

# Historiography - A Neglected Research Method in Business and Management Studies

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**Abstract:** The objective of this speculative paper is to open a debate as to the importance of historiography in the field of business and management studies and to this end the paper argues that it is an under utilised research paradigm.

It is the paper's contention that history has a special role to play in academic research. It contextualises the issues being studied and it gives shape to the parameters of the understanding which is offered by the research. Without access to a history of the issues and the ideas being examined it is difficult to make sense of the current situation. Being able to have a broad perspective of the history and the current situation opens the way to being able to make a valuable contribution to the theoretical body of knowledge in the field. Business and management studies can obtain much from historiography and this paper indicates how it may be used in this context and its affinity with other accepted narrative based research paradigms already in use in this field

**Keywords and phrases:** History, historiography, historicism, context, knowledge, facts and figures, pedagogical understanding, facts, case studies, critical realism, dialectic, story, narrative.

## 1. Introduction

This paper is a review of historiography and how it could be used in the field of business and management studies. It is based on the academic and business experience of the authors, which amounts to some 50-person years, as well as a review of the literature. The intention of this paper is to open a debate as to the importance of historiography in this field of study and to this end we argue that it is an under utilised research paradigm.

Historiography can offer the business and management researcher an opportunity to acquire a rich understanding of situations and the context in which they exist. Knowing the background to any situation or to any issue enhances our comprehension and improves our ability to see what is important and what is not. In the words of Elton (p67, 1989), "*Historical knowledge gives solidity to the understanding of the present*".

This paper, written for business and management researchers, reviews the role of history in academic research and suggests a methodological framework for using historiographic techniques in business and management studies. The methodological framework is expressed as a series of nine steps and offers suggestions about how to approach this type of research.

## 2. Perspectives on history

History has had a mixed press with protagonists who proclaim its undoubted value and antagonists who question its worth. Marwick (1979) pointed out that:

*History is attacked, from the intellectual heights, as being vague, cliché-ridden and devoid of basic standards, and, from the popular lowlands, as being pedantic and over concerned with the detailed persistence of the insignificant.*

Wittgenstein (1915) objected to, not a knowledge of history as such, but rather the idea that the history of an issue or situation will in some way dictate our current or future attitude or policy towards it. The danger he alludes to lies in believing that history or tradition not only informs the present but dictates to it which would have been similar to the historical deterministic position of Hegel<sup>1</sup>. This attitude of not being able to put history to rest is clearly seen in political clashes around the world..

However as a general rule business and management researchers do not become involved in this use of history. Instead Arnold (2000) suggests that "all history in some way wishes to say something about its own present time" and "the need to interpret the past, not simply present it",

<sup>1</sup> See <http://dave.burrell.net/hegel.html> accessed 17 July 2004

offers a basis for contextualising historiography within business and management studies.

### 3. History and the continuum of existence

Fortunately there is a much more positive way in which history is also used. Events do not take place in a vacuum. There are always preceding circumstances to any event as well as, of course, consequences. In order to be able to understand an event and to evaluate it, it is important to know about what has led to it. In fact any understanding of a phenomenon or a situation will usually have to be based on a knowledge and appreciation of the trajectory of circumstances which have led up to it. As stated above this means that any real appreciation of the present requires an understanding of the past or the history of the situation. Those who know the history of the situation can more fully appreciate what is currently happening and the context in which it is happening. This implies a continuum in our existence and assumes not that in some respects the present or indeed the future looks something like the past but that the present or the future will be informed by the past. It is this ability of the past to inform the present and the future which makes historical studies interesting to the business and management studies scholar.

### 4. The value of history - contextualisation for effectiveness

The importance of the contextualisation of any issue is well addressed by Neustadt and Ernest (1986). They point out that only when knowledge is contextualised may it be used effectively. Understanding the history provides the contextualisation. In this respect knowledge of history may be seen as having substantial practical potential. But learning from the past is never simply a one-way process. As Carr (p68, 1967) pointed out:

*To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past*

*and present through the interrelation between them.*

Any understanding of a phenomenon or a situation will usually have to be based on a knowledge and appreciation of the trajectory of circumstances which have led up to it. It is this ability of the past to inform the present and which makes historical studies interesting to the business and management studies scholar.

#### 4.1 Who writes the history?

It is sometimes no simple matter to locate the real perspective of the history. At the end of the day history is a story and as such it has to be told by someone. However Arnold (2000) pointed out that the process of creating the story is not one of incremental construction based upon building blocks of facts, but instead requires analysis of cause and effect, interpretation of previous analysis and crucially "arguing what the story means". Whoever does the telling will have a point of view. Carr (p11, 1967) pointed out that it used to be said that the facts of history speak for themselves. But today this type of thinking is seen as too simplistic. The term fact is used often in a very broad sense and what is regarded as a fact by one person may not be held to be so by another. In practice facts are frequently no more than those ideas, which are presented by the storyteller. For every fact that is used in any story or narrative there are frequently dozens or even hundreds of other facts which are omitted, as they did not suit the slant, which the storyteller wanted to give. But besides the issue of what may have been included and what may have been omitted there is another deeper consideration. According to Barraclough (1955):

*The history we read though based on facts, is, strictly speaking, not factual at all, but a series of accepted judgements.*

So called facts and their interpretation can be so intertwined that they are virtually inseparable and although a historian may try to be objective and unbiased, this is not always achieved.

Carr (p23 1967) reinforces the idea of the subjectivity of history when he said:

*Study the historian before you study the facts.*

. Certain things are sometimes said to be “known” and could be argued to be independent of *judgements* as suggested by Barraclough. But Collingwood (1945) reflected ‘*all history is the history of thought, and history is the re-enactment in the historian’s mind of the thought whose history he is studying*’. Carr (p23 1967) points to this problem of facts by saying, “*By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants*”. Keegan (1997) put an additional spin on this when he said “*Historians are committed to controversy*” and what appears to be simple facts are often not so simple at all.

## 5. Historiographic research

Although history has certainly been written since the time of Herodotus (c. 484-425 BCE), who acquired the accolade of the “father of history”, it was first properly recognised as an academic field of study in England in 1622 when William Camden established a Chair in Civil History at Oxford University (Black et al., p222). *Ranke (1795-1886) established history as a profession primarily based upon his insistence on working directly with primary sources – a focus passed on to his students.* However Elton (1989) claims that only in modern times has it become a “*properly developed discipline*”, Elton commenting on the older approach to history describes Francis Bacon’s book the Life of Henry VII as an “*untrustworthy piece of brilliant journalism*”. Marwick (1979) points out that it was only in the nineteenth century in Western European and North American universities that historians began an ordered and systematic study of history employing a range of intellectually rigorous concepts that changed the attitude and purpose of those who study history. There are many different aspects to historical rigour such as the need for the integrity of present evidence, avoiding preconceived ideas, a comprehensive set of sources, thorough criticism of sources used, and intellectually honest argument. Summarising this Elton (1989) points out

*Knowledge of all the sources, and competent criticism of them – these are the basic requirements of a reliable historiography*”.

But it is important to say that there is no universal agreement as to precisely how history should be researched and written (Powick 1956; Elton 1989; Marwick 1979). Marwick (1979) reinforces this by saying that history is an *ill-defined profession*. He also points out that the term historiography may be reserved not for the discussion of past events themselves but rather for how different historians have interpreted them.

## 6. History and business and management studies

History is not a popular research paradigm in business and management and consequently it has generally not been given adequate attention as a specific academic research activity. This was highlighted by Bannister (1992) in his paper which surveyed the use of historical works in the field of information systems management. Of course there are some formal and many informal works<sup>2</sup> in this field which draw on history. Marwick (p31, 1997) points out that Adam Smith’s seminal work, *The Wealth of Nations*, is *essentially historical in its approach to the study of man’s economic activities*.

Business and management studies addresses a wide range of issues, which requires this field of study to draw on many different research paradigms. This paper suggests that Historiographic techniques should be given more attention as a research paradigm especially at the doctoral level.

The object of academic research into business and management studies is to add something of value to the body of knowledge. What constitutes the body of knowledge has been addressed elsewhere (Remenyi et al 2004). The question here is how can a historiography approach be used to achieve such an objective.

Historiography is an empirical research paradigm using an interpretative or qualitative approach which focuses on a chronology over a substantial period of time in order to obtain a fuller and richer understanding of a situation or set of

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<sup>2</sup> There are a large number of informal business and management histories written by retired executives. Books by Jack Welch, John Harvey-Jones and Lee Iacocca immediately come to mind.

circumstances<sup>3</sup>. It is regarded by many but not by all, as being a social science (Marwick p104, 1979). This approach to research will follow *the general principles* of rigorous interpretative research as well as *the processes* associated with competent academic research and thus it is capable of producing a credible research finding.

## 7. The nine steps required

The steps required for this type of research are similar to those employed in any form of empirical interpretivist research. Of course the emphasis is on the chronology inherent in the field being studied. There are however certain differences in emphasis which need to be noted.

As with any stepwise description of research such as this it should be understood that frequently steps need to be repeated or revisited. As the research progresses into the research topic new dimensions can open up which may require the researcher to go back and revisit earlier steps. In historiography the evidence can actually take over and dictate the direction of the research.

### 7.1 The research question

Historiography, like any other research project, begins with the need to focus on a specific research question. The characteristics required of this research question differ from others in this field of study in that there needs to be a specific expectation that a study of the past will throw light on the possible answer to the current question. Thus chronology needs to be of central importance to the research question. It is clear that only certain types of research questions will benefit from this historiographic approach. Of course the question needs to be interesting, to both the researcher and to the business and

management community and it also needs to be answerable. The question needs to be defensible like any other research question against any suggestion that its answer is likely to be obvious or not relevant to its current set of stakeholders. Novice researchers may fall into the trap of taking on too difficult a question and therefore care needs to be taken that the research can be accomplished in the timeframe required.

### 7.2 The relevance check

A historiographic approach to research in business and management studies will only be relevant in a limited number of circumstances and therefore it is important for the researcher to check if he or she is on the right track. The following situations suggest that historiography is a useful approach. It is not a definitive list but simply indicative of the type of issues which may be studied in this way.

- i. If there is evidence of a previous event having a special importance on how current decisions are made or how current policy is established.
- ii. If there is a suggestion that the organisation faced a similar situation in the past and that lessons learnt at that time have been forgotten.
- iii. If there is a possibility that the current situation is part of a cycle and that understanding the nature of the cycle would help the current situation.

### 7.3 The scope of the research

Having established a suitable research question the next step is to determine the scope of the research. This requires a careful consideration of the domain for inquiry. In effect the domain establishes the principle academic disciplines which the research will need to draw on. Thus a research project may need to use marketing and financial and information systems ideas and concepts. Toynee (1948) made the remark that the history of an individual country could in general not be understood in isolation from other countries. This type of thinking also applies to business and management studies. It is not possible to have an in-depth understanding of marketing in isolation without appreciating finance and human resource management. Thus

<sup>3</sup> There is no reason why historiographic research might not also include some aspects of quantitative research but the main emphasis is likely to be interpretivist. Elton (1989) states that historians borrow methods from other sources and that where it is appropriate historians may well use quantitative methods. However he also points out that *"the historian may often be well advised to count heads: but it should always be recognised that, since history must analyse and relate the story of past change and must concern itself with particular people as well as categories, historical studies derived from sociologic influence can never be more than a small part of the enterprise"*.



scoping the question is also important. At this stage it is also necessary to establish the unit of analysis which will be used. The research may also look at an organisation, an individual or an industry. The result of this scoping exercise will be a high level plan highlighting the areas to be researched and the direct object or objects of the research. This gives the researcher a firm starting point from which to proceed.

#### **7.4 Sources of evidence**

History stands or falls on the researcher's ability to obtain a range of reputable and credible sources of evidence. Thus the next step in this research process is to conduct a survey of the potential sources of evidence. Evidence may be categorised into primary evidence and secondary. Primary evidence consists of original sources such as interviews, minutes of meetings, diaries and contracts. Secondary evidence consists of articles in newspapers, books and other information supplied by authors or commentators who were not directly involved in the situation being studied.

There are many potential sources of evidence. They include those mentioned above as well as academic papers, corporate documents such as annual accounts, personal letters, consultants reports, government archives, autobiographies, masters and doctoral dissertations, photographs, ordinance survey maps, television and radio programs (McDowell 2002).

When the event being studied is relatively recent history sometimes, though not always offers, eye witness accounts. When this is the case the researcher needs to acquire the skills of research interviewing.

Sometimes there are more sources of evidence available than the researcher can reasonably cope with and when this happens a process of careful selection needs to be undertaken. In such cases the bias of the researcher can become a major concern. Another problem arises when different sources provide contradictory evidence. The standard approach to resolving contradiction is triangulation (Remenyi et al 1997). However in applying triangulation selection of sources and the allocation of the

credibility of these sources can be a source of concern.

If it is not obvious that a number of suitable sources are available then it is probably that a historiographic approach should not be pursued. It is often not a trivial matter to establish all the relevant primary and secondary sources and this is often an important aspect of the research. Leaving out sources of evidence can seriously harm the research findings. This can occur when an organisation refuses to give the researcher access to knowledgeable informants and then other approaches have to be sought.

#### **7.5 Assessment of methods of analysis**

The assessment of the specific methods that will be used in the research is the next step. As historiography is essentially interpretist then the methods will largely come from this side of the research equation. There are some major choices to be made in this respect (Windschuttle 1996). If an entirely qualitative approach is pursued then the researcher will be looking at the use of one or other approach to hermeneutics, which is the theory and practice of interpretation, and with which the historiographer needs to be familiar. If a hybrid approach is used incorporating some qualitative techniques then perhaps content analysis may be used. This type of approach may even be supported by certain computer analysis. If this approach is taken then the research will need to become familiar with the precepts of critical realism.

#### **7.6 Assembling the evidence**

The next step is to assemble the evidence from the various sources to be used. This is a major component of the work involved. There are various techniques which may be used during this activity. Mason et al (1997) suggests that as a first step a timeline should be established but this is largely a question of preference. There is little doubt that some sort of a timeline will be produced before the research is concluded. Elton (1989) points out that the researcher may be drawn into all sorts of new areas and questions as the research proceeds. He makes the point that in historical research that "(the researcher) *becomes the servant of his evidence*". Argris and Schon (1978) suggest that the

historiographer needs to develop their own espoused theory at this stage. Throughout this work the evidence and the sources of the evidence needs to be continually evaluated so that spurious, inaccurate or false information is not included. How such evidence is omitted is not unproblematic. Each piece of evidence will have to be critically scrutinised and weighed carefully. An example of the care which needs to be taken is the thoroughness with which the motives for writing letters or creating a diary or similar documents needs to be assessed. Sometimes letters or diaries may be written ironically or sarcastically and it can be difficult to be sure the appropriate meaning of such documents is being understood and used in the research.

Each researcher will have his or her own set of criteria for accepting a piece of evidence as relevant and credible and there is no doubt that bias enters into this process. It is sometimes useful for the historiographer to ask colleagues to read evidence and to give their impression of its meaning.

Where eye witness evidence has been collected knowledge of non-verbal cues such as body language, verbal intonation and facial expressions may be helpful in understanding the evidence.

### 7.7 Developing the story

While the evidence is being collected the historiographer will be developing the story or narrative which is one of the primary products of the work. This requires the determination of patterns in and explanations of facts. Illuminating what happened and how it happened and why it happened are the central issues here and the skill of the researcher as a story teller comes to the fore during this part of the research. Story telling is an art form in its own right and the historian needs to cultivate this skill. If the story is told in an engaging manner it will be read and its credibility will be higher. If the story is told in a dull and an uninteresting way it will not be much read and it may not be considered relevant or creditable.

For this part of the research to be credible the historiographer needs to tell the story with the highest degree of integrity. The evidence may lead to a story in which there are contradictions. These need to be

highlighted and where possible resolved. Of course sometimes contradictions cannot be resolved and they have to be accepted as part of the situation. When this occurs it may be possible to suggest them as a topic for future research.

### 7.8 Critiquing the story

This step involves the major intellectual challenge of the research. Once the story or narrative has been developed the researcher needs to apply the skills of critique. There is no absolute set of rules for undertaking this type of work. The type of critique employed may be wide ranging and may address the story or narrative at various levels. For the purposes of this critique concepts may be drawn from Marxism, from psychoanalysis, from deconstructionism, from phenomenology, from postmodernism, from semiotics to mention only a few sources. However what ever the source of the concepts used in the critique the purpose is to assess if the evidence is appropriate; if the evidence is creditable; and the findings are understandable. A key question here is does the evidence allow a convincing argument to be made which will allow the finding to be accepted. In this context the researcher needs to be continuously aware of the problems of bias, the problems of preconceptions and the problems of selected perception. The narrative needs to be reviewed from the point of view of it not being too narrow in its perception and thus omitting important issues. Of course, it needs to be remembered that the historiographer seldom has a full set of information. At the end of this process the researcher needs to feel confident that a credible story is being told and that the story helps add something of value to the body of knowledge. The implications are clear. In publishing his or her findings the historiographer is asserting that the findings of the research are robust enough to be accepted by leading authorities in the field. This is not a trivial task but it is essential that the work receives recognition from those who are qualified to comment on the work. But like all other forms of research the finding of the historiographer will probably not represent the final word in this area of research. As Elton (1989) points out: -

*History is an unending search  
for truth, with the only*

*certainty at each man's end  
that there will be more to be  
said and that, before long,  
others will say it.*

### 7.9 The outcome of the research

The final step is the articulation of what this project has actually added to the body of knowledge and how this could be put to use by business and management people. This will be the research findings and conclusions. In the field of business and management studies this may also include some specific management guidelines and advice.

Historiography is unlikely to produce a rigorous academic theory but it will facilitate the development of such theories. According to Mason et al (1997) the outcome of historiography research may be described under five headings which are:

- a) An account of a significant fragment of the past;
- b) An explanation of present circumstances or events;
- c) Validation or invalidation of some theory

d) A recognition of patterns or principles derived from inductive reasoning arising out of this account;

e) A source of new research hypothesis.

All five of these possible outcomes are academic "raw material" for the production of new theory. They are also useful findings in their own right and could be regarded as competent for a research degree or for publishing in an academically referred journal.

### 8. Contextualising historiography in business and management studies

From the above it may be seen that there are numerous similarities between historiography and other research paradigms used in business and management studies, especially case studies and ethnography. All three of these frameworks are narrative orientated research paradigms with different emphases. Table 1 below indicates how the emphasis used in each of these paradigms differs.

**Table 1:** Different emphasis used in historiography, case studies and ethnography

		<b>Historiography</b>	<b>Case Studies</b>	<b>Ethnography</b>
1	<b>Key focus</b>	Chronology	Event/s	Culture
2	<b>Sources of Evidence</b>	Any authentic and credible source	Primarily interviews and corporate documents	Primarily observation
3	<b>Potential for the use of analytical or computer tools</b>	Low	Medium	Low
4	<b>Delivery of results</b>	Narrative leading to hypotheses	Narrative, hypotheses and theory	Narrative, hypotheses and theory
5	<b>Generalisability</b>	Not relevant	Some scope	Some scope
6	<b>Validity</b>	Strong potential	Strong potential	Strong potential
7	<b>Potential for academic rigour</b>	Strong	Strong	Strong
8	<b>Major challenges</b>	Finding authentic and credible evidence and objectively interpreting it	Obtaining adequate access to the people or organisations required	Usually a single view point. Having the time required to acquire the deep understanding and then presenting it objectively

In most of the issues listed in Table 1 historiography constitutes a useful research paradigm which may be used in

the field of business and management research.

## 9. Integrating historiography in business and management studies

Historiography has much to offer the researcher in business and management studies, especially for those coming to this field of study with an interpretist or a critical realist perspective Sayer (2000). In fact historiography offers a tempting resonance with these philosophical approaches.

There are numerous examples of this. Sayer (2000) proposes that social systems are necessarily open and that they evolved over time rather than equilibrated, not least because people have the capacity to learn and change their behaviour. Context is crucial to explaining behaviour by reference to the conditions within which decisions were taken and understanding how actors perceive their context and situation. As seen above historiographic research provides an approach to understanding the impact of such decisions on social systems. These themes of understanding and even evaluating change within a context were also evident in the work of Payson and Tilley (1997) where an evaluation approach based on critical realism was used to identify the impact of changes (mechanisms) on a system (Regularity) within the (context) of the environment. A key concern shared by Payson and Tilley (1997) and Sayer (2000) is to seek substantial connections among phenomena as an aid to understanding. This search for common connections then acts as a thread across subsequent evaluations and effectively becomes a historiographic study tracking interventions, decisions and consequences.

Similarly Bannister (2001) applies historical methods to assess the changing perception of Value from IT within the Irish Public sector, establishing that decisions in IT investment in public administration are driven by perceptions of value that change over time and the extent and effectiveness are closely related to the speed of evolution of perception and the ability of individual champions to overcome systemic barriers to IT infusion peculiar to the civil service.

Emphasising the importance of historiography Sayer (2000) maintains explanatory accounts must offer both a historical narrative and explanatory analysis of structure and mechanisms. Sayer (2000) also proposes that the contingency of action means that it is impossible to have a theory of history however it is necessary to interpret history in the context of theory, within such concepts it is worth looking at a proposed methodological framework for the use of the historiographic technique.

In addition historiographical research also resonates with the case study family of research methods. Historiographic research as proposed by Mason et al (1997) shares many of the same sources of evidence as proposed by Yin (2003) (Documentation, Archival Records, Interviews, Direct Observation, Physical Artefacts). It also shares the emphasis on the narrative. Yin identifies that both history and the case study focus on how and why questions. He claims that these do not require control of behavioural events. Of course Yin does characterise the case study as focusing on contemporary events. However to fully understand these in the case study context history is definitely required. The essence of Yin's approach is that the case study facilitates research where *"the boundaries between phenomena and context are not clear"*. Mason et al (1997) also identifies this similarity of comparative case research and historical research.

## 10. Summary and conclusions

This paper is an introduction into the use of historiography in business and management studies. As mentioned above the primary objective of this speculative paper is to open a debate as to the importance of historiography in the field of business and management studies. To this end the authors argue that historiography has an important role to play in research in the business and management studies field. However the relevance or importance of history is not without its critics. It is certainly necessary to establish that historiography does not mean the primacy of simple facts. Factism<sup>4</sup> is a distortion of the nature of

<sup>4</sup> Factism (with our apologies to the Oxford and other Dictionaries) is the emphasis on simple facts to the exclusion of understanding.



historical thinking. Even when historiography approach is clearly suitable for the business and management studies question being researched it is a challenge to undertake competent research work using this paradigm. Historiography is not an easy option for an academic researcher. Controversy surrounds its place in the social sciences. There is no simple cookbook approach. Historiographers are quintessentially individualistic. It is highly interpretist and the findings are often thought to be more personal than some researchers are comfortable with. However in this respect Gould's (1992) words are worth remembering:

*I believe that science must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gutsy, human enterprise, not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information.*

As business and management studies develop it is our contention that this field of study needs to pay more attention to historiography and to use it more frequently and more effectively. After all it was the eminent economist, Joseph Schumpeter once asserted that any discipline must have four components namely:

- a) empirical data (observations and facts),
- b) theories/paradigms,
- c) an ethics and
- d) a history.

This paper provides a starting point for researchers interested in building the historical component by identifying the applicability of historiography to the narrative based research paradigms used in business and management research. In addition it proposes a nine step framework for research that takes into account learning from historiography. Such a synthesis of the disciplines of history and business and management studies potentially increases the opportunities for new insights or knowledge.

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