Archival Research in Historical Organisation Studies

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Archival Research in Historical Organisation Studies: Theorising Silences

BY

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Gabrielle Durepos: for Scott and all our chapters ahead.
Amy Thurlow: for Paul who makes our journey a wonderful adventure.

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About the Authors

Gabrielle Durepos, PhD, is Professor of Business Administration at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Canada. Her co-authored book, *ANTi-History: Theorizing the Past, History, and Historiography in Management and Organization Studies*, offers a critical organisational history methodology. Her publications appear in *Management & Organizational History*, *Journal of Management History*, *Critical Perspectives of International Business*, and *Organization*. She is an Editor of the Debates in Business History Palgrave Book Series. She is a Co-editor of both the SAGE Encyclopaedia of Case Study Research and the SAGE Major Work on Case Study Methods in Business Research.

Amy Thurlow, PhD, is Professor of Communication at Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Canada. Her research is motivated by a curiosity about how humans socially construct and enact organisation through processes of identity construction. Her recent work includes historical constructions of identity and the alternative histories often ignored in that process. Her 2019 book, *Social Media, Organizational Identity and Public Relations: The Challenge of Authenticity*, investigates identity construction in a virtual context. She is a Co-editor of Diversity and Business Storytelling (2023), a collection of works exploring diversity in organisations from a variety of perspectives.

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Preface

During Eastern Canadian winters, it is common to wake up to vivid animal tracks in the snow. While some imprints are recognisable, many are not and, given the animal is long gone, will never be. Eventually, the snow melts, and the tracks disappear. This is double erasure: not only have the animals retreated, but there is no trace of their tracks. This story resonates with us, especially in the context of archival research. It's what we experience while researching women, indigenous persons, and their stories of everyday work life. Our book is about these absences and why they persist.

In the book cover, we sought to evoke the relationship between silence and noise. We imagine a jungle with giraffes and lions (and other animals, too). The lion is noisy, and the giraffe is silent. When we are startled by the lion's roar, we think of the lion only. We do not think of the giraffe's silence. In some ways, the lion's roar negates the presence of other silent animals. Such is the relationship between silence and noise. The noise distracts us from whom and what are silenced.

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Land Acknowledgement

This book was written in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Halifax is located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and traditional lands of the Mi'kmaq people. We acknowledge the Peace & Friendship Treaties signed in this Territory. We recognise that we are all Treaty People.

The authors of this book work at Mount Saint Vincent University, a university founded by the Sisters of Charity. The Sisters of Charity administered Indian Residential Schools (we explore this in Chapter Four). Though we were not part of this past, we take responsibility for reconciliation. We want to take part in building inclusive futures.

Our project of reconciliation goes beyond land acknowledgements. We work towards reconciliation every day. We read Indigenous literature and research the colonial past of Canada. We build awareness about Indigenous relations in our classrooms. We support Indigenous scholars by writing referee letters, reviewing their work, and including their voices in conference activities. We rely on Indigenous colleagues to read our research on Indigenous relations to give us feedback and guide us. Mostly, we listen and learn from them while recognising that reconciliation is more our job and less theirs.

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Chapter One

Introducing Archival Research in Historical Organisation Studies: Theorising Silences

Introduction

The emergence of the field of historical organisation studies (HOS) has fostered an increase in the use and intellectual curiosity about archives (Booth and Rowlinson, 2006; Maclean et al., 2016). This is unsurprising given historians have long valued archives as the prime location to search for sources of the past (Geiger et al., 2010; Raab, 2016; Scott, 1990). Despite this growth, detailed explanations on *how to use archives* are nascent in HOS (Fellman and Popp, 2013; Lipartito, 2013; Tennent and Gillett, 2023). The latter is needed given the limited explicit explanations of methodology in business history (de Jong et al., 2015; Fellman and Popp, 2013; Wadhwani and Bucheli, 2014). The lack of methodological transparency and reflexivity in archival research has led to calls to theorise archives (Barros, 2016; Coraiola et al., 2015; Manoff, 2004; Schwarzkopf, 2012).

Those answering the call have gone beyond treating archives as a place from which to extract data, to interrogating the archive, itself, as the research phenomenon (Mills and Helms Mills, 2011, 2018; Barros, 2016; Decker, 2013, 2014; Coller et al., 2016). One outcome of this research is the assertion that archives silence (Durepos and Barros, 2024). Among others, women, gender, race, ethnicity, Black persons, Indigenous persons, and voices from the Global South (Barros, 2016; Barros et al., 2019; Caswell et al., 2017) are largely missing from archives. Consequently, researchers in HOS are limited in the stories they can share about many marginalised communities.

This book is about archival silences and their consequences. We go beyond the statement that archives silence to demonstrate how and where silences occur. Our goal is to explore the processes through which archives silence and offer insight on how HOS researchers can begin to live with silences.

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What Is an Archive?

The archive, the central subject of our book, is a contested research site and concept. No single meaning of the term archive exists (Barros et al., 2019; Barros, 2016; Mills and Helms Mills, 2011; Fellman and Popp, 2013). Postmodern scholars like Foucault (1972) and Derrida (1996) have problematised the popular conceptualisation of archives as a collection of physical artefacts located in a defined space. For Foucault (1972), the archive is the entirety of accumulated knowledge about a subject. For Derrida (1996), archives evoke the idea of origin or a commencement. The archive in the postmodern sense is understood as foundational and constituent to the very structure of society. It is this structure, its system, and rules that determine the conditions of possibility of what can be said, thought, remembered, forgotten, and excluded (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982).

While we both self-describe as post-positivist researchers, the archive that is the subject of this book is less the concept and more the place, that is as a physical space and repository that houses collections of records and artefacts. We are interested in the archive as a storehouse of documents that are kept either intentionally or unintentionally, openly, or secretly, and whose presence influences and impacts the narratives that societies and historians can create. The archive we discuss in this book is both the collection of records and the institution of collecting (Scott, 1990; Raab, 2016).

There are various types of archives, including public, private, and library archives. In this book, we are mostly concerned with business archives and business sources. Other terms for business archives include corporate archives, organisational archives, and company archives and our choice of terminology is arbitrary. There are notable examples of empirical research that draw on business archives in HOS (Seaman and Smith, 2012; Maclean et al., 2014; Lubinski, 2018; Foster et al., 2020; Maclean et al., 2020). The idea of business archives is long-standing. As early as the 1980s, Smith and Steadman (1981) reported that companies including Wells Fargo, Foremost-McKesson, Case Manhattan Bank, and AT&T were developing their own archives. Examples of extant businesses that have archives include Marks & Spencer and Boots (Hull and Scott, 2020). Despite their plenitude, many researchers venture to university archives and museums (Maclean et al., 2020; Lipartito, 2013) or consult commercial directories (Scott, 1990) or the International Directory of Company Histories (de Jong et al., 2015) to access business records.

Business archives are distinct. To begin, many business archives are closed, and access must be negotiated (Lipartito, 2013). Whether the business is in existence or not can impact access (Rowlinson, 2004). Some extant corporations manage their own historical repositories (Hull and Scott, 2020) and keep their records on site (Lipartito, 2013). Many long-standing organisations may not fully know the contents of their repositories (Rowlinson, 2004). Because the legal requirements on what documents must be kept and for how long vary geographically and by business form, many collections can be sparce (Delahaye et al., 2009; Smith and Steadman, 1981). On the other hand, the private archives of large and long-standing firms can be extensive and overwhelming for researchers (Fellman and

Popp, 2013). Some companies are selective in what they keep or include for fear that documents may portray the organisation in a negative light or reveal company secrets (Grattan, 2008; Lane, 1993; Smith and Steadman, 1981). Beyond these factors, organisations with a complicated history can be challenging to study (Campbell-Miller and Kirkby, 2018). Some have undergone mergers or physically relocated which may lead to collections being relocated, split across sites (whose accessibility may vary), or discarded (Whittle and Wilson, 2015). Rowlinson (2004) cautions researchers to pay special attention to the validity and reliability of company documents because many documents are created to legitimate the company in the public eye. Finally, as we discuss in Chapter Five, the rise of information technology has led many businesses and archives to go paperless. The implication for researchers is that the physical documents accessible at business archives can date to the early 1990s, only. While opportunities are opened with online access, collections undergo a new spectrum of curation strategies which may limit what is accessible (Manoff, 2004; Featherstone, 2006; Cook, 2007; Schwarzkopf, 2012; Raab, 2016).

Archives, generally, serve several roles. For one, they act as a repository of organisational and/or national history as well as societal memory (Derrida, 1996; Cook, 2001a; Featherstone, 2006). They are said to offer people a sense of culture, identity, and history (Cook, 2001a). Manoff (2004) suggests archives play an important role in creating a sense of national consciousness. They are central to fostering understanding of where persons have been and what they have done (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). They are the foundation for maintaining accountability to actions (Cook, 2007). They are a promise to being remembered, allowing peoples and organisations a presence in the future (Derrida, 1996). The potential for perpetuity has no doubt fuelled the societal desire to archive (Featherstone, 2006; Cook, 2011a; Fellman and Popp, 2013). Beyond this, scholars have long desired to master the past and, consequently, capture everything and trace it to its origin (Dooley and Kavanagh, 2007; Smith, 2012; Featherstone, 2006). This impulse, in a modern condition, led to a dramatic growth in the volume of archival materials (Scott, 1990; Featherstone, 2006; Cook, 2007; Raab, 2016).

Archival Sources

Archives contain sources. There are many words in currency to describe sources, like, records, documents, artefacts, and evidence (a term we later problematise); however, we use sources. Sources are a main unit of analysis in our book. Sources have a physical presence. Many sources have some form of inscribed text (Scott, 1990); however, objects without inscriptions like sounds and smells can also be sources (Raab, 2016). Sources are usually produced by contemporaries in their everyday practice to serve their immediate purpose and respective activities. Sources, in the traditional sense, are not produced by the researcher or to inform the researcher. Our knowledge of archival sources and their curation is heavily influenced by Jenkinson (1922) whose work was highly realist (Trace, 2002). Jenkinson believed that sources and the thoughts, ideas, and statements inscribed therein corresponded exactly to the lived experiences of past people (Brothman, 2002).

Over time, the organisations that produce documents have changed. Early recording was limited to the church, state, and government, with the latter holding the largest body of documents available. Governments have maintained records for fiscal (e.g. collecting taxes, assessing land ownership), legal, and disciplinary (e.g. criminal statistics) reasons. Sources are often categorised as public and private. While the value of private documents like letters, recipes, and diaries is their capacity to open the every-day domestic sphere, public documents that speak to diplomatic and constitutional events have long been highly regarded by historians (Scott, 1990).

The idea that businesses keep extensive records is now normalised. This practice dates to the late 1600s with the emergence of Commercial Directories in Britain. Business records today are heterogeneous. Examples include clothing, web pages, meeting minutes, oral histories, legal documents, promotional materials, machines, buildings, and art (Foster et al., 2020; Fridenson, 2008). What is kept varies around the world. Legal frameworks that govern collection and preservation are geographically situated. For example, British Companies Act and the Companies Registration Office in Britain (Scott, 1990) is specific to its geography. However, in many businesses, the business archivist has a large degree of autonomy over curation, influencing what is preserved (Foster et al., 2020; Hull and Scott, 2020; Lipartito, 2013).

Researchers who use sources frequently engage in source criticism, where they interrogate the source to question its authenticity (is it what it deems to be?), credibility (is it free from mistakes, is it a plausible account of the authors point of view), representativeness (is it typical?), and meaning (is it clear and understandable) (Scott, 1990). Researchers question the proximity of the source whereby they ask about the temporal duration between the document creation and the event it reports. The less temporal distance between the lived event and the document that describes it, the more reliable the source is understood to be (Brothman, 2002; Lipartito, 2013).

Sources are usually described as either primary or secondary. Those deemed to be proximal to the event they describe are called primary sources (Marwick, 2001). Though what counts as a primary source depends on the research question, primary sources are valued because of their proximity to a past event (Scott, 1990). These sources are produced for immediate use, to serve the needs of its creators. Often, primary sources are fragmentary and opaque (Marwick, 2001). Examples of primary sources include documents of record (record that an event happened, a treaty), surveys and reports, chronicles and histories, family and personal sources (diaries, memoires, and letters), pamphlets, sermons, political manifestos, guides, handbooks, directories, media communication and artefacts of popular culture, literary and artistic sources (novels, plays, and paintings), and oral histories (the recording of personal recollection; valuable in societies where the written word was seldom used). According to many historians, visiting and using primary sources brings credibility to one's research (Lipartito, 2013).

Secondary sources are typically temporally distant from the event they describe and sometimes created later by researchers who drew on primary sources

(Marwick, 2001; Scott, 1990). Secondary sources can assist researchers as a point of entry into primary sources or offer clues about, for example, the popular or accepted version of organisations past. These can offer contextual details about an industry and organisation.

Appraisal: Handling Archival Sources

A central function of the archive is appraisal (Cook, 2011a; Duff and Harris, 2002). Appraisal is the process in which items from the past enter the archive, are dealt with, and come to form its collection. It involves various steps including processing, arranging, describing, preserving, and public programming (Cook, 2011a). While postmodernism has influenced appraisal, scientific positivism still governs the logic of archives (Brothman, 2002). In acquiring a collection from a person, family, or organisation, Western archivists try to maintain the original structure of a group of records because it is believed that the record and its context (the collection to which it belongs) can inform interpretation. The belief that records and the collection hold the key to the past as it happened and that collections can reveal an accurate and complete, thus, credible view of the past is still prevalent in archival practice (Brothman, 2002).

This dominant view of archival practice, as noted earlier, is highly influenced by Jenkinson who believed that archivists should be neutral, passive, and invisible custodians of the archives (Kaplan, 2002; Trace, 2002). However, in the late 1930s, researchers began to challenge this view, highlighting that archivists play a key role in the selection of what is kept and discarded. As such, they actively shape the collection (Kaplan, 2002; Brothman, 2002; Cook, 2011a). Rather than being mere keepers and preservationists of the collection, archivists are increasingly understood as its co-creators (Cook, 2011a, 2007, 2001a; Cox, 2002). Central to critiques of mainstream archival practice (Jenkinson's scientific approach) has been its neglect of power and subjectivity in the archival process (Zinn, 1977; Hedstrom, 2002; Cox, 2002; Cook, 2011b). For example, archivists make their keep and discard decisions to acquire or reassess a collection using their professional training and are influenced by current societal problems and ideological frameworks (Barros, 2016; Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Archivists also classify the collection, which means they select and deploy past or current nomenclatures. Thus begins the process of influencing the record's meaning (Duff and Harris, 2002). They create finding aids and assist researchers in locating documents. In doing these various acts, archivists highlight certain documents and collections, while others may receive less attention. In short, archivists partake in turning documents into evidence that researchers can use to craft narratives (Duff and Harris, 2002). Archivist' decisions impact what future generations can possibly know of their past (Cook, 2011a). These observations have led to calls for transparency in archival appraisal (Whittle and Wilson, 2015; Cox, 2002; Duff and Harris, 2002; Hedstrom, 2002).

Theorising the Archive: Opening the Box

A central goal of this book is to theorise archives and the silences therein. This operation involves seeing the archive as a site where one collects sources, while at the same time, as the subject of analytical curiosity. As we have noted, theorising the archive is challenging given the dominance of realism and positivism in the related academic disciplines of history, archival science, and business history (Schwarzkopf, 2012; Kaplan, 2002). As noted, postmodern thinkers including Foucault (1972) and Derrida (1996) have successfully critiqued this version of the archive, exposing its societal stronghold and imprint in its capacity as a memory institution (Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Scott, 2007). While postmodern archival theorists have suggested that an archival paradigm turn is underway, the extent that this turn has fully transformed the popular imagination on archives is debateable (Cook, 2001a; Caswell et al., 2017).

Despite this, progress on theorising the archive has been made in history (Farge, 1989; Stoler, 2009; Trouillot, 1995), archival science (Geiger et al., 2010), and HOS (Coller et al., 2016; Decker, 2013, 2014) in the form of archival ethnographies. This work has sought to view the archive through an ethnographic lens and map, historically, the process in which the archive is produced and maintained. This involves tracing the actors involved, outlining their relationships, probing their various decisions (e.g. on funding), collecting, programing, and accessibility (Stoler, 2009). A hallmark of this work is its capacity to reveal the cultural logic, motivation, and values infused in collecting over time and, thus, historicise the composition of archives.

A central finding of postmodern research on archives and archival ethnography is that archives are social constructs and sites of power (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Archives consign traces of the past and in doing so, influence what is, can be, and will be known of the past (Trouillot, 1995). In many ways, the archive is a location where power over what society can know of itself is negotiated, challenged, and affirmed (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Societies are made of heterogeneous actors, no doubt yielding unequal socioeconomic capacities, and the archive can become a stage where these inequities play out. Governments, the military, wealthy classes, and those of gender, ethnic, and racial majority groups have unequal access to creating and controlling the stories that future users of archives will be able to tell (Smith, 2012; Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Control over the archive leads to control over history, collective memory, and identity. It implies control over how societies construct truths and notions of justice. The consequence for our book and research on archival silence is that those who are marginalised in society are far too often those marginalised in the archive (Carter, 2006).

Archives (Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Eskildsen, 2013; Schwarzkopf, 2012; Cook, 2001a; Geiger et al., 2010) and business archives in particular (Fellman and Popp, 2013; Whittle and Wilson, 2015) are not neutral spaces. Despite popular belief in business history (de Jong et al., 2015), archival sources are also, not neutral (Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Scott, 2007). Mechanisms of power in the form of persons, institutions, and social systems (e.g. race, ethnicity, gender)

operate in making the record (Scott, 1990; Craig, 2002; O'Toole, 2002; Lipartito, 2013). Understanding the records' context of creation is important in order to expose respective mechanisms of power (Craig, 2002; Scott, 1990). This is an ongoing responsibility which extends to collectors, keepers, and users (Schwartz and Cook, 2002).

These claims are perhaps unsurprising given that archives are organisations and institutions (Schwarzkopf, 2012; Cook, 2011b). As organisations, they operate with limited resources; in accordance with fiscal budgets, they have cultures and structures, and they staff archivists who create and follow procedures (Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Lipartito, 2013). Archives are socially and temporally situated social constructs; they are shaped by the needs and desires of societies, governments, and laws (Schwartz and Cook, 2002; Barros, 2016). Beyond this, archives are shaped by the values, desires, and needs of its creators. Thus, archives, created and maintained by the state, house documents intended to serve and carry out the state's mandate (Cook, 2001a) whether this be democratic governance or colonial rule. Similarly, business archives house documents that reflect its culture, structure, operations, vision, and mission over time.

In the context of our book on archival silences in HOS, what is especially important is that archives and their collections influence what knowledge can be produced in societies, by governments, and businesses (Barros, 2016; Coller et al., 2016). The structure of the archive impacts what comes to count, in the present and future, as archivable content (Derrida, 1996). In the archive, knowledge is categorised. The archive uses a nomenclature, which influences what is desirable to collect. As the archive privileges and reinforces categories of knowledge, while lessening its attention to others, it partakes in creating social epistemologies (Trouillot, 1995; Brothman, 2002; Schwarzkopf, 2012; Manoff, 2004; Eskildsen, 2013). The archive is enactive, and it helps strengthen certain realities (Ketelaar, 2002) while letting others fade.

One example of a category of knowledge produced through the archive is the individual, and types of individuals. For example, the collection of records maintained by the state that documents lists of criminals and their offences is enactive of the description that given cultures have given to the category of criminal (Trace, 2002). Colonial states, which used their own ideological logic to collect, gather, and document information about residents, participated in creating those very subjects (Featherstone, 2006; Cook, 2011a, 2011b; Reid and Paisley, 2017). In this way, archives created identities. Very often, the motivation for collecting information about the subject was its capacity to exercise social control (Trace, 2002; Featherstone, 2006; Wareham, 2002). Censuses and land registries, for example, allowed governments to track residents, their relationships, migration, and property ownership (Scott, 1990). Through this bodies could be disciplined to follow laws, pay taxes, or enlist in war efforts. Historically, many states, which controlled the documents entering the archive, used those very documents to exercise societal control and, thus, legitimate itself and its goals (Harris, 2002; Manoff, 2004).

Throughout these various operations, archives silence (Carter, 2006; Schwarzkopf, 2012). The archive, as a socio-historical institution, allows certain voices

to be heard, while others are omitted. Records of populations that are omitted or destroyed impact the stories that future generations can tell (Trouillot, 1995; Carter, 2006; Steedman, 2002). The societal impact is longstanding.

What Are Silences?

Suggesting that archives silence begs the question of what constitutes a silence, what causes them and the difficulties and importance of surfacing silences. What we mean by silences in this book are omissions, absences, what is missing, and what is not articulated (Rogers et al., 1999; Zerubavel, 2006). Sometimes we can feel silences, for example, we may experience eeriness from what is tacit, below the surface or unsaid (Grønbæk Pors et al., 2019). Some silences are conscious, and others are unconscious (e.g. we don't know, or sense, so we cannot say). Some are deliberate (e.g. we know but cannot or will not say), and others are undeliberate (e.g. I didn't realise that should be voiced) (Trouillot, 1995). Silences can involve conspiracies, in that more than one person must tacitly agree to ignore or deny something, of which they are aware (Zerubavel, 2006). Silences can be personal, communal, and/or societal. They are historically contingent, and their nature changes. For example, what the popular imagination considers discussable changes over time. They are shaped by social conventions and traditions, and they shift geographically. In logocentric communities, silence is what is omitted from the record. In oral traditions, silence is the absence of sound when reading and writing (Wareham, 2002). Silences are found in all types of mediums, including what is written, spoken, drawn, or photographed.

The silences we discuss in this book vary on a continuum, from unharmful to traumatic (Rogers et al., 1999). The least harmful type of silence is what is unsaid; it is either not said or simply missing. A more harmful type of silence is that which is unsayable (Rogers et al., 1999). These silences are difficult to pin down, grasp, or articulate. They lie below the conscious realm, between the written and spoken words. We can identify these by reading between the lines and asking what was implied versus what was explicit. Finally, the most toxic and traumatic form of silence is the unspeakable (Rogers et al., 1999). The unspeakable is a deliberate form of silence; power is central to its manufacture. The unspeakable is what is avoided because it is denied, forbidden, taboo, horrific, and haunting.

Silences in archives and archival research happen for a host of reasons. To begin, literacy rates have varied historically and geographically. World regions with high literacy rates have privileged the written over the oral, leaving physical records for later generations. As a result, some voices are amplified across time, while others are not (Zinn, 1977; Scott, 1990). Some silences are caused by accidentally losing or discarding documents while cleaning (Scott, 1990). Employees may make idiosyncratic decisions to discard documents because of their inadequate knowledge of organisational processes (Craig, 2002). When organisations undergo administrative changes, some documents may be discarded or reclassified because of changes in organisational values or strategic direction (Campbell-Miller and Kirkby, 2018). Some organisations are deliberate in the destruction or removal of documents because they reveal a troublesome or dark organisational