

## Towards Polyphonic Constitutive Historicism: a New Research Agenda for Management Historians

This paper builds on recent developments in organizational remembering scholarship to outline a new research agenda for management historians. This approach, polyphonic constitutive historicism, involves investigating how competing interpretations of the past are developed and used by different sets of actors within organizations. Traditionally, management historians have focused on understanding what actually took place in the past. In this intellectual tradition, archival materials and other documents from the historical period being studied are the main data source used to write academic papers. In sharp contrast, the research agenda we are proposing involves a shift in focus to understanding how perceptions of the past influence economic action in the present. The research agenda outlined in this paper will require the use of a new set of data sources, such as interviews in which participants are asked about their understanding of the past. The research agenda we are proposing falls into the category of scholarly analysis Wadhvani and Jones (2014, 209) call *constitutive historicism*. Constitutive historicism involves the investigation how economic actors' perceptions of their own places in historical time shape their strategies. Constitutive historicism as developed by Wadhvani and Jones is part of the broader field of memory studies, which also includes organizational remembering, organization forgetting, and social memory.

Academics interested in organizational remembering have already published constitutive historicism research. We discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these works below. We argue that in going forward management historians need to draw on advances in the field of social memory studies to ensure that our methods for researching organizational remembering are up-to-date, comprehensive, and, crucially, *polyphonic*. By polyphonic we mean that many voices are heard together, rather than just a single voice or just the voices of a few elite individuals within an organization. Unfortunately, much of the existing literature on how the past is used in organizations is non-polyphonic in the sense that the historical ideas of only a small number of actors are considered. An example of such non-polyphonic research would be a paper that looks at the version of history presented in a commissioned corporate history without trying to compare this official narrative with the narratives created by the firm's other stakeholders, such as workers, consumers, investors, and regulators. The

result is that the organization is depicted as speaking with a single voice. We believe that in looking at perceptions of the history of a company, an industrial cluster, or indeed any economic organization, the researcher should record and compare the historical ideas of many different sets of actors. Such an approach would be *polyphonic constitutive historicism*.

Our analysis builds on the growing literature that focuses on the usefulness of historical analysis in management research. In 2004, Clark and Rowlinson called for a “historic turn” (i.e. the integration of “more history” into research and teaching in business and management schools). Keulen and Kroeze (2012) claim that since 2004, incorporating history has indeed become “more common.” Although Keulen and Kroeze do not provide hard bibliometric data to support this assertion, it is congruent with observations by other management scholars (Mills and Mills 2013; Birkenshaw et al. 2014; Rowlinson et al. 2013). The extent to which a historic turn is actually taking place has been recently been discussed by Kiesen (2015) and Rowlinson (2015). While Kiesen suggests that the turn has not had the impact that was hoped for twenty years ago, and Rowlinson demonstrates that history is increasingly integrated into organization studies. However, even Rowlinson concedes that the growing acceptance of historical research has not produced a true “paradigm shift” in organization studies (2015, 78). A recent special issue of *Business History* included articles analysing various methodologies including affirmation of the utility of the case study model, a social science approach, and the value of plurality (De Jong, Higgins, and van Driel 2015; Whittle and Wilson 2015; Decker, Kipping, and Wadhvani 2015). Business and management historians are now engaged in a lively debate about the future research direction of their discipline. Our paper should be viewed as a contribution to this conversation.

Our training in history departments informs our approach to organizational memory and organizational remembering.<sup>1</sup> As we show below, the research culture of history departments is far more polyphonic today than it was a generation ago because most historians now believe that it is important to listen to the voices of people of all socio-economic statuses rather than simply members of social elites. We call on scholars of organizational remembering to emulate social historians by seeking to incorporate a more diverse range of voices. We detect an emerging trend towards more polyphonic approaches in more recent works on organizational remembering by scholars such as Linde (2009),

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<sup>1</sup> Following Feldman and Feldman (2006), we have chosen to refer to “organizational remembering” rather than the noun “organizational memory.” We believe that the former term, which denotes an ongoing practice, better captures the nature of memory in organizations.

Adorisio (2014), and Decker (2014). These researchers have overcome the practical barriers to capturing and analysing the diverse historical narratives created by individuals within companies. We welcome this emerging trend and call on scholars of organizational remembering to build on it by increasing the degree to which their research is polyphonic.

### **The Rise of Polyphonic Research in History Departments**

Research in history departments in the early twenty-first century is far more polyphonic than it was fifty years ago, when the focus was on elite historical actors. Historical research has always been somewhat polyphonic in the sense that it has involved the triangulation of sources: for instance, a diplomatic historian researching a particular episode in relations between Prussia and Austria would likely look at documents created by political leaders from both countries in the course of forming his or her understanding of what actually took place. The importance of the triangulation of sources was stressed by Leopold von Ranke (Von Ranke 2010, 99), the nineteenth-century professor who is widely regarded as the founder of academic history (Woolf 2011, 538). However, the rise of social history in the 1960s dramatically increased the range of historical actors who were considered worthy of investigation. This trend was influenced by the publication in 1963 of E.P. Thompson's seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class* (Holland and Phillips 2014). Thompson wrote that he was seeking "to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity (1963, 12)." In an effort to be comprehensive and inclusive, social historians have built on Thompson's legacy by recovering the voices of other marginalized groups. What Thompson advocated is now commonly referred to as "history from below" (Black and MacRaild 2007, 113). This approach received impetus from the social movements associated with the New Left and the protests of 1968. "History from below" has resulted in research on social-historical topics that include, among many others, gender history, environmental history, LGBT history, and the history of childhood, all of which came to be regarded as legitimate and indeed core parts of the research cultures of many history departments (Novick 1988, 440-445; Cannadine 2008, 181, 232, 218).

The crucial point for our purposes is that most historians now believe that in attempting to understand a particular historical society, it is important to try to study the experiences and ideas of a range of individuals in that culture (e.g., peasants, ordinary

workers, foot soldiers) rather than simply relying on the documents that only record the experiences and ideas of powerful individuals, such as kings, captains of industry, and generals. We believe that the study of organizational remembering should strive to understand how individuals in organizations contest interpretations of the past. Doing so requires listening to the voices of a wide range of actors at all levels of the organizational hierarchy. We critique some of the existing works in organizational remembering for failing to capture the diversity of historical interpretations that are likely to be found in any large organizations.

### **Social Memory Studies: Changing Approaches**

In the section below, we discuss the current state of the literature on organizational remembering. This section analyses parallel developments in the broader field of social memory studies. Prior to the 1980s, few academics studied how non-academics think about the past. Due in part to the influence of Ranke, academic historians were traditionally positivistic in their orientation and were preoccupied with studying “*wie es eigentlich gewesen*” i.e. what had actually happened (Novick, 1987). The advent of postmodernist theory in the 1980s and 1990s helped to legitimize the growing body of literature on social memory i.e., the investigation of how the historical ideas of non-academics influence behaviour in the present (Klein, 2000). This field of inquiry has been defined as incorporating memory, identity, and cultural continuity (Assmann 2011, 2). It also involves considering how social groups construct a shared past (Erl 2008, 5), but can also either be considered the aggregate of individually constructed memories or collective memory (Olick 1999). Social memory scholars are interested in how the ideas about the past embedded in non-academic sources such as local war memorials, family storytelling, and Hollywood epics, influence how people think about the present and strategize for the future (Zerubavel 2012, 20). Academics who work in a wide range of disciplines, including anthropology, politics, law, education, literature, philosophy, psychology and sociology, as well as history, have contributed to the development of memory studies (Roediger and Wertsch, 2008). An increasingly important issue for memory researchers is determining how ideas about the past influence behaviour in the present and strategies for the future.

The first generation of social memory scholarship, which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, generally involved comparing what a relatively small number of printed texts said about a given topic. Although it was published in the early 2000s, the research methodology

of Von Borries (2003) is fairly representative of this approach. Von Borries notes that until the late 1960s, the history textbooks issued to West German teenagers were often silent about the Holocaust of European Jewry, although they used robust language to condemn Hitler for the specific errors in military strategy made during the invasion of the Soviet Union. He suggests that in the early twenty-first century, no German textbook based its criticism of Hitler on the obvious flaws of his military strategy, since such an argument would imply that Hitler's goal of invading the USSR was legitimate. Von Borries shows that textbook depictions of the Third Reich begin to include more information on the Holocaust in the late 1960s. He links this change to the youth protests of 1968. Von Borries did not attempt to document how the teenagers who read these obviously biased textbooks reacted to the messages contained therein. Moreover, he did not attempt to determine whether different perceptions of German history influence the behaviour of young Germans.

A somewhat different approach to the study of social memory involves interviewing those who participated in a given historical event and then comparing it against accounts in documents in archives and other primary sources. One example of this approach to social memory is an extensive project that involved interviewing Australian war veterans (Thomson 2006). The Australian project is fundamentally more interactive than that of Von Borries in the sense that it involved speaking to many individuals rather than relying on just a handful of textbooks. In practical terms, the research methodology of the Australian oral historians appears to be significantly more costly than the desk-based research of Von Borries. We would argue that the costs associated with interview processes are worthwhile since the resulting research is more *polyphonic*: a greater variety of voices were heard in the Australian paper than in the paper by Von Borries.

Other social memory projects involve studying the historical ideas of a cross-section of the population. For instance, Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998) interviewed over 1,000 Americans to try to gauge how the historical ideas of ordinary people influenced their approaches to matters such as careers, religion, and relationships. A similar approach inspired a recent research project that was coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness at the University of British Columbia. That study involved asking ordinary citizens open-ended questions in which people were prompted to identify the important events in the recent history that were important to their lives (Conrad et al. 2013).

As noted above, the first generation of social memory scholars tended to focus on a relatively small number of texts, such as textbooks. The creators of these texts were usually relatively privileged individuals in fairly senior positions in organizations based in urban areas. The authors of the textbooks studied by Von Borries clearly fall into this category. Scholars who were interested in the unequal distribution of power in society critiqued the approach taken by the first generation of social memory scholars because it ignored the perspectives of the youngsters and working-class people who were frequently the targets of elites' attempts to manipulate popular historical consciousness. Hoelscher and Alderman (2004, 349) note that "the study of social memory inevitably comes around to questions of domination and the uneven access to a society's political and economic resources." Drawing on the seminal 1983 work by Hobsbawm and Ranger, Hoelscher and Alderman argue that "representatives of dominant social classes have been most adept at using memory as an instrument of rule... it is often the case that memories of ordinary people are appropriated by elites and pressed into the service of conquest and domination." In their 2004 paper, they cite "recent research" that demonstrates that socially subordinated groups "such as the anti-apartheid leaders before the collapse of white rule in South Africa, or AIDS activists in the USA (Sturken 1997) are becoming ever more adept at making use of memory to challenge their own subordination." These scholars were, in effect, calling for social memory studies to become more polyphonic through the investigation of how subordinated groups create counter-narratives.

Social memory scholars appear to have responded to these demands for a more polyphonic approach. The aforementioned project at University of British Columbia is an outstanding example of polyphonic social memory research. This project involved a large number of interviews and for its efforts to ensure that their survey captured the historical ideas of individuals from a variety of social groups, not to mention geographical localities. Other polyphonic works on social memory include Griffin (2004), Armstrong and Cragge (2006), Molden (2015), and Novick (2015). Moreover, the ANTi-History approach of Durepos & Mills (2012) has also called attention to the diversity of historical perspectives within organizations, as their relational approach focuses on how actors are changed as they interact, form networks, and struggle to advance their interests. In their approach (p.709) "actors are assumed to be heterogeneous," a position that strongly suggests that the historical narratives produced by these actors will also be dissimilar. The lesson for management historians interested in adopting the constitutive historicism methodology is that we need to

ensure that our research involves the investigation of the perspectives of individuals in a variety of social classes and/or positions within organizational hierarchies. For instance, in investigating social memory in a car company, the historical ideas of the assembly line workers as well as those of the CEO need to be investigated.

### **Organizational Remembering**

Walsh and Ungson's (1991) work on organizational memory continues to be extensively cited. Like the historians and sociologists who wrote about social memory in the 1980s, Walsh and Ungson were interested in determining the consequences of specific organizational memories. However, while the central theme of their paper closely parallels those that were being explored by the social-memory scholars of the 1980s, Walsh and Ungson do not cite any of the works in this intellectual tradition aside from Schuman and Scott's study of the collective memories of various US age cohorts (1989). Instead, Walsh and Ungson's thinking about organizational memory appears to have been influenced primarily by developments in fields such as psychology and information technology. Their paper, which contains metaphors borrowed from discussions of computer memory, argues that organizational memory is contained in the following "storage bins: individuals, culture, transformations, structures, ecology, and external archives" (1991, 81). Walsh and Ungson criticize some of the existing literature on memory in organizations for falling into the trap of anthropomorphism (i.e., equating memory in organizations with memory in individuals). In their view, such anthropomorphism is a barrier to understanding precisely where in organizations various memories are located. They note that it is unclear whether "information is processed and stored by the individuals who comprise the organization... by the organization itself... or by the dominant coalition or upper echelon." In our view, Walsh and Ungson's reference to organizational elites is important because individuals with different positions in organizational hierarchies are likely to have highly dissimilar perceptions of the past. Implicit in their references to echelons and coalitions is the insight that ideas about the past are diverse and contested. Following the publication of the work by Walsh and Ungson, scholars began to look at how firms use history to make strategy, market their products, and motivate workers. Unfortunately, much of the literature on organizational memory failed to build on their important insight about the diversity of conceptions of the past within organizations.

The use of corporate history by managers was addressed by Rowlinson and Hassard (1993) in their study of the use of history by Cadbury's, a British chocolate manufacturer. In 1931, a year that was then regarded as the firm's centenary, Cadbury produced an official history that was given to employees and other stakeholders. Rowlinson and Hassard make it clear that this publication, which presented Cadbury's history as that of benevolent employer, was an attempt to generate goodwill among the workers at a time of considerable industrial unrest in Britain. Unfortunately, their paper neither attempts to assess the extent to which this narrative actually persuaded Cadbury's workers nor investigates the narratives about the firm's history created by the workers themselves. The closest the authors come to a sustained analysis of the workers' own counter-narratives is their remark that "if they read it, Bournville workers would have been re-assured to learn from their copy" of the official history that the firm had a tradition of paying wages that were higher than those prevailing in Birmingham (Rowlinson and Hassard 1993, 320). In defence of Rowlinson and Hassard, it should be pointed out that it would have been difficult for them to have captured the historical ideas of Cadbury workers in 1931 sixty years later: their adoption of a non-polyphonic approach to Cadbury's memory was, in a sense, dictated by practical questions of source availability. However, the lack of attention paid to worker-created historical narratives in their paper is also reflective of a wider tendency in the organizational remembering literature toward the adoption of non-polyphonic research methods.

A more recent example of non-polyphonic organizational remembering research is Kroeze's 2013 paper on how HSBC and Deutsche Bank depict their controversial histories on their websites. Deutsche Bank's long history creates liabilities for present-day managers because it has become common knowledge that the firm cooperated with the Nazi regime and profited from the seizure of Jewish assets. Similarly, HSBC's history, which extends back to 1865 and the era of the opium trade, creates liabilities in mainland China, where the bank is associated with historical British imperialism. Kroeze's paper explores how the banks, or rather the bank employees responsible for the history section of their websites, have dealt with these issues. Unfortunately, his paper is based on a very small number of texts (i.e. a few pages on corporate websites), which means that the voices of only a small number of (unnamed) bank employees are analysed in his paper. Had Kroeze been able to find other online sources, such as internet discussion boards, in which outsiders commented on the banks' controversial histories, his paper would have been polyphonic because the opinions of a wider range of actors would have been analysed.



A similarly non-polyphonic approach is seen in an important paper by Suddaby, Foster, and Trank (2010). This important paper is innovative because it demonstrates that “rhetorical history” can be an important source of competitive advantage for firms, particularly as it is often inimitable. Drawing on Hobsbawm and Ranger’s concept of the “invented tradition” (1983), they defined “history” as the socially-constructed interpretations of events, whereas “the past” is what actually took place: “history is subjective whereas the past is objective.” They also point out that history is not simply “made up”, as the past “acts as an empirical check” on one’s freedom to construct useful narratives. Instead, individuals select particular facts for inclusion in historical narratives while omitting other equally true facts. The key actors in the paper by Suddaby et al. are corporate managers and their research focus is on how “managers use the trappings of invented history, tradition, and ritual as a strategic device inside organizations.” Their focus on the use of history by managers means that Suddaby et al. do not explore how other individuals, such as consumers, low-ranking workers, investors, etc., respond to the version of historical events been disseminated by senior managers. In contrast, our preferred approach would involve examining the historical ideas of a wide range of individuals.

A similarly narrow focus on the historical ideas of managers is seen in Foster et al.’s piece (2011) on the use of history by Tim Horton’s, a Canadian coffee store chain. This firm’s marketing campaigns attempted to associate the company with Canada’s military history and national identity in the course of combatting the “invasion” of the Canadian coffee market by US chains such as Starbucks. Foster et al., focus on the use of historical ideas in texts aimed at consumers. They do not, however, attempt to gauge how *consumers* responded to the use of history in these texts. It is not, therefore, established that the managers’ use of historical ideas was actually persuasive.

We see similar limitations in the study by Anteby and Molnár (2012), which examined the use of history in documents created for internal use within a company. They studied over three hundred internal bulletins produced at a French aeronautics firm over half a century with a view to understand how management attempted to manipulate the historical thinking of employees. In our view, the decision of Anteby and Molnár to select an aerospace company for this study was appropriate because the aerospace industry is closely associated with defence and national prestige and thus the historical construct of the nation-state. Unfortunately, while their paper does a good job of describing the various historical

narratives that the managers presented to the workforce, it does not attempt to assess the extent to which ordinary workers were persuaded by this exercise in rhetorical history. The use of interviews may have allowed these researchers to capture the voices of ordinary workers.

So far, we have examined scholarship on organizational remembering that adopts a non-polyphonic approach. There is, however, extant research that corresponds to our preferred approach of polyphonic constitutive historicism. Parker (2002) explored how ideas about company history were contested by the employees of a British building society (community-based financial institution). Parker observed that there were substantial differences in the interpretations of history by the firm's employees and that these disagreements often frequently reflected "professional, departmental, generational" and other divisions within the organization. He argues that the managers' debates over strategy reflected "divisions over the meaning of the organisation's history." The key point here is that even within the elite of the organization, individuals had different versions of history. He cautions that "there is not necessarily only one history in use within an organisation" and corporate heritage is "often taken to imply sharedness, a normative consensus or negotiated order, when in practice organisations might be just as well formulated as sites of division."

The approach to organizational remembering adopted by Kransdorff (2006) has a strong polyphonic element, as he suggests that much of a firm's memory relies in its workers who may have interests that differ markedly from those of senior managers. He observes (2006, 43) that the high rates of employee turnover degrade the ability of US firms to remember, since workers take their memories with them when they depart. Linde's (2009) ethnographic study of an unnamed insurance company in the US Midwest is perhaps the best example of truly polyphonic research about organizational remembering. Linde's research involved spending an extended period in the offices of the company so that she could observe conversations and documents meant for internal use. Linde's approach has several advantages over that of Kroeze, Foster et al., and Anteby and Molnár in that her immersion in the firm allowed her to look at how rank-and-file employees *received* the messages about the company's history that were being presented by senior management. Her approach is closer to those we would favour because it recognizes that interpretations of the past are likely to be contested. However, we understand that most researchers are unlikely to have the degree of privileged access to company employees as Linde, who was embedded inside the company

for an extended period. The availability of sources may help to explain why much of the existing research on organizational remembering focuses on the discourses approved by senior managers (e.g. company official histories or the company history sections of websites).

Maclean et al. (2014) demonstrate an awareness of the fact that the version of the corporate past approved by senior managers may not be approved of by all employees of the firm in their study of how Procter & Gamble's senior executives used history to make sense of the present. Their article is grounded in Ricoeur's work on the importance of narratives in sensemaking (1984). They show that stories about P&G history played an important role in conveying a sense of the firm's "character" and in legitimating the firm's distinctive institutions, such as promotion from within. However, they caution that the interpretations of corporate history used by senior executives in the firm's Cincinnati headquarters might be radically different from those of other members of the company's worldwide workforce, noting that the "the small number of interviews" they undertook made it difficult to capture the views of other employees about the relationship between the firm's history and such recent innovations as "downsizing and off-shoring". However, while their access agreement with P&G in the United States only allowed the researchers to interview senior executives in that country, Maclean et al. were also able to interview "current and former executives from P&G subsidiaries in other countries. These executives recalled a "lessening of warmth and friendship" as the corporate culture changed in the 1990s (2014, 559). The research by Maclean et al. illustrates some of the practical problems researchers may face in attempting to capture the full range of historical narratives voiced by the employees of large companies, particularly those with global workforces that may not even speak the languages known to the researchers.

Adorisio (2014) was able to overcome practical barriers to the attainment of polyphonicity in her examination of the use of history in her study of two banks: one American and one British. Drawing on the distinction between organizational memory and organizational remembering advanced by Feldman and Feldman (2006), she argues that selective remembering through narrative is different from studying history through the "static repository" image of memory (2014, 465). Adorisio's research involves two main data sets, written sources such as "brochures, internal newsletters, official speeches and archive materials" that discuss the bank's history and interviews with bank employees. The first set of sources present the official, management-approved version of the bank's history, while the

interview process allowed Adorasio to examine the historical narratives created by employees. Adorasio's interviewees "were asked to talk about their professional life, the history of the organizations in which they have been involved and the evolution of management practices in their organizations" (2014, 469). Adorasio found that the individuals within these organizations frequently "storied" or narrated the organizational history in a highly personal fashion that differed from the approved version presented in official company documents. Adorasio's approach is clearly polyphonic and thus consistent with the research agenda argued for in this paper.

A strong polyphonic dimension can also be seen in a recent paper by Decker (2014) on organizational remembering in British banks in two African countries (Ghana and Nigeria) during the era of decolonization (1950–1970). Based on her reading of manager-created documents in corporate archives, Decker argues that modernist architecture was adopted by the banks as part of an effort to project a progressive narrative about the bank's future role in the development of these countries that was designed to encourage the "forgetting of their involvement in the colonial past of these countries" (2014, 515). Decker shows that while the adoption of a modernist architectural idiom for branches was clearly intended to convey the managers' message that the banks were a progressive force, not all local actors were persuaded by these arguments in concrete. She also found that there was considerable "internal dissent" with the banks that saw the rejection of this narrative. Moreover, the "new bank branches also did not magically create legitimacy for controversial firms, and the banks' colonial past would still get referenced amidst the narratives of economic development and a glorious future." (2014, 526-7) Decker was able to capture the voices of different individuals within the banks because of the nature of the access agreements governing her use of historical documents in the relevant corporate archives.

One important limitation of the existing literature on organizational remembering is that it is disproportionately focused on large corporations, particularly the multinationals with the resources to actively manage their social memory. Actively managing the history of a corporation can involve such costs as hiring an in-house historian, funding a corporate archive, or by commissioning an official corporate history from The History Factory (2015), the Winthrop Group (2015), or one of the smaller consulting firms that serve to manage corporate historical reputations (National Council of Public History, 2015). The problem with the existing literature's focus on the large companies is that ideas about the past also

influence the behaviour of small businesses, self-employed individuals, retail investors, not to mention judges, workers, regulators, consumers, central bankers, and other actors who influence the strategies of big firms. To really understand how perceptions of the past influence business in the present, management historians should explore how historical ideas influence the decision-making process of a wide range of actors. We also need to recognize that terms such as “the senior management team” may obscure the diversity of historical ideas on the part of the individuals within this population. It is unlikely that all of the senior managers of a company view its history in an identical fashion, particularly if some have been hired from other organizations.

### **A New Research Agenda for Management Historians: Polyphonic Constitutive Historicism**

The overall research programme we envision involves looking at how ideas about history influences business thought and action in the present. This basic idea can be taken in various directions. In this section, we outline some examples of what polyphonic constitutive historicism research might look like in practice. Before we outline these examples, we need to make a methodologically important point about how grammar structures the thinking of scholars engaged in organizational remembering research. As noted above, Suddaby et al. (2010) tend to anthropomorphize companies. For instance, they speak of “how corporations view history.” Although they are legally persons, incorporated entities do not view history: each of the humans in a company has the capacity to view history, but only some of their perspectives make their way into official texts (e.g. a brochure about the company’s history or the company-history section of the corporate website). The US practice of referring to companies in the singular may be a subtle yet important barrier to grasping the sheer diversity of historical opinions within a firm. As a general rule, we would suggest that in future research on organizational remembering, scholars adopt the British practice of referring to companies as collective nouns (e.g. “Barclays are a bank”) rather than the US practice of referring to companies as singular nouns (e.g. “Barclays is a bank”). This practice should be adopted in all of the possible research projects discussed below.

One of these possible avenues of investigation involves applying a polyphonic methodology to single-company case studies. We could, for instance, focus on the impact of social memory on consumers by trying to determine whether a company’s attempts to manipulate the memory of its history are actually successful in getting consumers to buy their

products. Foster et al. (2011) did not examine how consumers received the historical messages disseminated by Canadian firm Tim Horton's in its marketing campaign. A possible follow-up project would involve focus groups to see how Tim Horton's customers think about the company's attempt to use history and how such thought influences their purchasing behaviour. Another variant of this idea would involve looking at how senior executives of a company think about the firm's history and the relationship between that history and the firm's overall strategy. Such research would, of course, involve extensive negotiations with the firm's leadership prior to the interviews. Alternatively, one might look at the use of history in investor relations documents, such as annual reports. Interviewing investors about how they have received the historical messages produced by the company's investor-relations communications team might involve travelling to the company's AGM.

There are additional avenues of research we should consider. We could change the unit of analysis from the firm to the industry and then ascertain how various participants (consumers, workers, managers, and shareholders) think about the history of a given industry. This research approach would, however, be biased towards the study of those industries in which the sectoral organizations (e.g. Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers or the Motion Picture Association of America) have the resources to manage the firm's social memory actively. We could also switch the unit of analysis from the industry to the industrial cluster, such as Shenzhen's manufacturing hub or Silicon Valley. Under this scenario, we would look at how people view the history of the locality in question. One possible tack would involve looking at how various conceptions of a locality's history influences the decision of entrepreneurs about where to locate start-ups. For instance, Silicon Valley's history has generated a large number of legends and stock ideas, with accounts of the region's economy being replete with references to events, buildings, and institutions in the Valley's history. This "lore" (Isaacson 2014, 401) reinforces the idea that Silicon Valley is an ideal place in which to operate, despite the high cost of real estate. To adapt the terminology of Suddaby et al. this so-called lore helps to increase the competitive advantage of the region, since it is difficult to imitate. Similarly, the City of London is steeped in historical institutions such as medieval livery companies that have survived into the present (Jagger 2015). These institutions use obviously archaic pageantry to send messages about the endurance of the City as a financial centre. It may be that some industry participants find this sense of historical continuity and permanence reassuring in the face of risk and uncertainty.

Management scholars could also investigate bankers' perceptions of financial history to see which historical patterns they feel are relevant to their decision-making processes. In their autopsy of the recent financial crisis, Reinhart and Rogoff (2009) suggest that bankers and regulators have failed to learn lessons from the long history of bubbles and crises. The story they tell is one of historical amnesia, but their analysis of how historical amnesia might influence financial decisions is largely speculative and without any basis in interviews with actual bankers. Interviews with open-ended questions would be one way of verify the extent to which the strategies of participants are informed by various readings of financial history. One management scholar, Natalya Vinakurova (2015), is already at work on an ethnographic project on the interplay of organizational memory and organizational forgetting in structuring the market for new financial products. Her research, which is informed by the literature on sensegiving and sensemaking (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991), centres on the in the Mortgage-Backed Securities whose invention contributed to the financial crisis.

We also might begin to investigate how other ideas about economic history influence the behaviour of entrepreneurs in a given industry. For instance, we might look at how different ways of periodizing economic and technological history influence people involved in emerging areas of technology. One possible case study would involve looking at the community of entrepreneurs involved in 3-D printing and makerbots. A number of the writers who have published on this area of technology explicitly analogize its development to the British "industrial revolution" of the eighteenth century. In his book on the so-called "maker movement," tech entrepreneur Chris Anderson included a chapter comparing the Industrial Revolution with the rise of "distributed manufacturing" (Anderson 2012). Another recent book on these technologies contains even more material about the Industrial Revolution (Marsh, 2012). The authors develop this (highly questionable) historical analogy to support this thesis that 3-D printers and associated technologies will have dramatic social consequences. The key thing is that at least some of the entrepreneurs involved in this area of technology are thinking about their actions in historical and analogous-historical terms. We now need to assess whether such analogies influence the business strategies of other entrepreneurs involved in this fast moving field.

Constitutive historicism scholars should also adopt polyphonic approaches when investigating industrial relations. For instance, when union leaders talk to their members about history, do they refer primarily to the recent history of the trade union or to more

distant events in national or international labour history? What messages about history are embedded in the iconography of trade unions (e.g. the embroidered banners carried in processions)? Why is it that British trade unionists still congregate each year in the village of Tolpuddle to commemorate a nineteenth-century court case about the right of agricultural labourers to unionize? [See Image 1]. Are the historical narratives of ordinary workers the same as those of the trade union leadership? Another approach involves investigating how workers respond to attempts by corporate leaders to manage the historical memory of the company. These are all questions that could be answered if scholars of industrial relations adopted polyphonic constitutive historicism as a research methodology.

Image 1.

Caption: In 1834, labour activists in the English town of Tolpuddle were sentenced to transportation to Australia. In an attempt to harness this memory for present-day political action, British trade unions now commemorate the Tolpuddle Martyrs by holding an annual march through the village. Photo taken by Nigel Mykura, 20 July 2008. Photo released under Creative Commons Licence.





## Conclusions and Challenges

This paper has outlined a variety of research avenues for management historians interested in applying the approach we call polyphonic constitutive historicism. We recognize that there are many potential barriers to the implementation of the research agenda we have proposed. For instance, many of the possible research projects we have sketched would involve conducting interviews, which can be a costly process, especially since some stakeholders may be unwilling to talk. However, we believe that these costs would be worthwhile expenditures, as they would allow us to understand how the historical narratives created by various actors within an organization interact with one another.

The social-memory literature discussed above has demonstrated that the historical narratives that each individual creates are influenced by a wide range of factors that include one's nationality, gender, ethnicity, education, socio-economic status, ideology, not to mention the generation into which one was born. It is therefore likely that the individuals within a business corporation or other large organization have different ways of viewing the history of the organization and history more generally. Non-polyphonic approaches to organizational remembering fail to capture the diverse ways in which organization members view the past. The diversity of historical narratives within companies is likely to become even greater due to changes in the composition of the workforce driven by immigration, internationalization, and the recruitment of greater numbers of women.

Some of the approaches we have outlined would require researchers to draw on different bodies of theory and to engage with literature in different journals. In pursuing polyphonic constitutive historicism research, management historians would likely need to co-author with management academics in other disciplines. The need to engage with scholars in a wide variety of management fields means that the future body of work on constitutive historicism will be extremely diverse in terms of the types of theory and subject matter being addressed. In our view, this diversity will be one of strengths of this body of literature as the appearance of polyphonic constitutive historicism research in a wide variety of publication venues will help to convey our point that memories have a pervasive impact on a wide range of decisions. We operate in the presence of the past: raising consciousness of how perceptions of the past shapes decisions in the present promises to increase reflexivity on the part of academic researchers and perhaps even practitioners as well.

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