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ORIGINAL PAPER

Digging Through Dust: Historiography for the Organizational Sciences

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Abstract This article argues that historical research is an important organizational research paradigm, for which there is little instruction on its unique methods and techniques. Those who decide to pursue this methodology are given few methodological tips on how to conduct this research and how to avoid standard pitfalls. First, this article reviews some of the key types of research questions asked by historians. Different formats for research questions include biographical research, focus on a single topic, concentration of a particular place or time, and microhistory. Next, different sources of historical data are summarized (archival research, primary and secondary sources, personal interviews, and quantitative data), focusing on their strengths and weaknesses. Finally, several dilemmas that all historical researchers face are presented, providing suggestions on different ways to resolve those dilemmas. For example, the challenge of being overly celebratory versus critical is discussed as is the challenge of understanding the past through contemporary viewpoints. In addition, suggestions are presented on how to evaluate historical research and where to publish it. Suggestions for topics for historical investigation are made throughout the article. Work is cited from historical scholars on historiography as well as organizational researchers who have conducted historical research. Finally, the article ends with a summary of the benefits of conducting historical research.

Keywords History · Qualitative research · Research methods · Historiography

This paper is the ninth in this journal's *Method Corner* series. Previous articles have included topics encountered by many researchers such as tests of mediation, longitudinal data, polynomial regression, relative importance of predictors in regression models, common method bias, and construction of higher order constructs. For example, in a recently published *Method Corner* article, Landis (2013) focused on combining structural equation modeling with meta-analysis. The present article complements those articles by introducing readers to a different paradigm for research, one that has been important in organizational research, but also one for which there has been little formal instruction: historical research.

Historical methods are important parts of nearly all scientific disciplines. History of science has helped researchers better understand the forces that led to specific scientific discoveries, as well as to critically evaluate the practices that have led to those discoveries, the impact of that scientific knowledge, and the way that such scientific knowledge has been disseminated. Within industrial-organizational (IO) psychology and organizational behavior (OB)[1], historical research has occasionally played an important role with journals publishing sporadically articles on the evolution of scientific knowledge (e.g., research on criteria, Austin and Villanova 1992), detailing groundbreaking events (e.g., WWI and personnel testing, Kevles 1968), and highlighting seminal figures in these fields (e.g., Hugo Münsterberg, Landy 1992). Historical research can help provide insight into neglected topics and understudied populations, can help researchers envision alternate realities by examining practices and theories in another context

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[1] Hereafter, I refer to these disciplines as the "organizational sciences" for simplicity sake.

and era, and help researchers understand how their understandings are influenced by specific contextual features.

For the most part, organizational science scholars who publish historical research do so as a "sideline," having developed a primary stream of research focused on the development of contemporary scientific and applied knowledge (called *psychologist-historians* by Vaughn-Blount et al. 2009). For example, Frank Landy had developed an extensive research program on selection and performance appraisal before publishing his first historical research articles (Landy 2007). Although budding organizational researchers are given training on a variety of research strategies, most graduate programs do not include any training on methods of digging through dusty historical records. Organizational research methods textbooks and edited volumes rarely have any chapters or significant coverage of historical methods (e.g., Drasgow and Schmitt 2002; Rogelberg 2002). Organizational science researchers who wish to pursue historical work often learn by trial-and-error with little guidance, at least within their own discipline. This article is designed to help organizational researchers with an interest in historical scholarship by reviewing some key advice related to historical methods, often referred to as *historiography*. In this article, I review different types of historical inquiries, describe various classes of data used by historians, and explain several dilemmas that are often faced by historians. This review is based on consideration of historiography writings by professional historians as well as by organizational scientists who pursue historical research. Although most of the techniques used by general historians are similar to what is used by historians of organizational science historians, there are differences as well (such as more of a reliance on peer-reviewed sources as historical data within the organizational sciences); these differences are noted when appropriate.

Throughout, I use examples of historical research within the organizational sciences to illustrate key concepts and to provide models for those contemplating historical research. In addition, I provide suggestions for research topics, techniques, ideas that could be used by budding historians.

Types of Historical Inquiries

As in any other type of research, the first step in historical research is to formulate the question that will guide the research process. Although many researchers know how to develop traditional empirical research questions, developing one that guides a particular historical inquiry may be challenging to new researchers. There are several types of historical questions that have been asked by scholars in organizational research and consideration of these forms of questions may inspire beginning historical researchers. I highlight four types: biographical research, history of a topic through time, characterization of a place or time, and microhistory. In this section, I will discuss some of the basic issues involved in pursuing a historical research project.

Biographical Research

With biographical studies, the focus is on a single individual, telling history through the lens of a single life. These studies are popular because they correspond with the *great persons approach* to history, which assumes that the events of history are due to the actions of a few individuals. This approach was promulgated by famous Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle who in 1,841 published a book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History* which detailed the lives of some important people in the history of the world (e.g., Napoleon and Mohammed) and argued that "all things that we see standing accomplished in the world are properly the outer material result, the practical realisation and embodiment, of thoughts that dwelt in the Great Men sent into the world: the soul of the whole world's history, it may justly be considered, were the history of these" (Carlyle 1841/1913, pp. 1–2). The importance of single individuals is also central to much organizational research on leadership, which even has a *great man theory of leadership* (see Borgatta et al. 1954).

There have been a large number of biographical pieces related to individuals within the organizational sciences. See Table 1 for a list of some article-length pieces conducted on seminal people in the history of organizational research. Most of these articles begin with a short amount of biographical information, such as place raised, institutions attended, doctoral advisor, doctoral topic, and their job history. After that, their professional contributions are summarized with themes extracted from what is often a large body of work. In many of these works, lessons from the life of a particular psychologist are used to draw lessons relevant for today. For example, Erdheim et al. (2007) used the life of University of Minnesota psychologist Donald G. Paterson to lament the current division between vocational psychology and IO psychology, highlighting how in Paterson's time and career such a division did not exist. In another example, Locke (1982a) surveyed the ideas of early industrial engineer Frederick W. Taylor to demonstrate that most of those ideas were still valid despite criticisms by other management theorists. In these biographical pieces, the focus is nearly always on the professional life of these psychologists, unlike popular biographies that often try to unearth personal details of an individuals' life from dreams and private behavior.

Table 1 Example article-length biographical studies in the organizational sciences

Person	Citation	Significance
Marion A. Bills	Koppes and Bauer (2006)	Pioneer female applied psychologist
Arthur Kornhauser	Zickar (2003)	First applied psychologist to focus on worker-well being
Elton Mayo	Smith (1998)	Hawthorne studies pioneer
Bruce V. Moore	Farr and Tesluk (1997)	First leader of Division 14
Hugo Münsterburg	Landy (1992)	First industrial psychology textbook
Donald G. Paterson	Erdheim et al. (2007)	Bridged industrial and vocational psychologies
Walter Dill Scott	Lynch (1968)	Founded first applied psychology consulting company
Frederick W. Taylor	Locke (1982a)	Founder of scientific management

Although biographies of influential people are quite popular, since Carlyle's work there has also been a fair amount of skepticism among historians and social scientists about the over-emphasis of the role of individuals. Herbert Spencer, in response to Carlyle, argued that great individuals were a product of society (an argument similar to Marxist theory) and that history should become less obsessed with great individuals and more concerned with understanding basic culture and economics (see Hook 1950). Biographical research will likely continue to appeal to historical researchers, but the best biographical pieces will also root their research in a discussion of the related context and social forces (often referred to as the Zeitgeist). As Hook summarized, "Every philosophy of history which recognizes that men can and do make their own history also concerns itself with the conditions under which it is made" (Hook 1950, p. xiii). Burnham concluded, "it is true that biography traditionally provides material for history, but history involves greater concerns than mere individual lives" (Burnham 2003, p. 37). Biographical work is important and has been popular in organizational science history. Even though there have been a large number of biographies, there are still many figures who have not been subjects of peer-reviewed published articles. For example,

- **Morris Viteles**, the groundbreaking researcher at University of Pennsylvania who wrote one of the earliest and most influential textbooks;
- **Robert Hoppock**, one of the early pioneers in job satisfaction research;
- **Max Freyd,** one of the first psychologists to lay out the scientific foundation of selection work;
- **Mary Tenopyr**, a recently deceased IO psychologist who pioneered modern selection work within corporate America.

History of a Topic Through Time

Another popular form of historical inquiry within the organizational sciences has been tracing the history of a particular topic throughout its inquiry. For example, Austin and Villinova (1992) provide a historical investigation of criterion-related research from 1917 up to time of publication, dividing the research into discrete periods and characterizing each of those periods. Many of the chapters in Koppes's (2007) comprehensive edited volume detailing the history of IO psychology provide a historical summary of research on a particular topic such as selection (Vinchur 2007), training (Kraiger and Ford 2007), and consumer psychology (Schumann and Davidson 2007). Typical approaches start off with identifying precursors to organizational and applied psychology research before proceeding into discussion of formal organizational science in the topic. For example, Vinchur (2007) mentions the importance of Darwin's evolutionary theory as a precursor to research on individual differences, which ultimately led to personnel selection. Most of these histories then proceed to the beginning era of organizational and psychological research, working forward toward modern times.

These topical histories can be quite useful for contemporary researchers of the particular topic to help provide context for the development and progression of ideas, as well as a summary of vast amounts of literature that empirical researchers may wish to skim, rather than study. A danger in these histories is that researchers begin their historical research knowing quite well the current state of the literature and focus on research and events that led to the development of the contemporary status quo. It is important that these histories not only consider the successful research that provided a foundation for current thinking, but that they also consider failed ideas and dead ends pursued by past researchers to provide readers with a more accurate view. When these histories are pursued by contemporary empirical researchers who care deeply about the current state of research, there is a danger that the history is slanted toward telling a limited aspect of the history. Although it is likely that all historical researches are suspect to some bias, as I mention in the Dilemmas section (especially dilemmas 1 and 2), there are certain biases (such as the tendency to be celebratory and to be

presentist) to which amateur historians often are susceptible

Although there have been many studies of broad individual topics (e.g., selection, training, leadership), there are many more narrow topics that could be featured in more detail. For example,

- A more detailed historical study focused narrowly on the **selection interview** might provide deeper insights than a general review of selection techniques;
- From my reading of early selection texts, there could be a rich and complicated history written of the **treatment of women in the job application and selection techniques** of the twentieth century;
- Although there have been articles reviewing different types of tests, there have been little or no reviews on the **test development process,** and how it has evolved over time.

Characterization of a Time and Place

Much of history is focused on telling the story of a particular time and place. Although these types of histories are much more common in other areas (e.g., histories of the Reformation or the Renaissance), there has been some relevant historical organizational research that could fit into this category. Landy (1997) detailed the story of early selection researchers and how they developed methods and worked together to solve problems. Lowman, Kantor, and Perloff (2007) described the development of early applied and industrial psychology graduate programs. Capshew (1999) focused on the time after World War 1 (specifically from 1929 to 1969), showing how applied psychology developed within this period.

This research, however, is relatively rare in the IO and OB literature because of the youth of scientific organizational research. IO psychology might be considered a little over 100-years old (Koppes 2007) and organizational behavior and the formal field of management less than that (see Burnham 1941; Chandler 1977; Wren 2005). Given this short amount of time, it is more difficult to break this period of time into more discrete and distinctive eras. It should be noted that many of the historical periods studied by other historians are much longer than the length of time our fields have existed. For example, the Renaissance period lasted roughly 300 years, and the Enlightenment lasted roughly 150 years. These types of historical inquiries within the organizational sciences should become more important as time progresses.

Despite the challenge given the youth of the organizational science fields, more of this research that characterizes eras should be conducted, as it is important to capture a sense of the time and place for the various historical phenomena that we are studying. Many of our conceptions that we have about a particular time period are based on our understanding of how things work currently. For example, we currently view phrenology as an unscientific representation of the brain that is best used as an example of the silliness of earlier conceptions of the mind. This attitude, though, discounts the importance that phrenology had in the nineteenth century when serious scholars valued this line of research. By digging deep into the practices, beliefs, and attitudes of a particular time and place, one can begin to better remove our inevitable misunderstandings. More articles focusing on time periods within the history of organizational sciences will help to facilitate this process.

Although there have been histories of applied psychology during the seminal WWI years, other areas of our history have been neglected. For example,

- There has been no systematic investigation of the field's response to the **Great Depression**;
- A study of the field's response to the **Civil Rights Era** would be important; and
- Although there has been a lot of work on WWI and industrial psychology, a thorough telling of industrial psychology and **WWII** is needed.

Microhistory (History of a Specific Event Within the Field)

There has been a movement in general history to focus less on wide swaths of time and broad topics and instead to concentrate on "small mysteries," telling the stories of specific events and locales (e.g., Ginzburg 1993; Lepore 2001). In the first historical study to use the phrase microhistory, Stewart focused 300 pages on the final charge by Pickett in the Battle of Gettysburg, an event that spanned 20 minutes (Stewart 1959). Microhistories focus on a lot of rich detail about an event or person that might only receive passing notice in historical works that focus on a broader range of material. Microhistories are consistent with anthropologist Clifford Geertz's notion of *thick description*, which advocates providing as much detail as possible about a particular event so that readers can better understand events from the perspective of participants (see Geertz 1973; also Sokal 2003).

Organizational science history has tended to focus on more broad histories, though there are some examples of microhistories. Benjamin et al. (1991) described how Coca-Cola sponsored early psychologist Henry Hollingworth to investigate the effects of caffeine in randomized experimental trials, providing one of the first times that a corporation sponsored behavioral research. Zickar (2001) chronicled how in response to passage of pro-labor legislation by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, companies

turned to industrial psychologists to help thwart labor unions by screening out likely union members via personality tests. In both of these examples, the authors provided detailed information about the events chronicled; in addition, they provide contextual information that can help place the information in perspective. For example, Benjamin et al. (1991) provide a summary of US legislation to regulate food safety, which motivated Coca-Cola to defend itself through scientific experimentation. Zickar (2001) discusses relevant history of labor-management relations law and how that influenced corporations to turn to personality tests. In each of these cases, thick description of small events is followed with detailed contextual information.

Microhistory has its strengths and limitations. On the plus side, microhistories can be exciting tales that capture the reader's attention with more specific details and drama than might be possible with broad histories that must exclude many exciting and interesting anecdotes. By focusing on a narrow event, the researcher is much more able to portray a particular event as experienced by the actors in that event and to convey how contemporary audiences perceived these events. On the down side, microhistory can often have limited relevance and perhaps less generalizability to contemporary researchers. These strengths and weaknesses are similar to that of case studies to which microhistories have been compared. One additional challenge is that microhistory can be difficult to do if archival information is lacking for that particular event. The detailed analysis of microhistory research often is not possible for events that lack a rich historical record.

Regardless of its limitations, microhistory should be considered more often and be encouraged by historians of organizational phenomena. Some potential topics could be:

- Researchers could study **lecture notes and syllabi** from early psychologists to give a detailed picture of how graduate education worked in the early days of the field;
- Detailed analysis of the **implementation of a particular applied intervention** within a particular company would provide significant insight;
- Tracing the **evolution of a particular textbook** would provide insight into changes in the field over time.

Sources of Historical Data

Just like in traditional empirical research where there are a variety of methods to collect data (e.g., randomized experiment, self-report survey), there are a variety of typical sources that historians have used to gather data for historical inquires in the organizational sciences. In this section, I review many of these typical sources pointing out their strengths and weaknesses as well as providing tips for would-be historical researchers on how to best use these sources. As with traditional empirical research that uses a variety of methods to triangulate a particular finding, the best historical research uses a variety of different types of sources to confirm a particular conclusion. As French historian Marc Bloch wrote: "It would be sheer fantasy to imagine that for each historical problem there is a unique type of document with a specific use. On the contrary, the deeper the research, the more the light of the evidence must converge from sources of different kinds" (Bloch 1953, p. 67). Researchers should consider the appropriate sources of data to answer particular research questions, realizing that by using various sources of data, limitations of one approach may be complemented by the strengths of another approach.

Archival Research

Archives are repositories of information that are collected and organized for a particular person, organization, or topic. Good archives will have a large variety of documents including correspondence, personal items, speeches, unpublished documents, and organizational records. Material located within archives is often considered a treasure trove of information given that the information located here is often unfiltered (compared to published information) and may provide personal details unavailable in other sources. Archival research, digging through dust, is often considered the most important source of research for original historical scholarship.

Archives are generally located at universities or public libraries. An excellent way to locate the archives for a particular person or organization is through an internet search. The website www.archivegrid.org has compiled information from 1000s of different institutions in a searchable database, and so it is possible to find the location of information across a wide range of sources. Table 2 lists several important archives that hold information relevant to organizational science researchers. Most archives now make available online the *finding aid* for each of their collections. These finding aids list the scope of each collection as well as give an indication of the types of materials within the collection. Some finding aids have little details (e.g., only that there is correspondence within the collection), whereas others may list in detail the sources of the correspondent and the nature of the material within.

It is imperative to do some research before utilizing a particular archive. First, it is helpful to contact the archives to let them know that you may be planning a visit. This is important because it allows the archivist time beforehand to prepare materials for your visit as well as to determine if

Table 2 Some important archives for organizational science research

Location	Relevant Information
Boston Public Library	Hugo Münsterberg papers
Carnegie Mellon University	Walter Vandyke Bingham papers relevant to first graduate program in industrial psych
Center for the History of Psychology, University of Akron	Papers for Division 14 (SIOP), many psychologists
Columbia University	James McKeen Cattell collection
Kheel Center for Labor-Management Archives, Cornell University	Academy of Management archives
Honnold/Mudd Library, Claremont University	Peter Drucker collection
Library of Congress	James McKeen Cattell collection
Northwestern University	Walter Dill Scott collection, Scott Collection
Purdue University	Frank and Lillian Gilbreth Collection
S.C. Williams Library, Stevens Institute of Technology	Frederick W. Taylor papers
Yale University	Robert M. Yerkes collection

there are additional materials that they may have relevant to your research question that may be outside the scope of material that you are requesting to examine. Before you visit, also study the rules and procedures of a particular archive (if available online). Each particular archive has their own rules regarding materials. Finally, one should discuss access rights for particular material that you wish to peruse. Occasionally there will be restrictions on certain material so that you will not be able to access or cite that information. For example, material that contains personal information about individual students may be forbidden to cite. See Heck et al. (2004) for more tips on archival visits.

Archival research can provide some of the most stimulating aspects of historical research. It is exciting to uncover unmined information, whether it is a letter, military records, or a memo or document that answers directly a particular research question. Often, however, the information that is found within archives lacks contextual information, and so there is a need to pursue additional types of data that will help the researcher better understand the intent and significance of the "raw material" found within the archives.

Personal Interviews

Another way to collect original source material is to interview individuals who may have knowledge of the person or topic being studied. These sources may be key actors and actresses in the history, or might even be the primary target of the project. You may be interested in interviewing students of a particular faculty member or colleagues, children, spouses, or partners. People you may be interested in interviewing may be relatively famous, or they may be obscure and hard-to-find.

When conducting these interviews, it is important that you are knowledgeable about the person you are interviewing. This often involves reading as much of the published work conducted by them and doing some detective work. Once the interview has been scheduled, you need to figure out the format most comfortable for the interviewee. I have found that most interviewees feel comfortable talking over the phone, though some people prefer to respond to questions via e-mail. Conducting the interview in person might be ideal, though often impractical. Recording the conversation (with their permission) would be ideal followed by a transcription, but if that is not possible, taking detailed notes is important. I find it important to take a more detailed level of notes than I expect because my memory is never as reliable as I anticipate. Conducting an interview over e-mail has its advantages because there is no need for note-taking or transcription, but ultimately the experience is less satisfying than a phone or in-person interview. People are more to the point and less chatty over e-mail, and so you are less likely to get some of the interesting anecdotes that you would get through a phone or in-person interview. I have found, however, that e-mail is a good medium if you have a focused question that has a limited answer.

After the interview has been conducted, it is important to share drafts of your manuscript with an interviewee, especially if you are citing this information as personal communication. It is good to give them a chance to clarify their remarks. I have had the experience where these sources have provided additional clarification on material after reading a draft manuscript, providing help on sections for which they had not even provided input originally. In addition, these sources often are helpful at identifying other potential sources to contact, even sometimes facilitating connections with other people. I have found that historical projects can take on positive momentum as individuals become excited about the project. Finally, remember that

some sources will have a vested interest in the conclusions within your manuscript. When relying heavily on individual sources, it is important to triangulate by trying to confirm their information with other sources. In fact, Burnham (2003) describes a career of oral interviews, and chronicles some of the challenges including famous psychologists reciting verbatim already published autobiographies. When interviewing John B. Watson, Burnham claims Watson was "simply trapped in stories he had told himself and others over the years so that his memories were not very useful to a historian" (Burnham 2003, p. 21).

Despite Burnham's example, interviewing individuals about history can be some of the most satisfying historical work. Just like with archival research, there is a sense that you are uncovering hidden information that may vanish without your interview. In fact, there is a whole genre of *oral history* that relies solely on reminisces of individuals to describe a particular event, place, or history (see Yow 1994; Thompson 2000). There are examples of published interviews within the organizational sciences (e.g., Augier's 2004 interview with James March; Zahra's 2003 interview with Peter Drucker). These works publish edited interviews with the target, often first providing some brief background and context. In most historical projects, interviews do not play as primary of a role as in an oral history; in most historical works, interviews are supplemented with archival research and original source material to provide broader and more conclusive findings.

The current Society for Industrial-Organizational Psychology Historian Kevin Mahoney has created a living history series at the annual conference, interviewing older organizational psychologists in a public forum that is recorded for posterity (David Campbell was the inaugural interviewee in 2013). It is important to continue this work to retain the history and memories of our older generations of predecessors.

Published Source Material

Although uncovering new information via archival research or interviews is a sign of significant historical scholarship, most historical scholarship relies heavily on material already published. There are several sources of important published materials that have proven fruitful for historical research in organizational sciences.

Scientific and Trade Journals

Journal articles are a source that most researchers are comfortable quoting. Given the importance of journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology* (established in 1917), *Personnel Psychology* (1948), and *Academy of Management Journal* (1957), these may be the first sources that people turn to because these are journals that contemporary researchers know and appreciate. In the early days of organizational research, however, there were several other journals that were similarly prominent and need to be examined to gain an appreciation of the era. *Personnel Journal* was first published in 1922 by the Personnel Research Federation and was a leading outlet for businessmen and labor leaders as well as applied psychologists on topics such as validating selection tests, motivating workers, and compensation plans. *Occupations* began publication in 1922 and were published by the Bureau of Vocational Guidance at Harvard University. Other important journals were *Annals of American Academy of Political and Social Science*, *Personnel*, and the *Bulletin of the Taylor Society*. In addition, there were trade journals that often focused on a particular industry and had applied articles related to management and selection (e.g., *Factory*, *American Industries*, and *Safety Engineering*). Articles in some of these journals are difficult to find because they are not indexed in PsychInfo and in some cases, not indexed in any historical database.

Book-Length Treatments

Besides trade and scientific articles, book-length treatments are important to investigate. Textbooks contemporary to the person or idea that you are studying are excellent ways to get a sense of the field's view or attitude about a particular topic. Early textbooks by Münsterberg, Viteles, and others are essential to gaining a perspective on a wide range of topics that were consuming the field. Also, many textbooks have had several editions, and so it is instructive to trace the change in thinking about a topic by seeing how the coverage has changed across editions. In addition to textbooks which cover a wide range of topics, there are many single-topic textbooks written by organizational researchers and business leaders that will be of interest to historical researchers. For example, Kornhauser and Kingsbury (1924) published one of the first book-length treatments on personnel selection and Mathewson (1931) published a book on restriction of output by nonunion workers. Finally, it should be noted that autobiographies of psychologists and management theorists remain important sources. The series *History of Psychology in Autobiography* edited by Carl Murchison and others (e.g., Murchison 1930) and *Management Lauretes: A Collection of Autobiographical Essays* edited by Bedian (e.g., Bedian 1992) are rich sources of information about important individuals in the field.

Popular Press Articles

Besides the scientific and trade press, it is often important to determine the reaction of non-experts to practices and events in organizational science. In addition, it is often

important to determine how experts present their findings in a way that they think the lay public will be interested and be able to understand. The public image of psychologists has been studied through the analysis of newspapers and magazines (see Benjamin 1986; Dennis 2002). Studying the popular image of organizational scientists through the popular press is a historical article that could benefit current organizational scientists who still struggle with how to improve their public recognition and identity.

The tactics used to find popular press articles are often quite different from the techniques used to find scientific articles. Different databases need to be searched (e.g., New York Times Historical Database, *Readers' Periodical Guide*, and NewspaperARCHIVE). Asking a reference librarian at a university library can provide some good insights that most organizational researchers are not going to have developed with their own training.

Secondary Sources

When investigating a historical topic, it is essential to read others' interpretations of the same and tangential history of the topics that you are studying. If you are working on a history related to the Hawthorne Studies, there is a whole literature that has evolved that has further investigated the primary sources (e.g., the original writings of the Hawthorne researchers as well as archival material) and derived their own conclusions from that work (e.g., Bramel and Friend 1981; Gillespie 1993). Such work is often a good starting ground for original research because it can highlight unresolved questions or inspire more focused areas of pursuit. There is a bias, however, against relying on secondary sources to take the place of primary sources. For example, Bedian (2004) cautioned, "those who study management history know all too well that inaccuracies and myths arise when contemporary scholars fail to use primary sources in their research and rely on text book accounts or research reviews for their knowledge of the past" (p. 94). There is a fear, just like in the childhood game of telephone, that by focusing on secondary sources, an author is missing the original nuances and intent of the primary source. Messages get distorted, unconsciously or consciously, by authors of secondary sources. Given these distortions, it is important not to rely solely on general contemporary textbooks when conducting historical research. For example, Olson, Verley, Santos, and Salas (2004) reviewed the treatment of the Hawthorne Studies in IO and OB textbooks and concluded these accounts "vary in points of emphasis and historical detail, and in some cases, provide simplistic and inaccurate accounts of the research" (p. 23).

Secondary sources, however, can be essential for several purposes. First, they can provide helpful summaries of areas of research where it is impossible or difficult to read significant amounts of primary source material. Second, secondary sources can be very helpful in identifying new primary source material via their own reference sections. Finally, secondary sources are important for showing how primary sources can be interpreted. The quality of original historical research is often judged by the ratio of primary sources cited in relation to secondary sources. Secondary sources, however, if used judiciously, can be important sources.

Quantitative Data

The range of material studied by professional historians has expanded greatly in recent years. There has been a trend for historians to analyze quantitative data, whether those are population figures, economic data, or data produced by scouring archival data and assigning numbers to qualitative information (see Jarausch and Hardy 1991). Most organizational science historians have not yet used quantitative data to supplement their arguments, though there have been several cases which quantitative data have been used. Austin et al. (2002) coded *Journal of Applied Psychology* articles based on methodology used to show how usage of various research methodologies has changed over time; Landis and Kaplan (2005) performed a similar analysis. Zickar (2004) analyzed the frequency of articles published related to labor unions in organizational science journals to show the waxing and waning of interest in the topic. Other types of data might be citation rates, analysis of degrees granted, social media posts, number of articles published in popular press magazines and newspapers, among other possibilities. Finally, text-analysis software might be used with primary source materials to code various aspects of content and to see how the typical content changes over time. For example, researchers might submit articles published on personnel selection over a period of 75 years to see how different language features change through the period (see Alexa and Zuell 2000 and Franzosi 2010 for a discussion of textual analysis software). Objective features such as article length and statistical complexity could be quantified with the software, as well as emotional versus rational tone. In short, with increased access to large-scale archival quantitative data, increased digitization of source material, and more sophisticated text-analysis software, the opportunities for historical researchers to incorporate quantitative data into their projects have and will continue to increase.

Dilemmas to Consider when Doing Historical Research

The previous section focused on the collection of data relevant for historical inquiry. In this section, I discuss

dilemmas faced by historical researchers. I present these dilemmas, not to suggest that there is a correct way to resolve them, but to identify points worth considering. Although all research areas have their own dilemmas, historical research has some unique issues that scholars new to historical research might not anticipate. Researchers beginning a historical project can benefit by considering these dilemmas and figuring out how they wish to resolve them for their particular project.

Dilemma 1 The tension between being celebratory and being critical.

Many of the historical articles published in the organizational sciences were motivated by the need to celebrate the successes of a particular field or area. In fact, many historical articles are commissioned on the anniversary of important dates, such as the centennial of the founding of the American Psychological Association (see Parke et al. 1992) or the 100th year since the birth or death of an important figure. Many researchers, especially those pursuing a history of an individual topic, view history as a progression of events that led to the state where the field is currently. Within the field of history, such research is criticized as *whig history*, named after the British (and later American) Whig political parties, which emphasized the importance of progress (see Butterfield 1931/1965). The problem with this type of celebratory history is that it often ignores mistakes, problems, and dead-ends irrelevant to the ultimate progression of science, focusing on history just as a link from the past to current times (see also, Harris 1979).

On the other hand, there is a modern approach to history, called *critical history*, that questions the assumptions behind commonly-held beliefs and is focused on pointing out mistakes and biases of past researchers as well as correcting myths from previous historical interpretations (see Lovett 2006). Hilgard et al. (1991) describe this type of research as, "historical scholarship whose probing questions and demanding methodology evince little interest in affirming or legitimating the assumptions of contemporary psychology" (p. 81). For the most part, this critical historical scholarship has not developed within the organizational sciences as rapidly as it has in other areas of history of science. An example of critical organizational science scholarship, though, is Baritz's *Servants of Power* (1960), which investigates the history of social science in industry (both psychology and sociology) demonstrating that in most cases, social scientists worked to find answers more suitable for management than for lower-level employees or members of labor unions. Another example is Bramel and Friend's reinvestigation of the Hawthorne Studies through the lens of Marxist theory (Bramel and Friend 1981); they concluded that many of the "findings" derived from the experiments were not the results of the experimental data, but based on preconceived notions of the studies' main researchers. Both of these works were provocative and inspired other critical responses (e.g., Locke 1982b).

Both tendencies, to celebrate and to be critical, are useful, though ceremonial historical scholarship often does not advance the state of historical knowledge, instead serving a symbolic function that helps reify existing norms (see Harris 1979). Good historical researchers should be cognizant of their own biases as well as examine hidden assumptions of previous researchers and historians. Historians should not be afraid to celebrate accomplishments, though an explanation of these "successes" should not be the sole purpose of historical scholarship. Good historical scholarship will critically examine assumptions behind previously well-understood phenomena and will test the viability of those assumptions and conclusions using the variety of historical data outlined previously.

Dilemma 2 How to understand the past from the position of the here-and-now

One of the most damning critiques that can be leveled against historical scholarship is that it evidences a *presentist bias* (see Stocking 1965). Presentism means seeing the past solely through the lens of today. At some level, presentism is unavoidable in that it is impossible for us to completely divest ourselves of our contemporary biases and understandings. Good history, however, attempts to get beyond those biases to better portray the event or phenomena as it was experienced by contemporary audiences. There are current aspects of the field today that we take for granted that simply did not exist in its early days. If researchers do not appreciate those differences, history will be quite shallow. For example, the amount of specialization that exists within our disciplines was not present in the early 1900s. Researchers were trained in psychology with little emphasis on the fields that we have today (see Lowman et al. 2007). It was quite common for researchers to make significant impacts in multiple areas that we think of as quite distinct and different these days. Hollingworth, a leading industrial psychologist in the 1920s has also been cited as one of the earliest contributors in developmental psychology (e.g., Wendorf 2001). In addition, concepts and terms that we understand in one fashion can often have quite different interpretations of people who used the same term in the past. For example, the concept of "soul" is nearly always associated with a religious or spiritual sense in this generation, though for previous generations, the concept was much broader than that (see Smith 1997). It is difficult to see the events of the past from the lenses of those who experienced them, but reading and conducting more historical research lead to removal of some of these misunderstandings and false assumptions.

Dilemma 3 Where to publish historical research?

There are several different types of outlets for historical research. *History of Psychology*, *Journal of the History of the Behavioural Sciences*, *Business History Review, Journal of Management History*, and *Labor History* publish historical research related to organizational sciences. These journals are read primarily by historical researchers. Reviewers for these journals tend to be other historians who are knowledgeable about the time period and may be aware of the existence of the historical record related to a particular topic. The historical scholarship standards of these journals are quite high, though the downside is that these journals are not often perused by researchers who are not interested in historical scholarship.

Another outlet is to publish the research within journals that publish primarily empirical research. Historical articles are occasionally published in journals such as *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Academy of Management Journal*, *Organizational Research Methods*, *Personnel Psychology*, and *Journal of Vocational Behavior* among others. Historical articles published in these journals are more likely to be viewed by empirical researchers who are interested in the substantive topic being reviewed. The downside is that historical research is not a main focus of these journals, and so the barriers to publication might be higher in these journals depending on the bias of individual reviewers and editors.

There is a perceived bias against historical scholarship by traditional empirical researchers. I have heard some people discuss whether history articles should be given equivalent weight to empirical articles for promotion, tenure, and merit decisions. Popplestone and McPherson (2003) describe a Dean who complained, "When I encounter a scientist who is knowledgeable about the history of his discipline I know that I am dealing with an incompetent" (p. xv). This bias against historical scholarship is unfortunate but is likely the reason that many historical scholars, such as Landy, maintained a steady stream of traditional empirical research at the same time as conducting historical work. A problem is that historical scholarship needs to be held to rigorous standards, and so it is important for people who conduct occasional historical investigations, even only as a fraction of their research time (called *dabblers* by Dewsbury 2003), to keep up with the latest historiographical approaches.

Dilemma 4 Focus on External versus Internal Forces

When conducting historical research, there is a tendency to either explain historical events through the actions of the historical actors themselves (an *internal approach*) or to focus on how those actors were influenced by external events and conditions (an *external approach*). Take for example the development of IO psychology. An internal approach would concentrate on the efforts of early IO psychologists to build and develop successful programs and lines of research, ignoring for the most part external influences on the field's development. On the other side, there is a movement within psychology as a whole called the *sociology of psychological knowledge* that explicitly examines the context in which knowledge is generated. As Buss (1975) stated, "psychological knowledge is tied to the infrastructure of a society or socially defined groups. By attempting to understand the social basis of psychologists' theories and activities, a study of the sociology of psychological knowledge may lead to greater self-understanding" (Buss 1975, p. 988). An external approach to organizational science history might focus on the influence of the business context and world events, such as World War I, that had an influence on the development of IO and OB.

There is a tendency for substantive researchers who are conducting historical research within their substantive discipline to take nearly exclusively an internal approach, whereas outsiders often have more of a balanced approach. This focus on internal events by disciplinary-based historical researchers, coupled with a tendency for celebration, has led historical researchers to view with skepticism historical research conducted within a particular discipline (see Brush 1989). This caution should be heeded by organizational researchers who decide to conduct historical research. A nuanced consideration of both external events and internal actions is a sign of good historical research. Given that many of us substantive researchers do not have as extensive knowledge of external historical events as we do of internal events and actors, it is important to read historical scholarship of relevant time periods for the work being considered. Especially important for many organizational-based historical projects would be reviews of general economic and working conditions, reviews of governmental programs and relevant world events, as well as reviews of broader activity within the psychological, management, and social science communities.

Dilemma 5 How to evaluate historical research?

A challenge that consumers of historical research have is in evaluating the quality of the research. As shown throughout this article, the techniques used in historical research can be vastly different than those used in traditional empirical research paradigms. Therefore, it can be difficult for readers to figure out whether a particular historical article is of high quality. A few useful guidelines are provided here and in Table 3.

One of the most commonly mentioned criteria for high quality historical scholarship is the reliance and consideration of primary source materials. Historical research that

Table 3 Questions to Ask when evaluating historical research

1. Does the paper rely on primary sources, instead of secondary sources?
- Good historical research should have considered the important secondary sources in topic area, aware of each of the arguments and sources of data in those works.
- Good historical research will focus as much as possible on original sources if available. Given the problems of individual interpretation and biases, it is important to use the words directly from the sources who are trying to be understood. Publications, archival material, and direct interviews are especially helpful for capturing the intentions of the original sources.

2. Is new primary source evidence uncovered?
- Good historical research will uncover new material that will help provide new insights into topics and possibly remove previous uncertainties or misunderstandings.
- Good historical research will use archival research as it is essential for uncovering new material; in additional, personal interviews of key sources may also be important.

3. Are new insights provided in the article?
- Good historical research will correct mistakes from previous historical articles.
- In addition, good historical research will facilitate new insight and ways of thinking about the past.

4. Is the author biased? If so, is there an explicit acknowledgement of that bias?
- Good historical research acknowledges multiple perspectives on controversial topics, even if it chooses a particular perspective on which to focus.
- Good historical research acknowledges any particular bias or theoretical perspective through which the history is judged.

5. Is the article overly celebratory or does it properly mention both successes and failures?
- Good historical research is not afraid to point out particular successes, though the successes should be evenly evaluated.
- Good historical research should also acknowledge mistakes, failures, and dead-ends.

6. Is the article written merely to validate existing ideas?
- Good historical research will tell the full picture (both good and bad) and does not just trace past events that led to the particular current state of the field.
- Good historical research attempts to view the past from the perspective of those who were there at the time of the events, and then communicates those ideas to contemporary readers.

7. Does the article provide a historical context?
- Good historical research will provide context that helps interpret the findings more from the perspective of those who were there when the event occurred.
- Good historical research will review briefly major external events (e.g., wars, economic and political context) that might have impacted the events that are being studied.

8. Are different types of data and sources used to provide confidence in findings?
- Good historical research will rely on multiple types of data to improve the confidence in findings and interpretation.
- Good historical research that relies on a particular source heavily will corroborate findings from that source by considering other sources.

relies primarily on secondary sources, when good primary sources exist, should be viewed with suspicion given many of the concerns previously mentioned. In addition, good historical research uncovers new primary source materials. Uncovering new primary source materials can provide new insight into topics that seem to have already been exhausted. Consider Abraham Lincoln, a historical figure that has been subject to over nearly countless books and articles (over 2000 in my university library alone). Just recently, some pages from a notebook with math calculations by a young Abe were validated and provided evidence that the future President was perhaps more highly educated than was previously thought (Denham 2013). In addition to uncovering new evidence, good historical articles provide new insight into old material. Good historical research illuminates, not merely regurgitating a list of dates, names, articles, and events.

Other things to consider are the bias and perspective of the author(s). Although it is probably not possible to write a historical article without having a particular slant, good historical articles try to minimize that bias or, if that is not possible, openly acknowledge that bias. Sometimes articles with a clear bias, such as Bramel and Friend's (1981) openly Marxist interpretation of the Hawthorne experiments, can provide thought-provoking analysis that can spur thinking that stimulates. Such an openly biased perspective, however, needs to be acknowledged explicitly by the authors.

As previously mentioned, authors should avoid using historical research merely as a device to celebrate and to validate current popular ideas. History should be critical when appropriate and should be unafraid to mention failed ideas and mistakes. In addition, good historical articles provide a historical context for understanding the phenomenon, event, or person being studied. This context helps avoid presentist bias and helps readers better understand the importance of particular events. A final criterion for evaluating the quality of historical research is whether multiple sources of data are used to strengthen inferences made. Just as in traditional empirical research, good historical researchers will use different types of data and sources.

Conclusions

In this article, I have reviewed different types of historical inquiries that can be made within the organizational sciences, and I have outlined the strengths and weaknesses of different types of data that can be used. Finally, I have reviewed several dilemmas that historical researchers are likely to face when conducting this research. This article, I hope, will inspire some organizational science researchers

to engage in historical scholarship. To gain further skills, I recommend that budding researchers read lots of historical studies within and beyond the organizational sciences. In addition, reading some classic texts by professional historians may prove helpful. Some good places to start would be Hackett Fischer (1970), Howell and Prevenier (2001) and Iggers (2005) as well as the sources cited in this article. Throughout the article, I have provided some suggestions for research topics that could spur historical research.

One feature of historical scholarship that has not been covered in this article is the benefits of conducting such research, especially for those who have been trained in traditional quantitative methodologies. Historical research is important for a variety of reasons. Historical research can help readers envision alternative realities by examining previous scientific practices in other eras and conditions. It can help highlight understudied topics and populations and can provide a perspective on how our practices are influenced, not just by our actions, but by social and economic conditions beyond our control. Historical research can give us this additional perspective that is often difficult without considering changes over time. Historical research can also improve ones' teaching by providing more of the interesting details on why and how a particular theory or methods was created. Instead of just explaining the abstract theory to students, it is possible to provide details that may help make that theory more memorable and relevant for students (e.g., Cautin 2011; Goodwin 2010).

An important aspect of conducting historical research, especially for those who are primarily quantitative researchers, is that it helps sharpen argumentative skills. Many empirical researchers rely on the simplicity and black-and-white nature of statistical hypothesis testing to convey the logic of their arguments. In a sense, if a statistical test is significant, the researcher feels justified in concluding that his or her hypothesis was correct. With historical research, it is seldom so clear to judge whether a particular argument has been supported or not. To come up with definitive proof, historians must seek out additional types of data and find other methods to support or reinforce their arguments. Convincing the reader that you are correct requires much more attention to the logic and narrative form. Traditional quantitative researchers may feel "stretched" by conducting historical research and may feel that the new challenges of conducting historical research will further strengthen their intellectual skills. In a discussion of business history and econometrics, Morck and Yeung (2011) argue that both historical researchers and quantitative researchers can learn from each others' strengths. They cite historians' rhetorical argumentation skills, their ability to appreciate context, much more attention to the plausibility of alternative narratives, and a need to seek external consistency (i.e., making sure the historical explanation is consistent with as broad a set of circumstances as possible). Some of these skills are used by traditional quantitative researchers, though to a lesser degree than most historical research.

There are lots of historical projects left to be conducted in the organizational sciences; it would be safe to say that historical scholarship within the organizational sciences is still in its infancy. There are important people and events that have not yet been documented in any historical record, and there are lots of dusty archival materials that have yet to be examined by organizational scholars. And even for the events that have already been researched extensively, new researchers will unearth new data and derive new interpretations. It is important that this future research is conducted with consideration of contemporary historical standards and methods.

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