

THEORETICAL ASPECT OF BACKGROUND

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ABSTRACT

There has been a growing debate about the role of history in management research with several authors making suggestions on how to bring the two (back) together and others even highlighting the need for a “historic turn”. First of all, we present a systematic overview of the way history has been used—both at the micro (organizational) and macro-levels of analysis—distinguishing between what we refer to as “history to theory” and “history in theory”.

Keywords: Background, debate, management, method, organization.

INTRODUCTION

Within the research programs discussed in this section, history has featured as an explanatory factor. Although considering historical variation as an element of theory, such treatments of history have inevitably constituted an oversimplification. The imprinting and ecological studies have typically been based on quantitative data and have operationalized “history” as a very specific, single—occasionally composite—variable, such as the background of founders or cumulative experience in certain activities like mergers or, more generically “changes”. The few historical case studies that can be found in the research programs on path dependence and organizational capabilities have generally been based on interviews or secondary sources and have rarely attended to the specificities of the particular context. Even the few studies that have been somewhat more oriented toward historical research and narrative and have attempted to be more attentive to temporality and the underlying mechanisms affecting outcomes have tended to shy away from considering particularities within longrun developments—not surprising given predominant generalizability concerns.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Based on both primary as well as secondary data and combining qualitative with some statistical analysis, he elaborated a very nuanced account and periodization, taking into consideration the changing political, legal, economic, business, and even educational contexts. Theoretically, he developed the notion of “conceptions of control” [1]—totalizing world views that cause actors to interpret every situation from a given perspective, which he linked, among others, to the functional backgrounds of the top managers of large U.S. firms. In its complexity and the way the varying context is taken seriously, this is in many ways a more “historical” account than the one provided by Chandler [2].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Another, more recent and kind of perfect example for what we consider historical cognizance is a study of entrepreneurship by Haveman, Habinek, and Goodman (2012). These authors

examined entrepreneurship within the context of the U.S. magazine industry between 1741 and 1860, focusing on two periods, namely 1741 – 1800 and 1841 – 1860. They showed that the “social position” of the founders with respect to “occupation, education and geographic location” varied in the two periods. Relative to founders in the eighteenth century, those starting new magazines in the mid-nineteenth century were likely to come from outside the industry and from more modest backgrounds. Haveman et al. (2012) have combined a relatively detailed historical account with quantitative analyses based on data constructed from secondary as well as some published primary sources. Notable for us is again the particular emphasis on the effects of the specific historical periods and the call that the authors make for “grounding studies of entrepreneurship in historical context”, which may “set important scope conditions on any theory of entrepreneurship”. This is a study, which should also be welcomed by (business) historians, who have clamored for more context-based as compared to the predominant cross-sectional, characteristics-based research on entrepreneurship.

Our review revealed fewer cases of what we would consider examples of historical cognizance, where history featured with its specificities within theory— the few that we could locate being at the macro-level. Although not devoid of concerns with generalization, the studies we did identify would couch their hypotheses in the historical context that they were examining. An exemplary recent study in these respects came from the social movement literature, where King and Haveman (2008) examined the founding of anti-slavery societies in the U.S.A. in the period 1790 – 1840. The authors point to the significance of this particular historical period in the birth of social reform organizations in the U.S. The focus on this period enabled the authors not only to attend to the conditions contributing to the genesis of the anti-slavery movement in the U.S., but also to address more generally the antecedents of social movement formation. Their study showed that the mass media of the time had a major role to play in anti-slavery organization foundings, whereas the influence of religious organizations varied according to their theological orientations.

Finally, as noted at the outset, what is somewhat surprising is the almost complete absence of what we consider historically cognizant studies among the large “imprinting” literature, which covers both the micro- and macro- levels—and this despite the significant interest in and support of history and historical methods expressed by Stinchcombe (1965, 2005) himself. What might explain this is that these studies take only a view back from the present to a kind of stylized past as a driver for the former and have little interest in understanding the historic context of the founding conditions per se or, for that matter, in the developments occurring between that founding moment/period and the present. Nowhere is that perhaps more obvious than in the study of the establishment of the Paris Opera by Johnson [3]. While using primary sources from the period, the author kind of imposes modern notions of “cultural entrepreneurship”, “isomorphic” processes and stakeholder power. In stark contrast to the entrepreneurship study by Haveman et al. (2012), discussed above, Johnson (2007), largely disregarding the specific historical context, offers, for instance, the suggestion that Louis XIV as an important stakeholder had his “modern (albeit significantly less powerful) counterparts [4] in the persons of venture capitalists, philanthropists, legislators, and corporate lawyers” (p. 100). In their extensive review of the imprinting literature in this journal, Marquis and

Tilcsik (2013) seem to have recognized this shortcoming, since they elaborate a revised theory of imprinting that looks at “how specific phases of the past (rather than the vague totality of historical conditions) matter” and subsequently provide a number of exemplary topics such as institutional complexity and networks where an imprinting perspective could contribute to examine how history matters in organizations.

In summary, there is quite a bit more history than meets the eye in organization and management theory. We come to this perhaps somewhat surprising conclusion based on a broad definition of history as an empirical and/or theoretical concern with the past and/or the use of historical evidence, both quantitative and qualitative, and with a sampling approach that went beyond the “top” journals used by previous surveys—even if they retained a prominent position—and also included the strategy literature.

What we also confirmed are two very distinct uses of history in organization and management theory: one, where historical evidence serves to develop, modify, and—less frequently—test theories, an approach we refer to as “history to theory”; the other, where history, i.e. events or conditions in the past determine—directly or as a moderating factor—the present, which we call “history in theory”. In both cases, the use of history seems to be dictated often not by a conscious choice but by need, since certain theories require evidence that covers longer time periods in terms of longitudinal data or a sequence of events, while others incorporate the past as an explanatory (or moderating) variable. In some of these cases, for instance, path dependence, “history” is the only choice, since the theory would not work without a sequence stretching back into the past. In most others, say for studying changes in institutional logics or identifying founding conditions, researchers have to make a trade-off between the benefits resulting from the use of history and the difficulties inherent in collecting the required historical evidence—evidence, which is often less comprehensive and consistent than cross-sectional data. It is quite telling that despite these obvious challenges history has been used relatively extensively—definitely more frequently than previous surveys and ongoing discussions about the apparent need for a “historic turn” suggest.

CONCLUSION

Our paper has brought into view a quite extensive base of research programs in organization and management theory that employ history in a variety of ways—without necessarily using the term itself. It has also identified a growing number of studies that display what we call “historical cognizance” by considering period effects or historical contingencies. Heeding the above suggestions will, we believe, strengthen, and expand both of these and, ultimately, turn history from what appeared like an outsider status into an integral part of (empirical) research and theorizing in organization and management studies.

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