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IN PRAISE OF FRAGMENTATION IN HISTORICAL ORGANIZATION STUDIES

There is a rise in history research in management and organization studies. This is parallel by a rise in various communities of scholars doing history. This has led to field level fragmentation. The paper explores five motivations for doing history research that can unite otherwise divergent communities of history researchers. The objective of the paper is to suggest that a healthy fragmentation can only exist alongside an ethic of pluralistic understanding.

Introduction

There has been a rise of history research in management and organization studies (MOS) in the past 20 years (Mills, Suddaby, Foster & Durepos, 2016). Maclean, Harvey and Clegg (2016: 3) call the emerging field “historical organization studies” and describe it “as organizational research that draws extensively on historical data, methods and knowledge, embedding organizing and organizations in their socio-historical context to generate historically informed theoretical narratives attentive to both” history and MOS. The rise of history research in MOS has been accompanied by the rise and development of a diversity of historically minded communities of scholars who draw, to varying degrees, from the fields of history and MOS. The central argument of this paper is that the *diversity* of scholarly communities and their respective history research agendas is healthy and should be encouraged. This opinion is based on the notion that despite the philosophical differences that inform *how* history research is undertaken, communities share motivations that inform *why* they do history research. In this paper, I provide reasons why fragmentation in historical organization studies is good and why it should be promoted. A central aim of the paper is to caution that a healthy fragmentation can only be fostered alongside the emergence of a shared ethic of “pluralistic understanding” (Maclean, Harvey & Clegg, 2016: 2).

In light of the above, the paper and argument runs as follows. First, I take stock of the proliferation of history research in MOS. Second, I outline five motivations for doing history research and give empirical examples. Third, I describe and promote an ethic informed by *pluralistic understanding*.

Proliferation of History Research in Management and Organization Studies

There is no doubt that history research in MOS has increased over the last 20 years (Mills, Suddaby, Foster & Durepos, 2016). This is evident in both the launch of the journal *Management & Organizational History* and the re-launch of the *Journal of Management History* in 2006. Though these specialist journals have ensured a home for history research, it has spilled beyond these venues into generalist management journals, most notably through history themed special issues (Carol, 2002; O’Sullivan, Graham & McKenna, 2010; Godfrey, Hassard, O’Connor, Rowlinson & Ruef, 2014; Rowlinson, Casey, Hansen & Mills, 2014). Other important outcomes of the momentum for more history are edited collections dedicated to capturing various theoretical and methodological debates about how to

best engage in the craft of transforming the past as history (Genoe McLaren, Mills & Weatherbee, 2015; Bucheli & Wadhvani, 2014).

The proliferation of history research in MOS has come with a (less documented) rise in various communities of scholars engaged in the craft. These communities inform history research with different methods and theory conventions (Suddaby, 2016). Due to varied philosophical assumptions, each ascribes different meanings to words like *past*, *history* and *historiography*.

Based on this, the current condition of historical organization studies can be characterised as *field level fragmentation*. I use this term to suggest a research area characterised by multiple communities of scholars who pursue their craft in divergent ways. In conditions of field fragmentation, commensurability (understanding) is possible but convergence might not necessarily be desired.

The field's fragmentation is evident in reading management history journal articles (see for example, the exchange between Taylor, Bell & Cooke, 2009 and Toms & Wilson, 2010). Though an extensive literature review covering the span of history research in MOS over the past 20 years would surely reveal the extent of the fragmentation, it is also evident in other venues like academic conferences. Participation at conferences including the history stream at the Critical Management Studies Conference, the Management History and the Critical Management Studies divisions of the Academy of Management, the Management History Research Group as well as the history stream of the European Group for Organization Studies over the past five years provides a window into the emergence and interactions of the various communities. While the intent of this paper is not to factually capture, document and compare the defining characteristics of the various history research communities, some examples are necessary to illustrate the point. The flavours of history now in currency include critical management history, management history of the Academy of Management, economic history, labour history, business history, management and organization history, and the list continues.

The various communities reveal their identities, virtues and philosophical differences in a number of ways. At conferences, aspects of scholar identities are revealed in simple exchanges like introductions ('My name is ___ and I'm a trained historian'), paper presentations as well professional development workshops. Conversations about methods, the use of archives, the use and development of theory, and what kind of contribution 'management history' articles should make (empirical, theoretical, both?) are rampant and animated. Strong opinions are expressed concerning appropriate venues in which to publish management history articles, as well as value judgements about respective referencing style (extensive footnotes or in-text citations).

Points of convergence and divergence between communities are revealed through these debates. There is uncertainty about whether the debate impedes bridge building across communities or propels it. What is certain is the extent to which the debate illustrates the field level fragmentation characteristic of historical organization studies. This is cause for reflection. What does it mean for historical organization studies to be fragmented? Is this a productive or self-defeating condition? Is this characteristic of an immature discipline that will reach maturity when homogeneity is achieved? Will we eventually measure the level of maturity of the field of historical organization studies by its ability to have achieved commensurability? Can and should communities of scholars put aside their philosophical differences for the sake of convergence and knowledge building? Despite these questions, an engagement with the literature in historical organization studies reveals shared motivations for doing history research. As a result, there may be enough commonality to foster mutual and respectful understanding among communities.

Motivations for Doing History Research

In this section, I summarize what I believe are shared motivations for engaging in history research followed by respective examples of published history research. This summary is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be. It is instead to stress that despite the fragmentation that is characteristic of historical organization studies, there is seemingly convergence in the motivations that inform the craft.

History as a vehicle for critique

Some have argued that the potential of *history to engender critique* motivated the early appeals for more history in administration science by Zald (1991, 1993, 1996), Kieser (1994) and Jacques (1996). Indeed the potential of history to engender critique was central to calls for an historic turn a decade later (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004; Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004; Rowlinson, Stager Jacques & Booth, 2009). This motivation fuels much of the history work undertaken by critical management studies scholars (see for example, the 2015 CMS history stream call co-convened by Cooke, Mills, Mollan, & Durepos).

Fulfilling the agenda of history as a vehicle for critique is achieved in a number of ways. For example, history research can be undertaken to de-naturalise hegemonic organizations by revealing alternative and problematic pasts (Mills, 1995; Rowlinson, 2002; Booth, Clark, Delahaye, Procter & Rowlinson, 2007). Another form of de-naturalization has targeted dominant historiography that seek establish singular truths of the past. De-naturalization is pursued through developing alternative historiographies that expose history as subject to politics and thus, always multiple (Durepos, 2015; Durepos & Mills, in press). These histories are usually anti-performative in that they problematize narrow equations that promote one sole purpose of history: an engagement with the past only if it can yield solutions / lessons learned to maximize firm productivity and efficiency in the future. The narrow equation is destabilized by research that introduces other purposes for doing history like narrating and storytelling (Mills & Helms Mills, 2013; Rowlinson, 2004). Another hallmark of critical management research is reflexivity (Fournier & Grey, 2000). Many critical management histories provide reflexive accounts of the how the past becomes shaped as history. One way the agenda of reflexivity has been achieved has been to write (as part of the narrative) how the historians' choice of archival traces, and mode of telling the story, thus their choice of emplotment (White, 1973, 1985) shape the resulting history. Indeed these histories expose the historian as central to the molding of history.

History of an intellectual discipline or academic field

Another motivation that informs management history researcher is a desire to document or reassemble the history of ideas, the past of an academic discipline or/and an intellectual field. The sub-discipline of MOS called *the History of Management Thought* or the *History of Organization Theory* is dedicated to tracing management thinking, ideas and theorizing over time. Contributions to this field are plentiful and vary in at least four ways.

First, they vary in temporal scope. Some histories of management thought cover broad time periods (George, 1968, 1972; Harding, 2003; Litterer, 1959; Mee, 1959; Pollard, 1974, 1978; Urwick & Brech, 1944; Witzel, 2012; Wren, 1972, 2005; Wren & Bedian, 2010; Wren & Boyd, 1997). Others are considerably narrower in scope and cover one period, event or school of thought like the Human Relations School (Bruce & Nyland, 2011; O'Connor, 1999a, 1999b), the Hawthorne Studies (Hassard, 2012) or management in the Cold War era (Kelley, Mills & Cooke, 2006).

Second, there is variance in the scope of content covered. Some contributions to the history of management thought seek to capture, in a broad way, the many theorists and theories that have come to constitute the academic discipline of management over time (George, 1968, Witzel, 2012; Wren, 1972, 2005). Wren's (2005) work, for example, begins with a focus on management before industrialization and ends with a chapter on the globalization of business and opportunities for managing across cultures. In a similar vein, Witzel (2012) covers an impressively wide span of time in his history of management thought. He begins with the Bronze Age (civilization builders of Egypt, Mesopotamia, China, India, Greece and Rome) and ends with the Internet Age. Others adopt a mid level focus and feature the past of a sub-discipline. Khurana's (2007) study of the rise of American Business Schools is an example. Another example is Wadhwani's (2010) book chapter that highlights the development of entrepreneurship theory. Finally, others focus more narrowly on one theorist/theory to assess its transformation over time. Examples include research on Max Weber (Durepos, Mills & Weatherbee, 2012; Mills, Weatherbee & Durepos, 2014), Peter Drucker (Genoe McLaren, Mills & Durepos, 2009), Abraham Maslow (Dye, Mills & Weatherbee, 2005; Cooke, Mills & Kelley, 2005; Cooke & Mills, 2008) and Kurt Lewin (Burnes & Cooke, 2013).

Third, the goals of the research vary. Some researchers trace the history of management thought to debunk knowledge that has become taken for granted or introduce an alternative to the dominant narrative (Foster, Mills & Weatherbee, 2014; Jacques & Durepos, 2015; Mills, Weatherbee, Foster & Helms Mills, 2015; Marens, 2015). Others trace the history of management thought to introduce new theorists, theories and knowledge that contributes to the historiography of management thought (Wanderley & Faria, 2012; Genoe McLaren & Mills, 2015). Still others try to capture the past of a discipline in a factual manner (Wren, 1972, 2005; Witzel, 2012).

Fourth, the histories of management thought are approached from a variety of philosophical lenses. Some adopt an ontological realist lens and document the past as a series of causal facts (Wren, 2005; Witzel, 2012). Others engender a history of management thought that is critical of mainstream history for its silences, omissions, absences and marginalization. Interpretive or social constructivist histories of management thought seek to show the socially constructed nature of facts and emphasize the need for contextually sensitive history (Shenhav & Weitz, 2000). Postmodern histories are critical of hegemonic Western narratives that privilege efficiency and rationality, and unproblematically adopt a progressive mode of emplotment where later events are illustrated as marked improvements of those prior (Jacques & Durepos, 2015). Postcolonial histories explore the geopolitics of knowledge creation, thus the processes through which knowledge is produced around the north / south divide. Postcolonial histories question who produces the knowledge, for whom it is produced and who is privileged in the accounts (Cooke, 1999; Ibarra-Colado, 2006).

History to build or develop construct/concept clarity in an academic field

Historical research plays a fundamental role in developing construct/concept clarity. As a result, achieving concept clarity is another motivation for doing history research. While positivist scholars prefer the term *construct* clarity, constructivists are more attuned to the notion of *concept* clarity and here I use *concept clarity* to imply both. As Suddaby (2010: 346) notes, concepts are "phenomena that cannot be directly observed" they are "abstract statements of categories." Developing clear concepts is fundamental to building propositions, which outline the relationship between concepts (Zikmund, 2003). It is key to developing theory, which is made of combinations of propositions that explain the relationship between observed phenomena. In general, concept clarity is fundamental to knowledge building from any epistemological lens. Ensuring the clarity of concepts is crucial for providing a common language in a

research community to facilitate communication, assist in empirical analysis as well as enhance the creativity of research.

Suddaby (2010) discusses elements that are important to ensuring concept clarity. These include crafting clear definitions, delineating scope conditions, and outlining the relationship between constructs. Historical analysis is fundamental to each element. For example, Suddaby (2010: 348) suggests that to arrive at clear definitions the researcher must first show earlier uses of the term and also “illustrate, as exhaustively as possible, prior variation in how the term has been used.” Clear definitions emerge from careful etymologies, of which historical analysis is central. Another example is delineating scope conditions, which implies outlining under which conditions the proposed concept, with its suggested constitution, adheres. Types of scope conditions that are of concern to theorists include space, values and time. Ensuring the scope condition of time means assessing in which temporal context a concept assumes plausibility or accuracy. Ensuring temporal scope conditions is only possible through an engagement with the past. A final example is outlining the relationship between constructs. The latter is done by demonstrating the “historical lineage of a new construct” and positioning that concept in the web of “extant related constructs” (Suddaby, 2010: 350). Historical analysis is central to ensuring each of the building blocks of concept clarity are laid, therefore it is central to developing concept clarity.

There are many examples of historical research in management and organization studies intended to shed light on contemporary MOS concepts. Mills (1995) sheds light on mundane reproduction of discrimination (racism, gender discrimination) in organizations through a historical case study of image making at British Airways. Though Mills (1995) is less explicit that the goal of his paper to develop ‘concept clarity’ of workplace discrimination, the study contributes largely to what is workplace discrimination and how it is perpetuated at work. Another book length study that contributes to our understanding of a concept central to workplaces today is Jacques (1996) postmodern history of the notion of the employee. By providing an alternative history, the study adds clarity to how we make sense of the notion of the employee today. Lastly, Rowlinson and Hassard (1993) shed light on the notion of corporate culture by tracing a history of the histories of Cadbury.

Business and organizational history

Histories that fall within this umbrella carry an assortment of labels including, organizational history, business history and company history. This type of research involves the “systematic study of [the past of] individual firms on the basis of their business records” (Rowlinson, 2004: 301). It also includes research on “the ways in which companies manage and represent their pasts” (Rowlinson, Cark, Delahaye, Booth & Procter, 2008: 339). This research is sometimes written by academics and other times authored by commissioned historians or corporate sponsors. A point of concern for business and organizational historians is *access*. The type of access one has to the company documents has tremendous consequences for the type of history one can write. While access to some archives (documents that have been organized and catalogued by an archivist) or collections (the files a firm has saved and which are usually scattered in the company building) are restricted, other times it is open to the public therefore unrestricted.

Some organizational records are housed in archives open to the public and therefore access is granted after the management historian writes the archivist for permission or upon registration with the archive front desk. Access in these archives is unrestricted and the consequent organizational histories are also unrestricted. Recent research on the history of Pan American Airways, which relies on materials collected at the *Otto Richter Library* at the *University of Miami* provide fruitful examples (Durepos, Helms Mills, & Mills, 2008; Durepos & Mills, 2012a; Hartt, Mills, Helms Mills, & Durepos, 2009). A

history of Air Canada provides another illustration of the point (Hartt, Mills, Helms Mills, & Corrigan, 2014). The archives on which the history relies include *The Aviation and Space Museum*, and *Library and Archives Canada*, both of which are considered public archives. In each instance, authors used materials from the archive and wrote unrestrictive histories.

In other times, the documents are housed in a private or semi-private archive or collection where permission for access must be sought. This can have consequences for the type of history written. In this situation, the firm usually reserves the right to vet the resulting history. But on rare occasions, the firm can grant the researcher unrestricted use of the company documents. Rowlinson (1988, 2004) for example had unrestricted access to the Cadbury's document collection. In my own research on a history the Nova Scotia Museums, I was given unlimited access to a wide range of files and documents. I collected data under this agreement over a five-year period. Another example is Mills' (2006, 1995, 1994) research on the history of British Airways. Mills (personal communication) recounts the friendships made with archivists who helped with data collection and the subsequent friendships broken after he published his un-vetted history, which exposed problematic pasts of the airline.

Still in other instances, it is the organization that desires a company history. The firm either produces one in-house, hires a writer or history consulting firm (for example, The History Factory, History Associates Incorporated). These founder-funded histories are commissioned projects and though access is unrestricted, it is customary for those who commission it to vet the final project. Examples include Robert Daley's (1980) founder funded history of Pan American Airways, Robert Slater's (1998) history of Jack Welsh and General Electric, Ron Joyce and Robert Thompson's (2005) story of Tim Hortons and Walter Isaacson (2011) story of Steve Jobs.

Undertaking historical research to develop theory about the craft of history

In the inaugural issue of *Management and Organizational History*, Booth and Rowlinson (2006: 5) called for "alternative methods and diverse styles of writing appropriate for studying organizations historically." This signalled the need to develop unique and innovative theory and methods for an emerging field with roots in both history and MOS. Many have responded to this call by developing theories that can accommodate research at the intersection of two fields with different conventions. Four examples include ANTi-History, rhetorical history, genealogical pragmatism and organizational legacy.

ANTi-History, developed by Durepos and Mills (2012a, 2012b, in press), draws on three literatures, namely, the sociology of knowledge (Mannheim, 1985), postmodern historiography (Jenkins, 1991; Munslow, 2012) and actor-network theory (Latour, 2005). It is an alterative approach to history that looks at the socio-political processes through which the past is transformed as history. To this end, ANTi-History involves mapping actor trials (attempts to make sense of the past) and the trails they leave in doing so, over time. The emphasis is on tracing the tactics of actors who capture the interest of others and transform their view of the past to match that of their own. ANTi-History also probes the ontological potential of history by privileging actor practices and the multiple ways history can perform the past in those practices (Durepos, 2015). ANTi-History seeks to account for actors' subjective experiences of time by focusing on actor practices. It seeks to map how actors live their past in their present practices, and through this enact various histories in those practices.

Another example of a construct that has the potential to bridge the divide between history and MOS is rhetorical history (Suddaby, Foster & Quinn-Trank, 2010). Rhetorical history is defined as "the strategic use of the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm" (Suddaby, Foster & Quinn-Trank, 2010: 157). Suddaby (2016: 54) notes that history is increasingly recognized "as an

important but underutilized asset of the firm.” As a result, research that looks at how organizations use and shape their history strategically is on the rise. Suddaby and Foster (2015) offer that firms use history to leverage the collective memory of organizations to help garner support for implementing strategies and tactics that shape the future.

Like rhetorical history which focuses on the ways firms use history in the *present*, genealogical pragmatism is also a present-centered approach (Marshall & Novicevic, 2016). Marshall and Novicevic (2016: 100) offer genealogical pragmatism as useful for doing a “retrospective (re)analysis of present concepts and practices.” While genealogical analysis features present issues and concepts to trace their origins, pragmatism focuses on addressing “viable conceptual alternatives” (Marshall & Novicevic, 2016: 100). In short, genealogical pragmatism is dedicated to uncovering alternative evolutions of events or concepts and maps alternative possibilities for how to theoretically conceive of that concept. Through tracing other genealogies of present taken for granted concepts, the concepts is liberated from its usual connotations and possibly expanded to accommodate alternative and pragmatic meanings.

Another concept that has potential for historical organization studies is organizational legacy (Mitchelmore, 2015; Suddaby, 2016). It focuses on specific aspects of the history of a person, firm or region to account for its unique elements of competitive behaviour. As Suddaby (2016: 55) notes, the “research shares a common assumption that the entities’ unique historical heritage is a critical variable in explaining economic outcomes.”

In praise of Fragmentation: Toward an Ethic of Pluralistic Understanding

The various research communities that make up the field of historical organization studies share common motivations for doing historical research. This is despite the diversity of approaches in use to do history. The premise of this paper is that an ethic *pluralistic understanding* can be achieved on the basis of the shared motivations that exist for doing history research.

An *ethic* implies a set of behavioural principles that guide the conduct of group. It is a shared and explicitly expressed set of beliefs, attitudes and opinions that govern the way individuals act toward one another and through this, foster a sense of community. As implied in this paper, the management history community is made of researchers with different ideologies, or philosophical assumptions. But a common ethic based on *pluralistic understanding* can foster mutual respect, tolerance and perhaps even a celebratory attitude toward diversity. Pluralistic understanding draws on Weber’s notion of *verstehen*, or *understanding* (Maclean, Harvey & Clegg, 2016). It is characterised as a condition of respect of difference. It is “open to alternatives and different forms of synthesis” (Maclean, Harvey & Clegg, 2016: 18). To foster this condition, the collapse of seemingly opposite points of view or contrasting philosophical traditions is discouraged. Instead, “an empathetic tolerance of different methods and practices” is encouraged. (Maclean, Harvey & Clegg, 2016: 18). How can we foster an ethic of pluralistic understanding?

To begin fostering an ethic of pluralistic understanding, I propose seven guidelines. This list is by no means exhaustive, it is intended as a point of departure. The first suggestion is to approach our craft with an acknowledgement that there are different ways to do history, different disciplinary conventions and different philosophical traditions. This acknowledgement implies learning another language or acquiring what Maclean, Harvey and Clegg (2016) call “theoretical fluency”, which is my second guideline. Third, I suggest the need to ask questions of those who we perceive approach their craft differently, with an authentic intent to learn their ‘trade’. Fourth, the course of action necessitates being open to answers

framed by another language. Fifth, it also necessitates recognizing and reserving value judgements that are framed by our own disciplinary conventions and traditions. Sixth, it involves developing a comfortable theoretical fluency, one that can be leveraged to measure the rigour of *any* research based on its own metrics. This implies an acknowledgement that research traditions have their own disciplinary metrics and philosophical conventions. It necessitates learning to give constructive feedback using another's metrics. Finally, at the basis of an ethic of pluralistic understanding is the notion that learning about other ways of doing the craft does not come with an automatic acceptance of adopting those ways as your own.

In short, this trans-disciplinarity implies an acknowledgement of other theoretical and conceptual languages. At its basis is an authentic willingness to become multi-lingual and to work toward heightened theoretical fluency. An ethic of pluralistic understanding will prevent boundaries and gatekeepers but encourage different ways of doing historical organization studies. Pluralistic understanding in historical organization studies promotes healthy debate and mutual learning. It prevents complacency. Finally, with an ethic of pluralistic understanding, management historians can celebrate heterogeneity and diversity.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have reviewed the momentum for more history in MOS to suggest that its rise in popularity has come with the rise of a diversity of communities of history scholars who approach their craft with different conventions and philosophical traditions. I have argued that notwithstanding these differences, management history scholars are united by the common motivations that inform their craft. Despite the field level fragmentation that currently characterizes historical organization studies, these common motivations should be celebrated and are fundamental to fostering an ethic of pluralistic understanding informed by theoretical fluency.

Over 20 years ago, Zald (1993, 1996) celebrated the fragmentation of Administrative Science brought on by its rapprochement with the humanities and history. I wonder whether Zald's ideal version of historical organization studies would also be characterized by fragmentation? In this paper I have argued that *healthy* fragmentation can only be fostered alongside the emergence of an ethic of pluralistic understanding (Maclean, Harvey & Clegg, 2016).

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