

# Organizational archives and historical narratives

## Practicing reflexivity in (re)constructing the past from memories and silences

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to present the role of reflexivity in relation to archives and narratives.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The authors problematize the concept of “archive,” by engaging with debates in philosophy and the archival theory. The authors also revisit historical theories and debates on the role of the narrative within historiography. Finally, the authors consider reflexivity as a methodological attitude taken by the researcher at all stages of the investigation from challenging theoretical assumptions of empirical materials to questioning the very narrative that is created when looking for alternative ones.

**Findings** – This paper poses questions about documents and archives that emerge from reflexivity. The authors claim that reflexivity is an ethos that allows researchers to keep the multiple narratives in which they are entangled in check. The paper brings a framework that allows researchers to use reflexivity to become more conscious of the complexities and ambiguities within the research process that leads to the writing of historical narratives.

**Research limitations/implications** – This paper points to the need to enhance the reflexivity at every stage of the research, including “interrogating” the archives and documents, which are compiled under a narrative.

**Practical implications** – The authors highlighted the multiple characteristics of archives, their meanings and the possibilities of writing narratives about them through reflexivity. The authors have the historical narrative as one possible reconstruction of a historical object, which is connected to the production conditions of the text. Through reflexivity, the authors discussed the socially constructed nature of the documents and the archives. Finally, the authors believe that debates around the production of this knowledge should continue, focusing especially on building bridges with the field of history.

**Social implications** – Historical narratives do not depend on the scientific character of historical sources, but it considers reflexivity by the researcher regarding the search, collection, reading and analysis of historical documents. In addition, it is necessary to think about the use of documents and archives and histories in a reflective way for a writing of history and, indirectly, for a contextual understanding of the time observed and as forged sources – or discarded – and made available.

**Originality/value** – Challenging the use of documents and archives in a reflexive way for the writing of historical narratives and for contextual understanding of the past is key to a richer relationship between management and history. This paper points to the role of reflexivity in relation to archives and narratives in the practice of (re)constructing the organizational past from memories and silences. It also highlights how reflexivity can be incorporated in the research process to enrich the writing of the historical narrative.

**Keywords** Archives, Reflexivity, Historical narratives, Historical organizational studies

**Paper type** Conceptual paper



### Introduction

The inclusion of history in management and organization studies (MOS) contributed to an intellectual movement called the “Historical Turn” (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Keulen and Kroeze, 2012; Kroeze and Keulen, 2013; Rowlinson, 2013). The Historical Turn started

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questioning the scientific rhetoric within MOS and proposed approaching the past as an object of interest and not using context just as a variable. The functionalist paradigm which dominated the traditional approaches toward management and history (Chandler, 1962) lost ground to specific analysis of historical contexts and events, with authors participating in the Historic Turn asking for more pluralistic approaches (Clark and Rowlinson, 2004; Durepos and Mills, 2012; Kipping and Üsdiken, 2014).

The past, and the various, “stories” that may ensue from it have been framed as a potential source of competitive advantage (Suddaby *et al.*, 2010; Foster *et al.*, 2011), a source for reshaping organizational culture (Rowlinson and Hassard, 1993) and organizational identity (Schultz and Hernes, 2012), and as a way of understanding and shaping the future (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Ybema, 2014). The risks associated with the use of history for economic gain increases the necessity for those who write history in MOS to be more aware. All history is political (Rancière, 1994), but in MOS it faces the possibility of being written with immediate instrumental uses in mind (Popp, 2009).

The writing of history is always related to the society in which it is written (De Certeau, 1988). In this sense, we suggest that reflexivity is key for this active suspicion that MOS needs to cultivate, especially when writing history (Taylor *et al.*, 2009; Rowlinson *et al.*, 2014; Gill *et al.*, 2018). Reflexivity is the process by which researchers place themselves and their practices under scrutiny, recognizing the ethical dilemmas that permeate the research process, and the influence that it has on knowledge generation (Cunliffe, 2003; Alvesson *et al.*, 2008).

Reflexivity also involves the questioning of sources and the need “to break away from a frame of reference and to look at what it *is not* capable of saying” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 246; italics in the original). This frame of reference may be represented by both the empirical material and the theoretical framework. Reflexivity involves recognizing that the empirical material could not exist without a reflexive interpretation. Fostering reflexivity and awareness of the role of the author in constructing narratives allows avoiding “presenting definite truths, authoritative interpretations or superior insights” about the subjects being researched (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 249).

In this paper, we consider reflexivity as a methodological attitude taken by the researcher at all stages of the investigation: from challenging theoretical assumptions of empirical materials to questioning the very narrative that is created when looking for alternative ones. We claim that reflexivity is an ethos that allows researchers to keep the multiple narratives in which they are entangled in check. Moreover, we suggest that “reflexivity arises when different elements or levels are played off against each other,” all taken with the same degree of consideration and none of them is considered as being the “Right or Most Important Insight” (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 249).

In history, specifically, reflexivity also comprises an awareness of its constructive and literary aspect, the specific characteristics of the sources, and the narratives built in archives and documents as well as the narratives derived from them. This is not to say that history is a form of literature, or that the past is only a text. Our understanding is that historiography aims for objectivity but should be aware of its own fallibility. The role of reflexivity, then, is to write an open text. This notion is close to the idea of trustworthiness advanced by Gill *et al.* (2018). However, following Rancière (1994), we believe that the narrative form is part of the predicament of writing history concerned with truth.

Narratives are part of a different turn in MOS, the “Linguistic Turn” (Czarniawska, 2003; Gabriel, 2004; Brown and Rhodes, 2005; Rhodes and Brown, 2005). However, as Mordhorst and Schwarzkopf (2017) noticed, narratives and history came into the managerial field separately. Historical narratives have been discussed by authors in MOS (Phillips, 1995; Keulen and Kroeze, 2012; Weatherbee, 2012; Popp and Fellman, 2017;

Gill *et al.*, 2018). Recently, authors in business history have also made contributions to the topic (e.g. Popp and Fellman, 2017). The understanding of narratives also encompasses the role of antinarratives to connect past and present (Adorisio, 2014), and how traditions in business are invented (Kroeze and Keulen, 2013).

We highlight here that archives themselves are constituted as narratives (Ketelaar, 2001). This is important in understanding how documents are shaped, and in turn how they shape narratives that frame historiography. A reflexive approach toward research is a way of dealing with this constitutive characteristic of archives and documents. Therefore, our objective is to present the role of reflexivity in relation to archives and narratives.

In the next section, we introduce a framework to foster reflexive, historical narratives from organizational archives. We then discuss the multiple concepts of what constitutes an archive and highlight our main takes from the debates on the topic in other fields. That section allows us to highlight why the researcher should enter the archive and analyze the document reflexively to critically encounter their texts and subtexts. In the fourth section, we discuss the meaning of history and narrative to present our understanding of the characteristics of the historical narrative and why it is not fictional. Final considerations close the paper.

### **A framework for practicing reflexivity in historical organization studies**

We set our work in the nascent subfield of historical organizational studies (HOS). HOS are defined as “research that draws extensively on historical data, methods, and knowledge, embedding organizing process and organizations in their sociohistorical context to generate historically informed theoretical narratives attentive to both disciplines,” namely, organization studies and history (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 609). The authors suggest that dual integrity is the overarching principal when engaging with history, i.e., promoting organizational research with “historical veracity and conceptual rigor,” and which respects the values of both disciplines (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 617).

Our contribution to HOS is to consider reflexivity as the overarching principle for crafting organizational historical narratives that may go beyond the principle of dual integrity. Hence, we posit that having conceptual rigor and historical veracity are important. However, we add that reflexivity is necessary to craft historical narratives from organizational archives. We suggest that reflexivity is of the essence if we are to deliver on the promise of “envisioning a more fully informed, sensitive, reflexive approach to HOS” (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 613). We suggest that even the consideration of archives and documents should be reflexive, which is not the rule in the field of history.

History is always constructed as a narrative (Rancière, 1994), and historiography is strengthened by understanding archives as an active force in shaping narratives on the past. Furthermore, through a central reflection on historiographical writing in the present, in the next two sections we discuss the relationship between archives and narratives for combination in the writing of multiple historical narratives. Documents and archives are also inscribed within other narratives; hence, reflexivity is necessary to keep data and interpretations in permanent check. This is a way of being “alert to changing interpretations of meaning over time” (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 609).

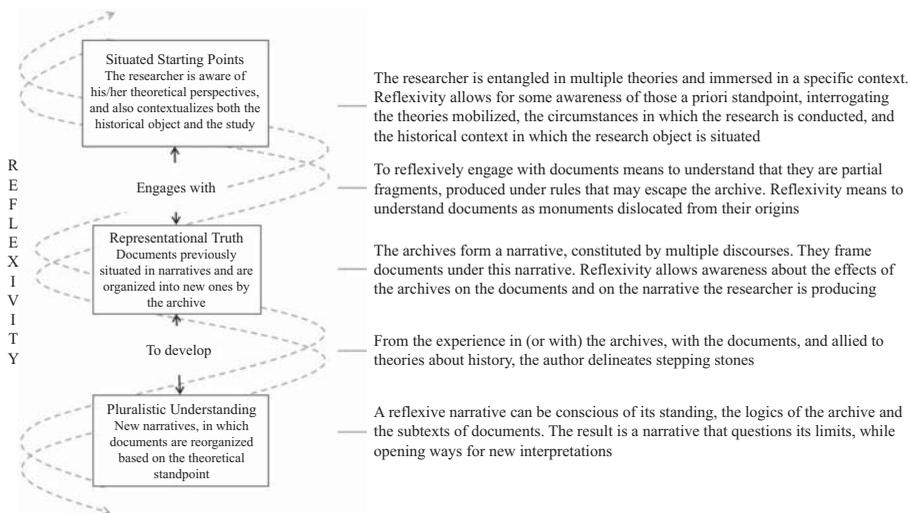
Reflexivity is commonly used in qualitative research to question both research practices, and representations (Pillow, 2010). In a similar manner, the notion of historical construction from the joint view of narratives and archives could follow the process of interpretive construction (see Figure 7.2 of Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 255), whereas historical narratives may be constructed from documents, which in turn influence the way that the narratives will be written (Decker, 2014). The researcher should consider the implicit meanings of documents and archives ingrained in narratives

about the past whether consciously or unconsciously (Mills and Helms Mills, 2011; Decker, 2014; Barros, 2016). Hence, we posit that reflexivity allows departure from a narrow focus, and the ability to question weaknesses ingrained in theories and perspectives, to challenge the language game rather than expanding it (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000). Therefore, the narrative and the work of the historian become fundamental to the understanding of the history being researched (Coraiola *et al.*, 2015).

MacLean *et al.* (2016, p. 616) suggest that – beyond the overarching principal of dual integrity – four other principles are fundamental to HOS: “pluralistic understanding, representational truth, context sensitivity and theoretical fluency.” Pluralistic understanding would allow for “greater porosity of boundaries to accommodate different ways of doing history in organization studies” (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 617). Representational truth should provide a “high degree of congruence among evidence, logic and interpretation” (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 617). Context sensitivity would be the ability of “constructing a rounded picture, to enhance understanding of the issue in question” (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 618). Theoretical fluency would be the ability to demonstrate “command of the appropriate conceptual language” and being able to bridge theories between organization studies into history, and to develop new theoretical insights from organizational empirical investigation (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 618).

We engage with the above principals, but we bring reflexivity to the center of our concerns. The research practice we propose, considers reflexivity at all stages of research, dealing with those stages recursively (Hibbert *et al.*, 2010), since understanding is more elliptical than linear.

In Figure 1, we propose a framework to guide researchers in the exercise of crafting reflexive historical narratives from organizational archives. This is our contribution for practicing reflexivity when (re)constructing the past from memories and silences. By putting reflexivity center stage, we combine the five principles introduced by MacLean *et al.* (2016, p. 617) which should be the basis of research within HOS with the proposal of Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000, p. 255), which is to generate reflexive investigations through different levels of interpretation.



**Figure 1.**  
Reflexivity in the  
crafting of reflexive  
historical narratives  
from organizational  
archives

**Source:** The authors inspired by Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000, p. 255) Figure 7.2, and from MacLean *et al.* (2016, p. 617)

Our proposition takes the proposals by MacLean *et al.* (2016) and Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2000) one step back. It is a recommendation for the researchers, before they enter the field, and for their relationship with the data.

Reflexivity can follow various paths, without any single way of triggering the process. Before the researcher enters the archives, reflexivity may raise awareness of the effects of theories on his/her standpoint. By interrogating the effects of the archives on the documents and the research, the researcher may question the nature of the documents and why they were created and preserved. Finally, the narrative produced at the end of the process can be understood as a precarious arrangement that equilibrates these multiple dissonances into a single text. Therefore, the historical construction is understood from diverse points of view, receiving inputs from critical self-reflection (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000) and permitting a pluralistic understanding (MacLean *et al.*, 2016). The questions are compounded at each level so that scientific rigor is translated into a flexible, dialogic reflection, assuming a circle of reflection and self-reflection of research (Czarniawska, 2003). Reflexivity takes place in the “relations and interfaces” among the different elements being considered (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 249), thus moving beyond the principle of dual integrity (MacLean *et al.*, 2016).

As a road map, we propose the researcher asks reflexive questions throughout the various phases of the research. For example:

- It is possible to interrogate the interests of the researcher, which would help deliver reflexive theoretical fluency (Where does my interest in this object of research come from? What do my theories obscure from the narratives I can construct?).
- Analyzing the context in which the researcher acts may also help in broadening the scope of the research, and it would be a reflexivity exercise in context sensitivity (What are the impacts on the research context in bringing this subject to the fore? Why was I granted access to this set of documents?).
- Additionally, it is possible to ask about the nature and characteristics of the documents and the archive in the search for a reflexive representational truth (Why and how was this set of documents produced, stored and kept? Who curated the documents? What is the logic behind this archive?).
- Finally, it is important to question the results (What are the possible narratives to delineate from this process? What is the impact of this process on the formation of new competing narratives? How did this process change my views as a researcher?).

As an elliptical process, these questions could go on and on, at every step of the research, each time allowing for enrichment of the process and promoting a reflexive pluralistic understanding. Therefore, the empirical material, for instance, more than just providing “historical veracity” (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 617) and being the initial point of the investigation, could be considered a source of “inspiration and arguments for interpretations,” and at the same time it “sets limits on the imagination” of the researcher in crafting narratives (Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000, pp. 277-279).

Notwithstanding our proposed framework described above, the researcher must be aware that, even after the effort of this reflexive process, the narrative produced “will be situated, contextual, contingent, perspectival – true for particular purposes; true under a given set of circumstances; true assuming the validity of taken-for-granted premises” (Simons, 2004, p. 161). Being cognizant of these facts is an exercise in reflexivity.

In the next two sections, we explore how to promote reflexivity when engaging with archives, and how we could derive reflexive historical narratives from them. This process, in the end, will lead to historical writing that accepts its entanglement in multiple webs of meaning and aims for objectivity, aware of its precariousness.

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### Interrogating the archives

There have been some debates in HOS around the use of archives and its silences and omissions (Mills and Helms Mills, 2011; Decker, 2013). The discussions included analyzing the space and architecture as an archival dimension (Decker, 2014; Liu and Grey, 2017), and calls for engagement with archives, beyond realism (Schwarzkopf, 2012).

However, the search for truth through the correspondence between the facts and the past that originated the archives/documents is still the most common scenario in HOS (Weatherbee *et al.*, 2012, p. 205). Usually the discussions focus on explaining how the archives were accessed, classified and analyzed. However, there are a few exceptions in the use of personal experiences with archives to discuss the topic (Mills and Helms Mills, 2011; Decker, 2013; Durepos *et al.*, 2017; Popp and Fellman, 2017). Decker (2013, p. 170), for example, made use of postcolonial lenses to remind us that “all selection of archival material for narrative, whether through sampling, causal analysis or exemplary selection, involves reconstruction, representation and therefore silencing.” Thus, the historical narrative starts being built inside the archives.

Understanding the multiple meanings of the archive and the powers that shape them is necessary for writing reflexive historical narratives (Decker, 2013, 2014; Popp and Fellman, 2017). The discussion on the use of archives is recurrent in the fields of History and Archival Science (e.g. Foucault, 1972; Cook, 2001a; Schwartz and Cook, 2002). It is also present in discussions in the field of HOS (Barros, 2016; Coraiola, 2013; Decker, 2014; Mills and Helms Mills, 2011). Archives are also an object of debate in philosophy, such as in the discussions established by Foucault (1972) and Derrida (1995).

In the dictionary, the word “archive” refers to the place where documents and other historical materials are kept or to the collection of documents guarded in that place. Schellenberg (1956/2003) has already pointed out that the ambiguity of the word archive is present in several languages. Schellenberg’s (2003) modernist and realist approach emphasizes that to become part of an archive, it is necessary that the document is produced for specific purposes. It should also be kept for reasons that are different from those to which they were initially produced. Interestingly, the author had somehow already pointed to the need for constant evolution of the definition of archive:

A definition should not be accepted that will vitiate their effectiveness. A definition evolved out of a consideration of medieval materials will not fit the needs of archivists dealing mainly with modern records. [...] The modern archivist [...] has a definite need to redefine archives in a manner suited to his own requirements. (Schellenberg, 2003, p. 15)

Together with Hilary Jenkinson, Schellenberg is a key figure in the establishment of modern archival studies. However, this approach tends to treat archived documents as part of a natural process of which the archivist is a neutral part (Cook, 2001a, 2011b). Although the modern view on archives already considered the ambiguity of the meaning of the documents, the archives and the documents remained as an objective reflex of the reality from which they were created (Cook, 2001a, b).

Archives are constructed from human practices embedded in their context, and subject to the vicissitudes that give shape to such actions. Cook (2001a, 2011a) questions, for example, the modernist notion, which is that an archive should be a document “organically” bound to the processes of the organizations to which it is attached. The author emphasizes that no archive is natural, for there is always the submission to the arbitrary rules of control and classification that can be expanded or restricted as to what is encompassed:

Like all human activities, archiving is culturally bound and a product of its environment: all archival records, as a result, have their own story, their own context, their own histories, especially concerning their appraisal and thus, their very inclusion as archives in the first place. These stories (or richly layered metadata, if you like) make the mere recorded artifact come alive, they make the archive more robust, and more useful, thus offering the possibilities for adding subtlety, texture,

nuance, and more accurate meaning to the information found in documents to society, thereby enhancing their understanding. This is not subjectivity run amok, but subjectivity recognized, documented, and made accountable. (Cook, 2011a, p. 178)

As suggested by Stoler (2009) and Foucault (1972) archives are not only the things that hold materiality (the institution that archives, the collection of documents, a space), but they can also be understood as a metaphor. The archive is what remains as a vestige and entails a set of possible discourses, although they concern the past, or the present (Foucault, 1972). In philosophical terms, the archives refer to subterranean discourses that enable practices (Foucault, 1970, 1972), which are reinterpreted and may acquire different meanings (De Certeau, 1988). The archive is also built amid the tension between destruction and preservation, that Derrida (1995) associates with the dispute between permanence and destruction:

If there is no archive without consignment in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus, from destruction. Consequence: right on what permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than what exposes to destruction, in truth what menaces with destruction introducing, a priori, forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument. [...] The archive always works, and a priori, against itself. (Derrida, 1995, p. 14)

Hence, archives are the effect of power disputes, and the archivist is a mediator, interpreter and shaper of the documents to be transmitted to the future (Cook and Schwartz, 2002; Cook, 2011b). From the time of their production until their archiving various rules shape the documents, going beyond individuals, but being affected by them. Thus, social forces, as opposed to the sole discretion of the individual agent, are added to the document, leaving the task of understanding their place in these power frames to the archivist. The choices archivists make are shaped by the forces in which they are immersed (Cook, 2011b). Similarly, the researcher must remain alert, to capture the elements that lurk beneath the surface (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Even if the archivists are unaware of the forces at play in their acts, the possible narratives built for the present are linked to decisions on what should be archived, and the meanings produced by the resulting network of documents.

However, it is not only the content of the archived material that determines the narratives that will be built from documents. The researcher also plays a role, including that of saying what is or is not historical (Steedman, 2009).

Social expectations and groups also play a part in the document production process and its uses, this outside force becomes ingrained in the archives later (Trace, 2002). What is considered a fact, a document and even the questions put to the archives are interdependent. The community involved in the production and curation of documents establishes support for memories that will be accessed in the future (Schwartz and Cook, 2002):

Archives are our memories. Yet what goes on in the archives remains remarkably unknown. Users of archives (historians and others) and shapers of archives (records creators, records managers, and archivists) add layers of meaning, layers which become naturalized, internalized, and unquestioned. (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, p. 18).

Ketelaar (2001, 2012) highlights that the archive is built as a narrative. It is within these spaces that documents are kept, that is, as objects that transform according to the way they are used. The documents in an archive narrate the past. Values are assigned to documents, from the collection process (data clustering) to the ordering (archiving) and reproduction practices that will insert these sources into new networks of meaning. Since we only have access to what is remaining from the past after many filters and frames (Ketelaar, 2001; Popp and Fellman, 2017), it is ultimately impossible to thoroughly know

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the dead and the past that are represented in documents, documents that are also monuments (Ward, 2010). Hence, Foucault (1972) stresses the importance of questioning historical sources, rather than simply trying to reconstruct the past from fragments.

Additionally, the archive is the legacy granted by the past, recorded in different ways and in different media that are not limited to the written text. Archives create frames that allow the production practices and their justification. According to Derrida (1995, p. 18), “The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge [*gage*], a token of the future. [...] What is no longer archived in the same way, is no longer lived in the same way. Archivable meaning is also, and in advance, codetermined by the structure that archives.” In this sense, new, virtual space for document hosting and decreasing pressure by on physical space creates new demands for both discussions on archives, as well as for the professional who performs this task: the archivist (Cook and Schwartz, 2002; Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Barros, 2016). Changes in production techniques and document archiving, including technological developments, led to changes in the constitution of archives (Derrida, 1995).

Gill and Elder (2012) and Bail (2014) also point to the change in the relationship of the researcher with their sources. They consider that the researcher can use software that analyzes large volumes of documents, bringing certain preselected results from the guidelines laid *a priori*. This type of research brings new ways of assessing data, which also implies the possibility of affecting the narratives constructed from them.

The growing volume of stored data and the difficulties of organizing it bring new possibilities and challenges for research in social sciences (Bail, 2014). Information technologies allow for transformations in archival notions (Featherstone, 2000; Cook, 2007; Gill and Elder, 2012), decentralizing processes linked to the creation, maintenance and perpetuation of archives over time (Yakel, 2006). However, there is still the work of selecting what is worth seeing, what may help with the telling of a story and defining what are essentially useless pieces of data (Cook, 2011b).

As seen here, the definition of what is understood as an “archive” is both complex, and increasingly disputable (Cook, 2001a). These confrontations are accentuated by changes brought about by the internet and other technologies. The reflective element contributes to what one might think could be considered an archive: “there is a growing realization of the problematic nature of the material that we manage – the record. In the electronic environment, the record, once viewed as knowable in terms of an understanding of its content, context and structure, is proving difficult to pin down” (Trace, 2002, p. 138).

Therefore, society, with its perception and ways of using archives, shapes our collective notions of the archive and delineates its possibilities (Cook, 2001b). This dynamic impacts the meanings of the archive, which are continually changing (Ketelaar, 2012). Therefore, the approach to historical archives, and their uses for the writing of history, points to reflexivity. The political, economic, social and cultural environment of any society defines what it archives (Eastwood, 1994). History, then, is what can be interpreted and extracted from the documents that extrapolate the dedicated institutions that created them and are inscribed in recorded registers (Foucault, 1972). It is never the same as the past.

In HOS, the nomenclature for archives is also complex because, necessarily, the relationships that organizations in general and, more specifically, businesses establish with archives have changed as well. Increasingly organizational history and memories are perceived as an asset that companies manage (Foster *et al.*, 2011; Coraiola, 2013; Coraiola *et al.*, 2015).

Archives also influence political disputes concerned with rights, collective memories, and societal positions and interests (Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Gilliland and McKemish, 2014). In the broader view taken by Foucault (1972), archives permeate the practices of subjects, not only from their influence on the perception of what the past was, but for being inexorable parts of whatever structures the present time. As Schwartz and Cook (2002) pointed out, archives are

the support of collective memories. Collective memories are both an instrument and a goal of power (Le Goff, 1992). Therefore, it is important to question archives and how they are produced, considering, but going beyond their framing around people, events or periods.

A reflexive encounter with the archives, allows the researcher to denaturalize the documents and the ways they are organized. It also aims to highlight the multiple voices that are engaged in the production, preservation and availability of any single document. We discuss the different possibilities of writing narratives based on this expanded notion of archives.

### Historical narratives

The veracity of history lies in the way it represents the past in a narrative, within the dilemma of producing a text with only partial knowledge (De Certeau, 1988). The text only becomes a historical narrative through critical analysis of the sources, often organized in historical archives. In this sense, truth is a precarious construct built around specific rules (Foucault, 1970). Thus, reflexivity allows the author to denaturalize the sources and try to maintain a critical relationship to the text that is being produced.

History is not the science of the past, but the science of the mutation and explanation of changes over time (Le Goff, 1992), prone to reinterpretations that are an integral part of the historical debate. As a discipline, history does not have a consensual way to investigate and write about what happened. In this sense, some of the debates in history are close to debates in organization studies, especially those opposing realist-positivistic standpoints vs various levels of more relativistic alternatives.

At least three perspectives shaped debates on history throughout the twentieth century. From a positive, Rankean perspective, that saw history as the exposition of facts, passing through the perspective built around the *École des Annales* and the structural-Marxism of Althusser, until arriving at the linguistic turn around the 1970s, which is now receding (Stone, 1979; Rancière, 1994). Although this rough characterization does not live up to the richness of the perspectives that shaped history throughout the debates of the last century, bringing it up is important. Each of those positions sums up a group of understandings about what it is to write, and to make history.

These debates are rich and difficult to summarize, but the interested reader may check, for example, the discussions in Jenkins (1995) and Ginzburg (2012) on the relations between truth and the past, or the debates around paradigms (Burrell and Morgan, 1979) and their aftermaths in management (Shepherd and Challenger, 2013).

The scientific discourse of objectivity, characteristic of the natural sciences, influenced history by developing a method in accordance with “historical science” (Ricouer, 1984). However, when historians try to avoid narrative and reproduce a neutral science, being a collector of facts, they do it at the expense of the specificities of history itself. This abandonment is still constituted through narrative procedures (Rancière, 1994). Recognizing the role of narrative, does not necessarily mean understanding history as romance. Documents support narratives and constrain the narrator, binding them to truthfulness (Burke, 1993). Therefore, the writing of history needs to go through the literary procedure, since it produces a plot. Nevertheless, it also uses referents that separate history from simply fictional narratives (Ricouer, 2004; Mouzakitis, 2015).

Narratives can only be created about groups of meanings that preexist the history that is going to be told. However, narratives themselves are a specific way of investigating historical writing. Lawrence Stone (1979) presented his work “The Revival of Narrative” at a moment when there was a growing distrust around the structuralist historical explanation. He suggested that it was not enough for historians to accomplish methodological rigor. Instead, they should provide style to writing when addressing the act of knowing how to account history. Later a similar debate was also present in discussions within MOS (van Maanen, 1995).

In "Time and Narrative," Ricouer (1984) noted that all historical production, whether traditional or structuralist, is regulated by narrative principles as the elements with which the historian works. The narrative is essential, for it holds the ability to articulate the features of temporal experience. Time is only shown to be intelligible insofar as it is thought narratively. According to Ricouer (1984, p. 217), even when the objective of the historian is to speak of tendencies and currents, "it is the act of following the narrative that gives them an organic unity." Thus, such tendencies and currents also appear as characters of a history that must be followed throughout the succession of events that constitute it, i.e., through an exercise in reflexivity.

According to White (1978), narrative accounts consist not only of factual claims, but also of rhetorical and poetic elements, they represent the position of the historian in the universal writing of history, that is, independent of human cultures: "the narration of a historical fact and the reflexivity of the historian on how to write about it, to give this event a meaning" (White, 1984, p. 102). Although history and literature interact with each other in terms of narrative style, according to Burke (1991), historiography will not advance much in the case of engaging with what the author calls "literary experiences." Thus, although the works of White hold an enduring influence in the field of history (Doran, 2013) they are criticized for blurring the lines between history and literature (Ricouer, 2004), leaving too much room for fictionalized history.

A dense narrative deals with the sequences of events and the subsequent intentions of the actors in this event. However, actors and events take place within structures that also interact with events. Writing in the present, we have the benefit of hindsight. The actors, in the past, could only guess the odds. Although there are discontinuities and pluralities of meaning that need to be addressed historiographically, the narrative method has a style which is linear and sequential. The narrative is always a possibility that emerges at any given time, due to a certain sort of arrangement that allows some discourses to emerge, while others remain subterranean (Foucault, 1970, 1972).

For Burke (1991), historiography renews its ways of narrating, and that these new forms of historiography, while not answering all questions about narrative, show that there is a simple "narrative return." Moreover, they sound like a regeneration in the act of narrating, by the historian, in the field of history. The problem of categorically using narrative as a method is that reality is not given in an orderly way, but in a permanent stream, without explicit ordering or emphasis (Partner, 2008). Historical documents, for example, can be analyzed in relation to the fact that they are also cultural products and not windows of what happened in the past (Partner, 2008; Cook, 2011b).

Therefore, to adopt a narrative approach and to become aware of discourse that is used in any specific text do not imply a knowledge that is less scientific than the strict functional-positivist approach or an embrace of irrationalism (Keulen and Kroeze, 2012). A historical narrative is the formal representation of historical content, and history is the process of translating evidence into historical narratives. As Taylor *et al.* (2009, p. 165) emphasize: "Historical narrative should be understood as a process of composition involving events and characters, including the author, with the goal of building a unified and meaningful account." The author, in the present, is part of the narrative that is being created about events that took place in the past. To recognize this active role as the creator of a narrative is an exercise in reflexivity.

Partner (2008, 2009) pointed to the narrative as the main contribution from the linguistic turn in history. Kroeze and Keulen (2013) suggest concentrating on the contributions that can be made by the narrative approach that came up with the linguistic turn. The concept allows reflection on how subjects and collectivities are constructed, and the struggles they are engaged in. In other words, the central point would not be to "know" that narratives are constructed but tackling "how" they are constructed.

The narrative, thus, includes the imprecision, unpredictability and permeability of the contexts involved in historical events (Eagleton, 1996). Hence, the paradox of a narrative approaches as a historical method. Such inclusion also advocates reflexivity in the sense of understanding the context when writing a historical narrative. In pondering history in such terms, according to Veyne (1984), it is not only drawing attention to the narrative form of it, it is also highlighting the responsibility of the historian as being the one who weaves intrigue into the choice of what should appear as part of the plot. That goes against all “positivist” pretensions that the whole story is already told in the sources. Finally, from these narrative premises, we complete the theoretical interlacing, together with reflection of on the constitution of archives, the role of reflexivity for a conscious, historical writing on the part of the researcher.

### Final considerations

This paper discussed the role of reflexivity in relation to archives and narratives in the practice of (re)constructing the organizational past from memories and silences. We highlighted the multiple characteristics of archives, their meanings and the possibilities of writing narratives about them through reflexivity. We have the historical narrative as one possible reconstruction of a historical object, which is connected to the production conditions of the text. Through reflexivity, we discussed the socially constructed nature of the documents and the archives. We then affirm historical narrative as opposed to fictional work, but constructed by an author and, hence, subject to interpretations and further reinterpretations.

Our proposed framework considers reflexivity as a methodological attitude of the researcher in all stages of the research, from the conscience of searching for documents in archives, historical writing and the narrative produced as “final.” Furthermore, it is necessary to reflect on the contextual understanding of the period of time studied and how the sources were retained – or discarded – and made available, and the consequences of the theoretical choices made.

We are aligned with Keulen and Kroeze (2012) on the definition of historical narrative and the demystification of its supposedly non-scientific or fictional character. The use of archives is well recognized in HOS. However, historical narratives deriving from their analysis are still viewed with some skepticism. Considering the historian as the creator of a narrative about the past strengthens a creative view of history, without siding with the notion that all history is fiction. The facts described in the archives do not exist in isolation. The fabric of history is an intrigue, permeated by powers and conflicts in their relationships. Sources are constructed within discursive webs, and both are immersed in the social context in which they are produced and archived. The coding of events in relation to a narrative is one of the ways in which culture makes the past intelligible.

However, recognizing reflexivity does not make the writing of history easier. On the contrary, paraphrasing Pratt (2009), we may say that since history may be supported by the veracity of the narrative, it becomes difficult to judge what “good” history is. At the same time, we emphasize that all historiography is written within the frames of the archives to which it relates. Thus, historical narratives depend on archives to be written.

The framework we have proposed in this paper, with a diagram and some questions that may help the writing of history, does not intend to finish this conversation. We believe, that if historical narratives are to be part of HOS, debates around the production of this knowledge should continue, focusing especially on building bridges with the field of history.

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#### Further reading

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