argue that the production of history is the result of a network of multiple actors and their representations and performances of a given history in the present. Thus, the focus of research is on understanding the politics over the representation of the past in organizations (Weatherbee et al., 2012). Applying ANTi-history to the professional production of history in different institutional settings could help uncover and expose the different ontological positions of professional history producers and the implications that this has for the production and consumption of professionally constructed histories.

A third stream of research could look at the process of institutionalizing history, and how some historical accounts tend to be diffused, maintained, reproduced, and changed over time and their relation and implication to social issues and social dynamics. History in this case could be seen both as an important research object for management and organization studies, or as a major site or arena for the study of management and organizational phenomena. The work of Jones et al. (2012) presents a special case for this kind of research. They developed a study connecting institutional logics and categorization in order to understand the emergence of the category of ‘modern architecture’. Although they had a strong historical component in their research, they chose to develop a deep semiotic and network analysis of historical texts instead of dealing explicitly with the historical element of their research. The authors have a very interesting component of revisionist history that could be explored in more detail in a further publication. For instance, the article could be reframed as an analysis of the process of social construction of the history of ‘modern architecture’. Thus, by being more attentive to the role of history, the authors might be able to bring an even greater contribution to the field.

Conclusion

In this chapter we argued that the lack of debate and problematization of history in management and organization studies is not the result of an informed and conscious choice of researchers or a
necessary consequence of producing knowledge inside of a scientific paradigm. The derogation of history in the field can be better understood as a result of taken-for-granted practical realist assumptions about the nature of historical reality generally shared by organizational researchers. Organization scholars tend to see the past as an unproblematic dimension of human inquiry. They generally accept the verisimilitude of historical knowledge as the historical truth. And they usually regard the task of recovering the past as belonging to the domain of an autonomous field of knowledge. History and historians remain responsible for reconstructing the past as it once was through a skilful analysis of the remaining traces of past reality or historical sources. In the end, the narrative on the past produced by the historian would then serve as raw data for the testing of social theories.

As an alternative to this dominant reconstructionist view on the nature of historical reality, we introduced two other approaches to historical knowledge. We argued that history does not need to be seen as the truthful reconstruction of the past through inductive work, but can also be understood as the result of a deductive process that constructs the past based on a set of inquiries directed to the sources. A third possibility relies in an attempt at deconstructing history by exposing the structures of its narrative reality and disclosing a multiplicity of possible existing pasts.

Our discussion of the different possibilities for understanding historical reality is intended to increase the awareness of organizational researchers about different ways of knowing the past. We also wanted to provide researchers with some tools to help create a reflective account and an informed position about history in organizations. By presenting these different varieties of historical understanding we contribute to the enrichment of management and organization studies. Furthermore, we call for the development of research on organizations to be more sensitive to issues of history, historical theory and the epistemology of history.

**Note**

1 It is also worth noting their use of footnotes in their research. These were exhibited in the Appendix of the article and speak to an old – but always present – criticism on the organization scholars’ derogation of historical sources debate (Rowlinson, 2004; Rowlinson & Hassard, 2013).

**References**


