Part VI

Commentaries on the future of management and organizational history: does it have a past?
Processing history
Bringing process-oriented research to management and organizational history

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Introduction

Management and organizational history (MOH) is a growing area of research. This is evidenced by the growing number of new outlets for historical research on organizations. One example is the development of *Management & Organizational History* as a leading journal for research about history in organizational studies. Another has been growth in the number of meetings and conferences (e.g. the Standing Working Group at the European Group for Organizational Studies, the Business History stream at the Atlantic Schools of Business) for research that straddles the boundary of history and organization theory. There is a growing awareness that MOH research has a reach and influence that cuts across the paradigmatic boundaries and silos of traditional management theory. The Special Topics Forum for the *Academy of Management Review* is but one of a number of examples of how MOH is reaching a level of recognition as a growing and influential part of management research.

That said, there are still unexplored opportunities and possibilities for MOH research. Recent work on organizational memory (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2010; Schultz and Hernes, 2013), rhetorical history (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Foster *et al.*, 2011; McGaughey, 2012; Suddaby, Foster and Trank, 2010), and ANTi-History (Durepos and Mills, 2012) demonstrate the breadth and creativity of research that integrates history and institutional theory, critical theory, identity theory, and related organizational disciplines. There is increasing cross-fertilization of ideas from other scholarly areas such as historical sociology (Schneiberg, 2007), literary and narrative research (Delahaye *et al.* 2009; Kroeze and Keulen, 2012; Wertsch, 2004), and gender studies (Aaltio-Marjosola and Mills, 2002). This offers a clear indication that MOH is poised to produce emerging and interesting ideas about management and organizations.

So where do we go from here? The growth of the field and the creative impetus of the branches of MOH that combine disciplinary interests suggests that there is much more intellectual terrain to be explored using a historical lens. One of the most promising of these is process research (Langley, 1999). It is somewhat surprising that historically trained management researchers, as attentive as they are to historical processes, do not explicitly recognize process as an explicit theoretical lens within which we can analyze organizations.
We see two ways that process can be brought to the MOH discussion. One is to investigate process management in historical settings. **Historical process research** addresses how the processes of management and in organizations have changed over time. The second is to look at the processes involved in constructing and presenting a coherent organizational history. **Research of historical processes** would be directed at understanding how the different elements of the organization work together to produce a specific version of its history. We feel that this focus on process in MOH will open new avenues of research for inclusion into the current discussions of MOH.

What follows is our argument for why MOH researchers should be more attentive to process as an explicit variable in historical research. We begin by mapping the intellectual terrain of MOH research. We use this as a springboard for a discussion of where we think the field can and should go. Next, we discuss how process research can be used to enhance the descriptive and explanatory power of MOH research while limiting some of its major points of contention. In closing, we identify and elaborate areas of research where we see new and exciting opportunities. These include organizational work, identity and identification, entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship, and memory and remembering. In this penultimate section we will posit new questions and explore how a focus on historical process research and research of historical processes can lead to new and different understandings of management and organizational research.

**Mapping the field – where have we been?**

Management and organizational history lacks a unified and coherent voice (Booth and Rowlinson, 2006; Üsdiken and Kieser, 2004). The diversity of approaches makes MOH a vibrant and lively area for study. Yet, at the same time, it creates tension and conflict about what history is and the place it has in organizations. To understand where the field can go, we must understand where it has come from. So we start with a brief overview of the evolution of fragmented voices in organizational history. This brief and broad review is not meant to be exhaustive but merely illustrative of the variety of ways that history is approached in management and organizations.

**History as fact**

Perhaps the dominant perspective understands history in organizations as objective and factual. Research in this vein explores what happened in the organization and explains how and why this happened. The events from the past offer lessons that can be learned. The idea is that we can understand present management and organization situations by looking backward. Thus, managerial decisions about policy, strategy, staffing, and other organizational actions are to be viewed in the light of the past and past experiences. Historical case studies (Chandler, 1962), oral histories, and the stories of great business leaders of the past (Barnard, 1938) are representative of history done in this way.

With the call for a historical turn in MOH, most research has moved beyond a simple, factual account of an organization’s past. Yet the historical baby shouldn’t be thrown out with the bathwater of the past. We see an important place for historical case studies and research grounded in strong archival and empirical historical work.

**History as data**

In many cases, history in organizational and management research is equated with longitudinal research and some scholars have deemed the collection of data over significant periods of time as history. In some ways this is the most accepted and acceptable form of historical research for
organizational scholars and journals. The best examples of this are studies of population ecology (Hannan and Freeman, 1977, 1984, 1989), path dependence (Arthur, 1994; David, 1986; Stinchcombe, 1965; Sydow, Schreyogg and Koch, 2009), and neo-institutional theory (Baum and Haveman, 1997; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991 [1983]). In these studies the past is a variable that affects the organization and what the firm can or cannot do. The history of the organization is something that is to be controlled for and measured.

Furthermore, history is also explained as a factor that constrains or enables the organization (Oliver, 1997). Some organizations are rich in history while others are saddled with an unfortunate past (Barney, 1986). A rich history is to be valued and embraced, while an unfortunate history can be limiting and, often, destructive. When history is equated with data, managers are limited in their actions and the choices they can make. The organization and the management of it is the product of circumstances and these are unchanging.

**History as a tool**

A third way that MOH scholars have looked at history is as a tool. This approach is different from the two above approaches in that history, when looked at as a tool, is not conceived of as a variable or as a fact. History is a malleable construct that is to be built and employed in the service of achieving organizational goals (Brunninge, 2009; Ericson, 2006; Foster et al., 2011; Gioia, Corley, and Fabbri, 2002; Ooi, 2002). History is developed and discussed to accomplish things in organizations. The facts of history are irrelevant and are inconsequential in the hands of a skillful manager who can identify the meaningful elements of history when connected to an organization. This approach to history is grounded in the idea that history is a rhetorical device that can be used strategically to persuade organizational stakeholders (Suddaby, Foster, and Trank, 2010). When it is recognized that history is not the actual set of events that once occurred but a reconstruction of the past for present use and present goals, it becomes another strategic tool that managers can use to lead a company into the future.

This area of research is still developing and new ways of understanding history as a tool are still to be developed. Yet, there are limits to seeing history as a tool. In particular, it is still unclear how organizations construct a particular version of history that conveys the same message to different groups at different times. The assumption is that history can be constructed, presented, and interpreted in the way that the manager chooses. Often this can and does happen; however, there are times where the organization's version of events is not accepted. There are numerous cases where an organization presents their history only to find it has been reinterpreted and, in some cases, hijacked. Moreover, a history as tool perspective is open to criticism as being overly managerial and focused too much on what the manager can control versus what the employees and other stakeholders think of the company's history. History may be used as a tool, but it is not always the case that it will be appropriate for the specific job at hand.

**History as power**

Closely related to the history as tool perspective is the view that history is the product of power relations (Clegg, 1989; Foucault, 1972, 1979; Hardy and Clegg, 1996; Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993). MOH research from this perspective investigates how history is presented and is constructed to advantage those who are in power. Also of concern is the issue of who makes the rules, how they create the organizational values, and how this helps these groups retain power. Drawing on neo-historical studies and critical management, history is viewed not as fact or data but as a site of contestation and control.
It is in and through history that managers can construct particular images of their organization, which are then taken for granted. The role of the researcher is to understand how power has been used to create a particular image or view of the organization’s past and how this reinforces and allows for the continuation of existing power arrangements. Managers have control over the artifacts of the past and how these are understood. What is important is that power relations, their unequal distribution and how these have been hidden in historical arrangements, are uncovered and identified.

**Bringing process research to MOH**

*Research of historical processes*

One way to bring process research to MOH is to investigate the way that history develops in organizations and through management actions. The emphasis is not on the facts of history or on how history is used or who is using it. The focus is on the processes involved with creating and using organizational history. This shift is away from the past or history as a thing or as an arrangement of power structures, although research of historical processes does not preclude or exclude these discussions. The study of the historical processes is concerned with the different interactions and mechanisms that occur at the different stages in the development of a specific historical conception of an organization.

One way this research can be manifested is by researching how managers influence historical processes. Because organizational history is a social construction it is important to recognize the influence that managers have on its production. Yet, what is not known is when and where managers have influence over the construction and presentation of an organization’s history. The common debate is the degree of influence that managers have on producing the organization’s history. What is missing from the MOH literature is a study of how managers influence historical processes and whether there are specific places or times that make their influence more salient and consequential.

A process approach to history also avoids talking about whether events happened and if they were ‘right.’ The investigation of how history is developed and managed in organizations addresses how organizational actions and decisions conspire, deliberately or unintentionally, to produce the organization’s history in the present. This type of historical research also analyzes how and why some histories have greater impact and persuasiveness than do others. The ties to national symbols and collective memories tend to become more influential and effective than histories that are specific and local. Research about how these histories develop and how they are constructed can possibly uncover what makes these ‘national’ histories more important and useful than other histories.

*Historical process research*

Another way for process to be brought to MOH is to look to the past with an eye toward how processes have changed over time. The focus for this type of research is on how organizations operated or managed in the past and how this compares to what occurs today. Unlike research that explores past organizational and management practices to glean lessons about how to manage in the present, historical process research is interested in comparing practices and determining what processes have changed (if any) and why these processes have been altered. In other words, the unit of analysis of historical process research is the change in processes over time and what this tells us about management and organizations.
An area where this research has particular applicability is in the study of rituals and how these have changed. Rituals, traditions, ceremonies, and other forms of memorializing are taken-for-granted processes in organizations. However, little research has questioned how these change or stay the same (Dacin, Munir, and Tracey, 2010 being a notable exception). A common expectation is that many of these historically grounded activities remain static and rigid which can be problematic to an organization. Yet, there are also other examples where historical processes evolve and are changed to accommodate the needs and aspirations of the current organization. What we currently do not know is the degree of change that is acceptable to make to these rituals within organizations. We also are not clear about how changes to longstanding traditions and celebrations are initiated and maintained. Further research of historical organizational processes will help expand how we understand historically ground processes and how these processes change over time.

Applying process research to MOH

Our call for more process-oriented research in MOH is relevant to a number of different areas of organizational research. Below we offer a brief examination of where and how historical process research and the research of the historical process can be studied.

Organizational work

Organizational work explores micro-processual actions that actors take within their organizations. This area of investigation is common in institutional theory (Lawrence, Suddaby, and Lea, 2009; Lawrence and Suddaby, 2006; Zietsma and Lawrence, 2010) and identity theory (Beech, McIntosh, and McInnes, 2008; Bruijn and Whiteman, 2010; Creed, Dejordy, and Lok, 2011). From a MOH perspective, there is a great opportunity to explore the different ways that organizational members and managers create, maintain, and disrupt the various presentations and understandings of an organization's history. For example, an interesting question revolves around questions of maintaining (Balmer, 2011; Trank and Washington, 2009) and enduring (Anteby and Molnar, 2012). How do certain conceptions of an organization (e.g. values, traditions) persist throughout the existence of the organization while others are forgotten and cast asunder? Many organizations point to their history as a defining or unifying feature of their organization. Nevertheless, how does this history continue and persist?

To investigate these questions one could look at the historical 'work' that individuals have to do to ensure that one version of the organization’s history continues. Thus, questions that could be asked include: What different steps occurred in order for the organization to endure? What were the mechanisms that were involved in constructing a particular version of the organization and its history? What actions and factors interact or impact the maintaining or the dissolution of an organization and its history? Bringing history to organizational work explores the micro-foundations of history and how these contribute to the continuation and persistence of specific historical narratives within an organization.

Similarly, we can ask whether work changes over time. A tacit assumption in the work literature is that the practices of creating, maintaining, and disrupting are invariant. In other words, are organizations, institutions, and identities maintained using similar processes as they were in the past? We are not clear if work has evolved or stayed the same over time. Moreover, what does this tell us about the nature of creating, maintaining, and disrupting if these aspects of work have/have not changed? An exploration and study of past conceptions of work might lead to new insight about creating, maintaining, and disrupting in various organizational contexts.
Identification and identifying

Organizational identity has close ties to organizational history (Kieser, 1994; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). A firm’s history and how it is presented is an important factor in strengthening an organization’s identity. What is less investigated is the connection between an organization’s history and the process of identifying with an organization. Questions can be asked about how a particular organizational history attracts individuals to an organization and how a specific history facilitates identifying. For example, are there particular aspects of an organization’s history that make it more or less likely that members will identify with the organization? As well, Elsbach (1999) has categorized different types of organizational identification. What also could be investigated is how these different types of identification are related to a firm’s history and how historical processes can lead to one of the types of identification.

Questions can also be asked about how a firm’s history is complicit in the process of building and enhancing identification of existing organizational members. Are there particular historical events that when drawn upon or emphasized create highly identified members? We can also ask if the way members identify with the organization has changed and whether strong bonds amongst individuals and organizations persist and continue. Finally, what are the different processes that both organizations and individuals have to engage in to continue identifying with an organization and how does the managerial presentation of history impact this process?

Entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship

Another area that could benefit from a historical process-oriented approach is entrepreneurship. A great many historical studies have attended to the actions and backgrounds of the individual entrepreneurs. These studies paint an interesting picture of who it is that becomes an entrepreneur. Nevertheless, what isn’t as clear is how these individuals identified and cultivated the different opportunities that they then turned into successful ventures. A historical process study of entrepreneurs would lead to new insight about the ways that entrepreneurs identified their opportunities and the different steps that pushed them to make certain decisions about their organizations (e.g. Hargadon, and Douglas 2001). Moreover, comparing how early entrepreneurs identified their opportunities to how it is done by entrepreneurs today could provide more insight into how entrepreneurs identify and capitalize on new ventures.

Similarly, a historical focus on entrepreneurship could also be a fruitful avenue for research. Instead of addressing the traits or characteristics of the person who created the venture and the processes involved with the development of the business, historical process research could explore the discipline of entrepreneurship and how it operates as a whole. It is entirely possible that entrepreneurship has remained relatively static and that entrepreneurial processes from the early 1900s are the same as they are today. A comparison of how different processes involved in creating a business have changed could also offer new insights into what is considered entrepreneurship and the mechanisms involved with business creation.

Finally, the role of history in new ventures is an important and understudied aspect of entrepreneurship. A strong culture is an important part of building cohesive and highly productive organization and the history of an organization is one component of a strong culture. Yet, new ventures are devoid of history and it is not clear how new organizations manage this history deficit. There are anecdotal stories about how high tech companies deliberately worked in garages to supplement their history and to create historical events from which to base future organizational narratives. It is less clear if all new companies and new ventures need to create histories and what needs to be done to ensure that these are credible and authentic renditions of past events.
Studying the processes of building a history for and in new ventures could be an interesting opportunity to examine and debate what qualifies as an organizational history and how these new histories are managed.

**Memory and remembering**

The study of organizational history and organizational memory are two established streams of thought. However, there is very little cross-fertilization of these ideas in the MOH literature. Most organizational memory studies, with some notable exceptions (Anteby and Molnar, 2012; Rowlinson et al., 2010; Schultz and Hernes, 2013), focus on the storage and retrieval of facts. Management and organizational history is interested in the appearance of the past in organizations and the impact this has on organizational stakeholders. What is missing is a conversation of how memory, and what is remembered, informs MOH and how organizational history works to focus memory and organizational remembering (e.g. Nora, 1989). Memory is grounded in the past and remembering is an historical process. The exploration of how historical processes interact with organizational memory and remembering could lead to new insight about how organizations remember and what it is that is being remembered and by whom. As well, an exploration of how events and people are remembered differently could also expand our understanding of what it means to remember and how it is related to MOH.

**Conclusion**

In our discussion we have identified a number of ways that history appears in management and organizational discussions. Each of these different perspectives contributes to our understanding about what role history has for organizations and managers. A history as fact view emphasizes the importance of learning from past lessons and engaging in empirical work to help answer difficult questions. A history as data approach suggests that history is an important variable that can and does significantly impact organizational actions and decisions. Approaching history as a tool suggests that managers can control and shape their histories to create optimal strategic outcomes. Finally, history as power emphasizes that history and the presentation of history is not neutral and is the product of different power relations.

Our suggestion, a stronger emphasis on process research, is meant to augment and not supplant other approaches to MOH. In fact, we hope that our suggestion will help to stimulate more research in all the areas we have identified. A process-oriented approach to MOH will, in our view, enhance and expand how history is studied and understood by management and in organizations. We have identified four specific sites where we anticipate historical process research could be of great value. However, we anticipate that there are other areas of research that are equally ripe for investigation from a historical process approach.

In closing, our goal has been to encourage new conversations and to advocate for another approach to MOH studies. We hope that our commentary has piqued the interest of the MOH community and others because we see historical process research and the research of historical processes as a journey and not just a destination or foreign land.

**References**


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