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Rethinking Retrospective Research:
Some Positions on the Past and Possibilities for Analysis

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Abstract
This paper compares and contrasts four positions on the organisation and treatment of the past in retrospective social research: Controlling the Past, in which attempts are made to maximise accurate recall or to reveal potential sources of error or bias; Interpreting the Past, in which understanding of the present is informed by the construction of past reality; Reconstructing or Revising the Past, in which causal explanations link the past and the present; and Representing the Past, which involves the problematisation of time and research on time. Implications for the analysis and practice of retrospective research are discussed, and it is argued that the taking-for-granted of retrospect as marginal has stifled discussion of a fruitful site for analysis.

Keywords: Retrospective research methods; Bias; Sensemaking; Attribution; Time.
In their recent introduction to critical management research, Alvesson and Deetz (2000) argued that much of mainstream management research is built on a modernist science based on the Enlightenment promise for “an autonomous subject progressively emancipated by knowledge acquired through scientific methods” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p.13). Within the associated grand narratives of progress and emancipation (cf. Lyotard, 1984), the past was displaced and “the traditional was marginalized and placed off in the private realm” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 14). Indeed, in both its interests and its practices, modernism looks to the future rather than to the past for its emphases lie on hope, on prediction, and on control for a better future. In contrast with the dignity of the present and the hope for such a future, the past is marginalised, romanticised, oversimplified as kitsch, or overcomplicated as pandemonium (cf. Burrell, 1997).

Within this context, it is perhaps not surprising that social scientific methods for research into the past receive somewhat less attention than those that assist in understanding the present or in predicting the future. In an effort to redress this imbalance, this paper provides an overview of four positions on retrospective research: Controlling the Past, Interpreting the Past, Reconstructing/Revising the Past, and Representing the Past. First, each position is introduced and its assumptions are discussed. Comparisons among the positions are drawn, and these are then summarised. Finally, implications are discussed for the analysis and practise of retrospective research, and a call is made for further examination of the micropractices of marginalised research methods.

**ORGANISING THE PAST: FOUR POSITIONS ON RETROSPECTIVE RESEARCH**

1. **Controlling the Past.** This first position assumes that there was an objective truth in the past and that any ‘difficulties’ in uncovering or capturing such truth lie with the efficacy of present research methods and accounting processes. In terms of epistemology, or “the relationship between the knower or would-be-knower and what can be known” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.108), such assumptions derive from positivism. Both dualist and objectivist, positivism assumes that: (a) “Objective” reality can be captured, (b) the observer can be separated from the observed, (c) observations and generalisations are free from situational and temporal constraints, that is, they are universally
generalisable, (d) causality is linear, and there are no causes without effects, no effects without causes, and (e) inquiry is value free (Denzin, 1989, p.24).

In qualitative positivist research, problems in access to the past are typified by “pitfalls in retrospective accounts” (Golden, 1992, p.849). These occur due to faulty memories, oversimplifications and rationalisations, subconscious attempts to maintain self-esteem due to needs for acceptance, achievement and security, and social desirability. In addition, recall problems are caused by inaccessibility and by hindsight bias, which has been defined by Azar (2000) as the way the memory of judgments changes when we learn the outcome of an event (cf. Louie, Curren and Harich, 2000). Interest here lies in not only in understanding the nature and functions of such faults, but also in reducing the potential for the epistemological space between the real and the known. For this position, the nature of reality, or ontology, is therefore one of realism, where “[a]n apprehendable reality is assumed to exist, driven by immutable natural laws and mechanisms” (Alvesson & Deetz, 1996, p. 109; see also Chia, 1997). Accordingly, particular remedies have been devised in order to control for the impact of judgment processes on accounts of the past, for the issue is how not to bias recall and how to minimise the potential for such bias to affect/infect the present and, potentially, the future. In retrospective qualitative organisational studies, such efforts to reduce “errors” (Golden, 1992, p.855) include the use of free rather than forced reports, multiple knowledgeable informants per firm, a focus on simple facts and concrete events, avoiding discussions of the distant past, ensuring confidentiality, minimising inconvenience, and following “guidelines generally associated with proper retrospective data collection” so that “scholars could be truly comfortable with the idea that retrospective reports are not fiction” (1997, p.201). In response, Golden later maintained his call for researchers to be critical of retrospective data but argued that “if significant efforts are made to minimise retrospective biases and error and these data can be validated, retrospective data may well provide unique access to past organizational events” (Golden, 1997, p.1251; emphasis in original).

Measurement issues are also important in retrospective quantitative research designs. For example, in experimental studies, a retrospective pretest-posttest control group design has been developed to control for the effect of a response shift that occurs when training affects participants’ understanding or internal standard of measurement for the dimension under consideration (Sprangers, 1988). Similar
concerns have been noted with respect to collective learning. For example, Busby (1999) investigated postdesign reviews as a mechanism for learning from collective experience and reviewed the argument that retrospective reviews can promote double loop learning. He argued that “[p]eople’s recall tends to exaggerate the consistency of experience with their prior conceptions; they often fail to notice incorrect predictions (or interpret them as measurement errors) and remember as being real data that are consistent with mental models that are in fact missing” (Busby, 1999, p.111).

In historical research there are also well-rehearsed concerns with accuracy of access to the past. For example, and with respect to the work of Frederick Taylor, Wrege and Hodgetts (2000, p.1290) have recently expressed concern that “what the typical management reader “knows” about what happened at Bethlehem Iron a century ago is more fiction than fact”. Wrege and Hodgetts hope that such neglect will not continue, arguing that “managers will have to increasingly focus on data collection and analysis and fight the tendency to accept anecdotes and hearsay as accurate” (2000, p.1290). Thus, accuracy is paramount, and the task of both the researcher and reader is to maintain a critical stance so as not to be duped into receiving a less-than-objective view of the world.

In summary, from this position, retrospective research is potentially flawed research that is at best avoided and at worst controlled through careful attention to method and measures, depending on the nature of the research design. The various forms of control, such as experimental control in quantitative designs, or limitation to recent, concrete events, and use of multiple informants in qualitative interview surveys are employed to improve the validity and reliability of the research and to reduce the many sources of potential interference that affect the potential of the research to mirror (or at least access) a past reality. Under such assumptions, retrospective research is only employed on a qualified and even apologetic basis (e.g., De Meuse, Bergmann, and Lester, 2001, p.113-114).

Such qualification can be contrasted with the greater affirmation of retrospective research that occurs from the other three positions, and these are now introduced.

2. Interpreting the Past. Here the emphasis is on the present interpretation of past reality. Whether or not that interpretation has ties with any actual past is immaterial from this position, which is sympathetic to the idea that present reality is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and that the consequences of such construction can have material effects (Thomas, 1937). For example, and
with references to ethnomethodology, Weick argued that “[t]o talk about sensemaking is to talk about reality as an ongoing accomplishment that takes form when people make retrospective sense of the situations in which they find themselves and their creations” (Weick, 1995a, p.15). Initially, such sensemaking is an equivocal process due to elapsed experience making “many different kinds of sense” (Weick, 1995a, p.27), and it only becomes less tentative at a later stage of interpretation.

It is here that Weick distinguishes his emphasis from work on hindsight bias, arguing that discussions of this bias “tend to emphasize how much the backward glance leaves out and the problems that this can create” (Weick, 1995a, p.28). Based on the relatively short time between act and reflection and an argument that “people are mindful only of a handful of projects at a time” (Weick, 1995a, p.29), Weick argues that distortions due to hindsight bias are unlikely to be substantial in everyday life. His interest lies more in how making sense of the past is important for present action and future decision making, and he comments that “students of sensemaking find forecasting, contingency planning, strategic planning and other magical probes into the future wasteful and misleading if they are decoupled from reflective action and history” (Weick, 1995a, p.30).

Weick’s retrospection is, therefore, a pragmatic, normative retrospection rather than one that is purely interpretive (cf. Burrell & Morgan, 1979). It is one centred in the present rather than in the past, and his critique is not of inadequate access to the past but of inadequate representation of the present. His calls for greater appreciation of the past (see, for example, Weick, 2001, p.462) aim to improve the accuracy of that representation and it is in this emphasis on accuracy that Weick’s position can be seen as not all that different from the position of controlling the past discussed above. Both emphasise accuracy, but while the first position is concerned with an accurate past this second is concerned with an accurate (and more humble) present in which “people know what they have done only after they do it” (Weick, 2001, p.462).

There are also several variants of this second position. As noted above, more interpretive studies may be, arguably, distinguishable from the functionalism of Weick’s argument and focus solely on the interpretation of a past situation or event (see, for example, Isabella, 1990; Wolfram Cox, 1997). More social constructionist positions are concerned not with individual constructions of the past but with how those constructions develop in interaction and with generative potential for new futures (see,
for example, Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Gergen, 2001; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). More critical retrospective studies may draw attention to or disrupt prevailing discourses of the past or historicise and politicise present order, pointing to potential for future action, emancipation, or transformative redefinition (see, for example, Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Here the past informs the present, and research assumes an historical realism, where a once-plastic reality has become inappropriately shaped and reified over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3. Reconstructing/Revising the Past. While the differences among and within these variants both deserve and have received much fuller attention than is possible here, the third position presents a further shift in emphasis that is also the subject of current attention in social research. This third position is in some ways like the first in that it assumes that the past and the present are discrete. Rather than attempting to gain access to the past from the present, or to understand how constructions of the past affect the future, the emphasis here is on why particular causal links are made between the past and the present and on individual cognitive processes in making causal explanations.

In the case of retrospective research it is attribution theories that provide the clearest exemplars of this position. For example, Martinko and Thompson (1998) have discussed extensions to Kelley’s (1973) attributional cause model that describes how different types of information affect social attribution processes. Under this well-known model, it is suggested that the cause of behaviour is judged to come from either an internal/person, external/situation or stimulus source depending on the available information about the event (cf. Blount & Janicik, 2001; Hewstone and Agoustinos, 1998). In general, issues of whether or not causal explanations are ‘accurate’ and how they alter future understanding are neither as central nor as interesting to researchers taking this position as why the explanations are formed in the first place.

In addition, variants of this third position overlap with the first two positions. For example, Bell-Dolan and Anderson (1999) examined the consequences of inaccurate attributions, concluding that “[a]lthough wildly inaccurate attributions (and attributional styles) are certainly maladaptive in the long run, it is less clear that this positive relation between accuracy and adaptiveness holds true at less extreme levels of inaccuracy” (Bell-Dolan & Anderson, 1999, p.58). In contrast, Harvey and Weary (1981, p.6) suggested that by using attribution processes to understand workplace violence,
participants attempt to find an “inference about why [violence] occurred”. Thus, knowledge of attribution processes may assist both in understanding a particularly difficult past and in functioning in the present. Similarly, storytelling work examines not only causal attributions for the past events but narratives of how the past is told. For example, telling retrospective accounts of organisational atrocities attributed to others may provide the storyteller with additional time and experience to “reconstruct a story” Charmaz (1999, p.372). While such stories may be anxiety provoking and hard to hear (Frank, 1995), their telling may allow the expression of a mix of emotions in an effort to deal with a process of change (Bromley, Shupe & Ventimiglia, 1979).

In summary, attention to attributional processes has been extended from the individual to the social arena, and from accounts of particular events to full sequential narratives. In organisational and communications research narrative methods have gained increasing prominence (Boje, 2001; cf. Czarniawska, 1998), demonstrating not only the importance of different narrative genres for accounting for the past (e.g., Barry & Elmes, 1997; Jeffcutt, 1994) but also the variety of narrative methods now available to researchers. It is important to note that the growth of interest in such methods extends not only from attempts to create a fuller understanding of attribution processes but also from a questioning of the very nature of research and of the configuration of temporal relations in the first place. Such questioning informs the fourth position discussed in this paper, for this final position concerns representing, or re-presenting, the past.

4. Representing the Past. The first three positions attempt to recall the past more accurately, to make sense of it, or to examine causal links between the past and the present. In all three, the present exists independently of the past; at issue are the nature of temporal recall, understanding and evaluation. In contrast, the fourth position does not assume that the present is ontologically independent of the past, or that there is schematic time. Under such assumptions, time is often presented as one-dimensional, and it has been argued that “the notion of a single, unitary form of time which is objective, absolute, homogeneous, linear, evenly flowing, measurable, readily divisible and independent of events” is “massively inhibiting” (Clark, 1990, p.143; see also Burrell, 1992).

In contrast, and with reference to organisational contexts for examples, Clark (1990, p.141) calls for recognition that “all corporations require and possess a plurality of chronological codes”, some
focusing on time as unfolding and regular, others holding more heterogeneous conceptions of time where interpretations of pace and duration are socially constructed and affected by events of local cultural importance (see also Ancona, Okhuysen, & Perlow, 2001). Further, and from a contextualist stance, there are not merely different chronological codes but an interpenetration of the past and the future, for “[a]n event is never what is immediately available but also includes its contiguous past and present” (Tsoukas, 1994, p.767).

It is this stance that informs the fourth position, for when the very definition of past-present-future is problematised, facts themselves may vary over time (Gergen, 1973) as there is no stable knowledge outside of the representation of that knowledge (see Calás & Smircich, 1999). This argument differs from that of Weick presented above, for Weick’s concerns are epistemological rather than ontological. Weick argues that our knowing of the present is affected by our knowing of the past but does not go so far as to suggest that the past, present and future are not discrete, real phenomena.

Importantly, when the semblance of realism is no longer attainable or valued, retrospective research shifts from the status of poor science or poor history to art, craft or fiction. The researcher is no longer disinterested scientist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), or analytical excavator, but writer, storyteller and editor “embedded in a social context and in relation to others” (Calás & Smircich, 1999, p.653). For example, in their discussion of strategy as fiction, Barry and Elmes (1997) argued that strategy is something created or made up rather than something that is fake. Thus, their interest is not in the distinction between the fake and the real, but in the construction of the real or at least the taken-for-granted (cf. Latour, 1987). As noted above, narrative methods are not ‘just stories’ but legitimate means for representing, accounting for and constituting past, present, and the play of their characters, events, interconnections and fragmentations (see Boje, 2001). Within narrative, the past may affect the present to various degrees depending on genre (see also Jeffcutt, 1994).

Overall, where there is no assumption of transcendent truth, the variability among research genres becomes more than an array of different methods for data capture in the positivist sense. Retrospective research methods do not merely assist in the investigation of a past reality but constitute the very nature of that reality from the position of the researcher. As an objective stance is no longer possible, questions of interest concern not error, construction or attribution but reflexivity in the sense
of “the ability to be critical or suspicious of our own intellectual assumptions” (Hassard, 1993, p.12, with reference to Lawson, 1985). Accordingly,

Method is thus not primarily a matter of ‘data management’ or the mechanics and logistics of data production/processing, but is a reflexive activity where empirical material calls for careful interpretation – a process in which the theoretical, political and ethical issues are central (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p.5; cf. Hardy & Clegg, 1997).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

While Controlling the Past, Interpreting the Past and Reconstructing the Past all exhibit realist ontologies, Representing the Past differs in that it takes an anti-realist stance. It also adopts a constructionist epistemology that differs from the social constructionism of the second position on Interpreting the Past. As noted above, there is a distinct difference between the two, for Interpreting the Past is based on the assumption that constructions of the past inform a fuller understanding of the present, and that such understanding can be of assistance in determining a better future. The past may well exist as real, even though its construction may vary depending on interpretive or sensemaking processes. In contrast, the fourth position, Representing the Past, is anti-realist in both its ontology and epistemology, and has no progressive intent. Unlike the first position, its proponents would not view retrospective research as something to be avoided, but such research would be of interest only for local illustration of the idea of questioning the taken-for-granted in research methods.

It is from the second and third positions, namely, Interpreting the Past and Reconstructing/Revising the Past that retrospective research is not only of interest but also of central importance. In both, this importance derives from the value of interpretations and explanations of the past. In Reconstructing/Revising the Past, such interpretations have instrumental value for managing the present, while in Interpreting the Past that value relates to the future and may be emancipatory or even generative (cf. Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). While the more interpretive variants of the second position are informed by what Habermas called a practical interest, “concerned with the understanding of the historical and traditional context of human life” (Alvesson, 1991, p.216), the emphasis on management across most of the second and third positions adopts instead a technical interest, “which aims to find laws or law-like relationships, through which processes can be manipulated and controlled” (Alvesson, 1991, p.216).
CONCLUSION

In summary, this paper outlines and illustrates four different positions on the conduct of retrospective research. While it has been argued that retrospective research methods are not, in general, highly valued in mainstream research, two of the four positions, Interpreting the Past and Reconstructing/Revising the past are largely positivist in intent if not always in epistemology, for both adopt a technical interest consistent with better management of the present and/or the future.

Of course, there are many limitations to this analysis. First, and as with any typology or list of classifications, this one includes “tacit messages” as positions not on this list are less critical than those on it (cf. Weick, 1995b, p.388). For example, it is largely dependent on a review of qualitative research and may exclude or fudge the subtlety of positions within or outside what has been termed Controlling the Past. Second, it is informed largely by studies within the traditions of organisational behaviour, organisation and management theory, and social psychology and will undoubtedly gain from the inclusion of work from other disciplines. Third, and with reference to inclusions rather than exclusions, each of the four positions includes several variants. As such, the classificatory system that is used here is rather rough and, of necessity, tentative rather than exhaustive.

Within these limits, however, the paper makes several important contributions. It takes seriously an area of research methods that tends to be marginalised and regarded as unimportant, if not second rate, by mainstream management researchers. This is done with the aim of stimulating others to take an interest in all four possibilities for retrospective research, and to adopt and develop retrospective research practices in line with their particular ontological and epistemological assumptions. For those who already do retrospective research, the paper provides a starting point for further debate and refinement of the categories proposed here. For example, it identifies some ‘unlikely paradigmatic bedfellows’ within the second category of Interpreting the Past, grouping interpretive, social constructionist and critical retrospective studies in terms of a common interest in the creation of better futures (cf. Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). No doubt, many will find this alignment unusual, if not provocative. In addition, the separation of generative postmodern work (e.g., Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987; Gergen, 2001; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996) into this second category and away from the fourth classification, Representing the Past, may also invoke further discussion. The
distinction has been made due to the normative intent of such work, which is distinct from the
problematisation emphasis of the fourth category.

More generally, it is hoped that the paper will encourage further interest in the micropractices of other
research methods that also occupy a marginal or at least non-traditional place in mainstream
management studies. For example, while narrative methods have been gaining ground (e.g., Boje,
2001; Czarniawska, 1998), and discursive and rhetorical studies have attracted considerable attention
(e.g., Abrahamson, 1997; Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 1998; Jackson, 1999; Kieser, 1997), aesthetic
endeavours are relatively new in organization studies (e.g., Gagliardi, 1996; Linstead & Höpfl, 2000;
Strati, 1999) and worthy of further review and development. The challenge is for that development to
be done with care, and for further attention to be given to analysis of the taken-for-granted in research
methods – to the organisation of research methods as well as to research methods for organisations.
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