Journal of Management History 4,1

Exploring the past

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Introduction

As a social science, the management discipline is inevitably historical[1, p. 274]. Its development is benchmarked by historiographical landmarks that give structure and coherence to the institutionalized and intellectual make-up of the discipline. As such, the management discipline's history and theory are merged on a "voyage of discovery," in which answers to pressing analytical questions require an appreciation of history's complexities, not only to "get the history right" but, also, to "get the theory right"[2]. In this sense, the discipline's contemporary definition of significant research questions, understanding and use of basic concepts, and derivation and testing of substantive hypotheses are each simultaneously current and historical. Thus, to fully understand the management enterprise in its broadest sense, one must also understand it historically.

At the same time, it should not be assumed that management knowledge has preceded in a direct line from the past toward the present. Rather, past arrangements – institutions, roles, cultural forms – are not simply superseded, but transformed and recombined to produce the present[3]. In this sense, the past repeatedly informs and reinforms the present such that the search for understanding is never finished. Present management applications are quite literally what the past – as received and interpreted by the present – have made them. Based on data from the 1870s to the present, Barley and Kunda[4], have demonstrated this point by tracing the manner in which American managerial thought has been elaborated in counterpunctual themes centering on the contrasting ideologies of normative and rational control. Their analysis strongly underscores the conception that despite shifting rhetorics, the past exists in a reciprocal relationship with the present. Just as the past is seen through the eyes of the present, the present is judged in an unending dialogue with the past[5, p. 35].

As argued here, a management discipline that ignores the cumulative impact of past events on present events fails to fully exploit the explanatory and interpretive potential of understanding how and why "present[theories and methods] have their particular nature by virtue of their past"[1, p. 274]. From all indications, contemporary management scholarship is extraordinarily naive in this regard. Whereas, as Zald[6] notes, the development of management thought

Journal of Management History, Vol. 4 No. 1, 1998, pp. 4-15.

The helpful vetting by Ronald G. Greenwood and Daniel A. Wren on an earlier draft manuscript is gratefully acknowledged. Electronic mail may be sent to MGBEDE @ LSUVM.SNCC.LSU.EDU

may be pondered by scholars[e.g. 7-9], theories of management typically proceed "without reference to historical context and process"[6, p. 82].

This ahistorical cast is not unique to newer investigators, but represents a longstanding inclination. Writing over 35 years ago, Viteles[10, p. 104] criticized this tendency by observing that "Sometimes, as I look at the current literature, I wonder whether or not graduate students are ever asked to read anything which was published before approximately 1945." A perusal of the contemporary management literature suggests little has changed, except that 1945 may well be 1980. Indeed, the illustration that Viteles[10] latter cited to substantiate this practice is seemingly still applicable today. Viteles[10] offered as an example the failure of the then relatively new job redesign movement to reference classical British studies, conducted during the 1920s, contrasting the effects of uniform versus varied tasks on output, workers' feelings, and so on. A recent review of the job redesign literature indicates a continuing neglect of these same studies[cf. 11]. The job redesign movement is but one example of a "newer" approach that was, in fact, anticipated in earlier studies that could yet be helpful in informing ongoing workplace challenges. A second example that might be offered involves a forerunner of today's self-managing teams. As early as the 1870s, skilled iron workers, with no foreman or contractor, managed themselves, collectively making production, pay, training, and hiring decisions[12].

A review of current management textbooks is no more encouraging. Although textbooks are admittedly shaped by pedagogical considerations that restrict their topical coverage, the overall impression conveyed is that what is "new" in management thinking is better than what is "old." Past accomplishments are typically relegated to an obligatory "history" chapter in which Frederick W. Taylor is grouped with Henri Fayol and the Gilbreths, almost as automatically as Nod is with Wynken and Blynken and Curly is with Larry and Moe. The relevance of their accomplishments for present-day practice is seldom again mentioned. What is perhaps even more disturbing is that evaluations of research reviews in both management textbooks and journals have repeatedly revealed widespread inaccuracies in the recounting of even so-called classic experiments[13,14]. The deleterious impact of these errors is felt as they are transmitted from generation to generation of scholars and ultimately accepted as fact[15].

To redress this historical vacuousness, the present essay seeks to establish three fundamental points:

(1) the temporal nature of management analysesmandates adopting a contextual logic of explanation;

(2) history serves an indispensable methodological function; and

(3) the methods of nonhistorical research, as compared to those of traditional historical research, are no less problematic and possess no inherent superiority.

At the onset, we define history as more than information about objects, customs, and situations. Recognizing that history requires synthesis, it is defined for the present purpose, following Nevins[16, p. 39], as "any description or analysis of past events or facts written in a spirit of critical inquiry." In doing so, it is readily conceded that "all definitions take sides," but yet as Gay and Cavanaugh[17, p. ix] acknowledge, even today, "historians continue to disagree not merely on how to do what they are doing, but on what it is they are doing in the first place."

Contextual sensitivity

Being a social science, the management discipline is concerned with understanding the daily flux of workplace behavior, the character of collective action, the workings of organizations, and the course of societal evolution. The construction and elaboration of management knowledge, not to mention the practice of management, is consequently a human endeavor in which questions and answers are conceived within a unique and time-bound socioeconomic setting.

Faced with what Stocking[18, p. 211] has termed the resulting "massive complexity of historical particularity," management scholars have all too often fallen victim to the "historian's 'pathetic fallacy'," abstracting events and ideas from their historical context and judging them with direct reference to the present without an awareness of the particularity of the intellectual framework and assumptions of the period in which they existed. All too predictably, this practice (characterized by historians as "presentism") has resulted in prolonged struggles in which self-proclaimed "forces of light" have attacked designated "forces of darkness." This contrasts with the belief that values and ideas change with periods of history, that what is a justifiable ethical or moral standard at one time may not be so at another, and that intellectual frameworks are relative to a given area or time. This belief, which denies "the validity of absolute principles in history," is known as "historical relativism" or "historicism"[19, pp. 25-26]. As a perspective, historicism parallels the notion that structures and behavior in organizations are culturally specific and, thus, as noted by Kieser[20, p. 609], "Differences between organizations in different cultures can... only be explained completely if the historical dimension is included in the comparison."

By wrenching individual phenomena from their historical context and abstracting them in relation to contemporary analogies, successive generations of "enlightened" management scholars have established their "progressive" credentials without regard for anachronistic misrepresentation[cf. 18, p. 212]. Thus, there have been repeated attacks on such "forces of darkness" as Frederick W. Taylor, the Hawthorne Studies, the so-called classicists, and the human relations school[21]. Such assaults seem to run in 20- to 25-year cycles.

These attacks ignore the realization that all intellectual progress is "historically grounded" and that where and when an event or idea occurs significantly affects its character[22]. In this respect, an understanding of both the past and present requires the study of context. The provincialism of those who ignore the significance of time and place fails to recognize that "genesis and context function as integral elements in explication"[23, p. 10]. Moreover, attempts to understand individual phenomena at a particular point in space and time without recognizing broader patterns risks mistaking the particular for the general. Situational and temporal context sensitivity are essential to not only understanding "what," "how," and "why," but also for gaining insights into the ongoing flow of events and ideas. This reality is increasingly evident in the growing number of management researchers who now stress the importance of context for understanding the nature of individual behavior[24].

As noted by *The Economist*[25], Frederick W. Taylor is the most popular target of modern (i.e. presentist) management thinkers. He is vilified as the "epitome" of anachronistic managerial methods. When all too many people think of Taylor today, "they tend to think of dehumanizing time-motion studies"[26, pp. 71-72]. This is an unfortunate caricature of Taylor's work. The fundamental aim of Taylor's philosophy was to replace rule-of-thumb opinion with scientific study in a search for the best way to management. As explained by Locke[27, p. 158] "today's manager has the same goal."

Ironically, it is an appreciation of this common goal that lies at the heart of Japanese managerial success. As described in the *Forbes*'s article "A Lesson Learned and a Lesson Forgotten"[26], what Japanese businessmen learned about management after World War II, they learned from Americans. What Japan learned, and the U.S. forgot, was the lesson of Taylorism, a lesson now known as the systems approach to manufacturing: the notion that every part of an organization should be scientifically analyzed and redesigned to achieve the optimum output[26, p. 72]. Examples of U.S. companies now embracing Taylorism abound. At New United Motor Manufacturing, Inc. (NUMMI), the car factory jointly owned by General Motors and Toyota[25], Ford Motor Co.[28], and UPS[29], the spirit of Taylorism is openly endorsed. The rush of these and other companies to optimize "everything" would no doubt make Taylor dance with glee.

Looking back, even before the first widespread stirrings of the human relations movement in the 1930s, voices were raised in the U.S. against Taylor's efforts[30]. Admittedly, Taylor was often less than diplomatic in addressing his critics. The point remains, however, viewed in the context of the times, wherein the average educational level of the U.S. workforce was three years[31, p. 4]. Taylor's efforts began a revolution that enabled workers to earn middle-class wages and achieve middle-class status[32]. Taylor's "scientific management" was to be (and remains) a tool for greater productivity, greater purchasing power, a higher standard of living. As noted by Drucker[33], it is exactly the application of scientific management to the study of work that has enabled many of the world's less developed and poverty-stricken countries – South Korea, for instance, after the Korean conflict – to become world-class competitors within a single generation.

None of this is to say that even Taylor[34] did not recognize the limitations of the scientific knowledge then at his disposal. Although he has been severely criticized for ignoring the human factor, he well understood he was dealing with a human problem as well as materials and machines. He readily admitted, "There is another type of scientific investigation... which should receive special attention, namely, the accurate study of the motives which influence men"[34, p. 119]. Denouncing Taylor's work, however, for ignoring the intricacies of modern motivation theories is much like attacking Isaac Newton because he failed to invent non-Euclidean geometry or discover the theory of relativity[35]. Viewed in their historical context, when the wisdom of "experts" prevailed, and judged with reference to the intellectual framework and assumptions of the period in which he existed, Taylor's ideas still bear relevance for today's managers. In short, as one reads the classics in management, it is essential that they be grounded in the social reality of their age, so as to avoid the "anachronistic mythologies" that all too often pass as received knowledge[36, pp. 39-40]. That such "contextual reading" likewise requires a due regard for the historical conditions that produced the classics themselves is axiomatic.

History as method

By and large, management historians[e.g. 8,9,37] have avoided the so-called pathetic fallacy, readily acknowledging the variety, contingency, and dynamism of particular historical situations. In doing so, however, they have sought general explanations for workplace behavior, insights into the teleological principles that govern collective action, and knowledge of processes that inform the course of socioeconomic evolution. Likewise they have emphasized a research model that advocates the testing of scientific hypotheses against data from the past as well as the present. In applying this model, they have judged contributions to the management literature on the basis of their originality and importance for the discipline as a whole[cf. 38].

In making such judgments, it is essential to be familiar with what others have said, done, and written. In this regard, history is a necessary part of basic research, serving an indispensable methodological function[39]. Writing from the perspective of the individual scholar, Watson[40, p. 69] makes this point clearly: "To grasp the relative import of one's own work, to place it in perspective, a knowledge of history is invaluable." Indeed, without such knowledge, old facts and old views may be mistaken for new, and there will be no intellectual baseline for evaluating the significance of new theories and techniques[41, p. x]. This linking of understanding and knowledge underscores that, whereas an event did occur in the past, it can only derive meaning by discourse with the present[42].

The "temporal provincialism"[43, p. 252] that marks certain management "contributions" may well stem from the discipline's substantive fragmentation[44]. Whereas the resulting diversity is arguably stimulating to management scholars, it has made developing an integrated overview of the discipline more difficult. This in itself offers justification for the inclusion of history of management courses in graduate management curricula. The historical development of the discipline is the whole that binds the various specialties that compose modern management. It is only by understanding the discipline's genealogical roots that its contemporary diversity can be made clear. Simply stated, the management discipline's past explains its present state.

It has been fashionable since the early 1960s to view management theory as being composed of various major "schools" or "approaches"[45]. Whereas, like the widely differing and often contentious religious denominations of the world, all have the same goals and deal with the same world, each identifies a different "truth." Viewed over time, the emergence of what has been identified as the resulting "management theory jungle" may be explained as a predictable outcome of an inevitable historical process. Understanding this process is essential for appreciating the management discipline's ideological diversity.

In the first place, the existence of alternative approaches to the study of contemporary management highlights the socially constructed view of managerial theories. Whereas these theories may be viewed as testable hypotheses, they may also be treated as ideologies, or, following Barley and Kunda[4], as a set of assumptions about the management enterprise. Such assumptions are never innocent or without consequences. By definition, they not only reflect the circumstances prevailing within various schools of thought at a particular time, but also their past development. As Barley and Kunda[4, p. 363] note, "In this sense, all theories have an ideological component,[because] all theorists must adopt some ontological stance in order to proceed with their work."

As a consequence of having an inevitable ideological component, there are multiple "histories" of all theories, depending upon which ideological stance is "read back into the past"[46, p. 240]. Clearly then, it should never be assumed that any particular text is a pure representation of a discipline's present state. Rather, the extent that "thinking historically requires going beyond chronology or chronicle and looking at the relations that the facts bear to one another"[47, p. 71], an understanding of the management discipline's historical (and ideological) development is essential for explaining its contemporary diversity. For, again, if there is one topic that binds the various approaches to management thought together, it is their common genesis. In this regard, history of management courses can serve an integrative function by showing the present management discipline to itself by revealing its origin from the past[cf. 48, p. 53].

Aside from an integrative function, an appreciation for the management discipline's origins is also invaluable for understanding the implicit values and orientations of modern practitioners, as well as the inherited epistemological foundations, theoretical paradigms, and methodological strategies of today's scholars[49]. For this reason, it is important to study history as an aid to acquiring self-knowledge[50, p. 315]. It is through such knowledge that both practitioners and scholars can gain a better understanding of their defining identity and aspirations and, hence, the ability to go beyond their inherited past.

Likewise, it is in this manner that the characteristic "errors" of every generation are "corrected" by the characteristic "truths" of another. Or, as classicist Edith Hamilton[51, p. 283] recognized, "The heterodoxy of one generation[becomes] the orthodoxy of the next." In their analysis of generational imprinting, Schuman and Scott[52] have concluded that such differences in generational perspectives "can be considered to be a result of varying" locations in historical time. It is this inevitable juxtaposition across generations that ensures the continued progress of management as both an art and a science[53, p. 4n].

Methodology

Historians in any discipline – management being no exception – are invariably confronted by a basic question: What is the appropriate mode of analysis for understanding historical phenomena of interest? This question is confounded by a peculiarity of historical research. That is, it lacks a methodological literature equivalent to other social sciences. As Hendry[54, p. 213] notes, graduate students studying management history do not typically take courses in historiography or "historical methodology." Rather, they learn their craft by critical discussions of the "timeless questions and answers" posed in the "great books," and by critical feedback on their own writings.

In considering such discussions and feedback, it is useful to distinguish between "historical" and "theoretical" explanations[55]. Historical explanations center on "contexts and the causal consequences of events that produced a particular phenomenon of interest." As such, they address "accounts of agency, particulars, and contingency"[55, p. 55]. By contrast, theoretical explanations seek to account for empirical processes in terms of abstract, context-free, and noncontingent principles.

As historians pursue their calling, they often seek to identify the antecedent contexts and events that produced specific developments. In other instances, their search for understanding involves the identification and consideration of theoretical principles that apply beyond a particular historical case. To the extent that historical and theoretical explanations do yield different kinds of understanding, they should be seen as complementary rather than competitive approaches. In this sense, historical explanations can be useful in developing structural or causal models depicting theoretical relationships.

In this connection, whereas historians can and do employ quantitative methods[56], their approach within the management discipline has been primarily to draw upon qualitative analyses to hypothesize causal connections. To do so requires that "events and their contexts be openly theorized, factual material abstracted and generalized, and the causal connections among narrative sequences established in a way that can be explicitly replicated and criticized"[57, p. 1100]. That the extraction and marshalling of evidence of causal significance is fraught with substantive methodological questions is one reason why nonhistorians so often distrust such "historical interrogation"[58, pp. 25-50]. For many management researchers, especially statistically based empiricists, the use by historians of narrative sequences of representation is an index of methodological failure[59, p. 26], indicative of an "archetypal nonscience." For these scholars, the physical sciences are an ideal to be imitated; positivism is considered a virtue and narrativity an invalid mode of explanation marked by subjectivity[54, p. 212].

Whereas some management researchers may have inherited from the physical sciences the myth that scientific inference as endorsed by positivism is objective and free from personal bias, in the words of Leamer[60, p. 36]: "This is utter nonsense." Social research of all kinds and, more generally, all managerial practice, are theories in action, inasmuch as they involve conscious or unconscious procedures for constructing facts or relations among facts[61, p. 39]. In this manner, all facts are theory laden. As a consequence, the research we read, historical and nonhistorical alike, "though based on facts, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements"[62, p. 14].

The point is simply this: Whereas the rituals of nonhistorical research, with an emphasis on quantification, is usually more elaborate and, in the words of Mills[63, p. 71] "certainly more pretentious," the "logical status of the result is not different." In both historical and nonhistorical research projects, researchers typically work with imperfect materials[5, p. 14; 64, p. 215; 65, p. 7]. Moreover, in neither case, do the researchers involved stand outside the facts they analyze, or look down on them from above. In both, they are agents in the research process[66, p. ix].

The basic contrast between the explanatory logic of historical and nonhistorical researchers is the manner in which data ("evidence") come into being[23]. For the most part, researchers following a nonhistorical tradition literally create their own data through interviews or surveys. In doing so, they intrude as foreign elements into the social setting they seek to describe, creating as well as measuring the attitudes they seek to gauge[67, p. 1]. The artificially-induced responses they collect are commonly "forced" into pre-selected action categories or orientations. As a consequence, the resulting data are necessarily second-order interpretations of respondents' own subjective interpretations, both interpretations undeniably replete with perspectival and ideological biases[23].

By comparison, historians can only draw comparative inferences based on primary evidence (i.e. letters, public notices, diaries, and legal records;[68]). The historian's imagination must thus be directed toward re-creation not creation[19, p. 9]. As explained by Cicourel[69, p. 143], "It is the historian's imaginative ability to engage in... comparative conceptual play, backed by logical argument and careful use of documents, which meaningfully explains the past." The information so extracted is thereby free from the artificial trappings of modern survey or interview methods with their batteries of formal questions and psychologically-induced and mechanically-scaled responses.

A comparison of information generated through surveys or questionnaires with that identified from historical materials should not be taken to suggest a preference for one over the other. Rather, as Bryant[23] argues, the quality of inferences drawn from source materials or data sets, whatever their provenance, should be assessed on the basis of their substantive properties rather than on simple methodological boundaries.

Whereas historical and nonhistorical research strategies are founded on different empirical bases, both have advantages and disadvantages whose relevance can only be assessed on the basis of specific research goals. The logic of discovery they employ is identical. Each involves an "ongoing dialectic" between both observation and conceptualization and induction and deduction[23, p. 5]. Thus, the management researcher who correlates job commitment with various work-related outcomes so as to propose a causal relation is engaged in the same inferential process as the management historian who infers how changes in the economic, social, and political environments of Great Britain set the stage for the Industrial Revolution and the genesis of modern management thought. Both require interpretation!

Finally, matters of data quality are an essential concern in both historical and nonhistorical research. In this regard, the challenges faced by contemporary management researchers are no less daunting than those encountered by management historians exploring the past. Whereas management historians must always address difficulties associated with the availability and preservation of primary evidence, investigators of the present confront problems regarding the completeness, reliability, and validity of their self-generated data. Furthermore, though it is often overlooked, even those plumbing the present do at times confront matters that are "intrinsically historical"[23, p. 6]. Indeed, this is becoming all the more commonplace with the growing application of longitudinal data techniques with their concern for sequentially-ordered and time-dependent events and focus on causal (i.e. historical) explanations.

Conclusion

A rich and modulated understanding of the historical structure underlying the logical surface of the management discipline is essential to fully understand the contemporary management enterprise in its broadest sense. To this end, the past is an indispensable tool for grasping the relative importance of one's own work and placing it in perspective with regard to other generations. It is this free commerce between the ages that cements our kinship with times and places past and allows us to more fully appreciate our own time and place in the parade of history. In this respect, above all, the "gift of professional maturity"[41, p. x] comes only to those who know the history of their discipline.

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