
Editorial: Every manager, a historian

Editorial

To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?
(Marcus Tullius Cicero, Roman Senator and Consul)

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As this is my first editorial as solo Editor in Chief of the *Journal of Management History*, I want to accomplish two tasks. The first is that I want to thank Brad Bowden for his excellent work as editor and then co-editor of the journal. I believe I am not alone in thinking that Brad strengthened the journal by bringing in and developing new authors, opening the journal to the debates in the field and encouraging the journal to be a “big-tent” or “broad-church” in that we publish a wide range of articles everything from traditional management history to post-modernist and amodernist perspectives on history. Although Brad was a frequent and enthusiastic participant (some would say too enthusiastic) in debates, nevertheless he promoted and published a wide range of scholars. The management history field owes him a debt of gratitude.

My second task is to lay out a vision of management history to illustrate its absolute importance to management practice and research. Currently, management history is at the periphery of the profession as there are few courses offered in the topic. Most scholars in the mainstream deem management history as being “too trivial.” I believe this sentiment stems from a lack of understanding of the terms “management” and “history.” Although these terms are frequently used, they are often misunderstood by scholars and practitioners alike. I believe that this confusion has lowered the importance of management history throughout the curriculum and even the practicing managers we seek to educate. For example, there are differing definitions and competing ideologies that confuse and befuddle scholars. A potential solution is to ask the basic question: how we reduce the definition to the lowest common denominator? Accordingly, I would like to define what I mean by these terms and by doing so to illustrate their vital importance to management research and practice.

Management is simple – getting work done collaboratively through others. As such, it covers a wide range of business activities and is not limited to organizational behavior, human resource management, operations or strategy, but can consider entrepreneurship, marketing, accounting, finance and other business fields. In addition, given that getting work done through others is broadly understood, conceptualizing management can also consider literatures such as psychology, sociology, economics, political science and anthropology. Management scholars often use these areas (sometimes shamelessly) to develop theories and interventions for management problems. Indeed, management is so varied and diverse, I will not claim that I am exhaustive in either list I provide.

Whereas management can be defined and its importance obvious, the definition of history is more diffuse, questionable and its importance debatable. This is troubling as history (and our understanding of it) forms the basis of modern beliefs, attitudes and practices. Because of historical events, I am writing this manuscript on Microsoft Word. If I had written this manuscript 50 years ago, it would have been on a typewriter or 800 years ago I probably (assuming that I was even educated) dictated this to a scribe. Likewise, your interpretation of this manuscript is formed from your and our history. For instance, if like me, you had been a student of Art Bedeian, then probably you would agree with me on the nature of history and the importance of management to creating wealth. Or, if you dislike



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traditional history (nothing wrong with that), then perhaps you regard this as mere doggerel. Therefore, our modern world is shaped by historical forces that oftentimes we do not understand or are even ignorant of. What is more troubling is that our ignorance is often unknown to us or, if known, we dismiss it as irrelevant. However, for people doing management history, we understand its importance – whether the scholar is critical, traditional, postmodern or other. Put simply: we are all influenced by history.

As such, then, if history is so important: what is an adequate definition? I agree with Carl Becker (1932) that the simplest definition is probably the most appropriate given that a simple definition does not obscure issues. His definition was simply the “memory of things said and done.” Therefore, a historian is someone who analyzes the records of the past (in its various forms) to determine some sort of pattern for some purpose. To be sure, historians will quibble with this definition as being too simplistic, reductionist or philosophically unsophisticated. But its simplicity serves a purpose, namely, to illustrate the ongoing importance and relevance of history for management scholars and practitioners. In fact, both routinely function as historians. Furthermore, this suggests that history is a domain open to all scholars and managers and does not require a degree in history.

To build on the previous point, a practicing manager often must find patterns of behavior or other events in the past to determine how to address it in a future. To illustrate this, let us take a manager named Bob, who is working as a plant manager. One of his subordinates, Matthew’s production has been consistently low every Friday, and this inadequate performance has had a negative impact on the work group. How would Bob go about solving this problem? Whatever method he would take (additional training, discharge, counseling, a verbal reprimand), would be based on the research he would conduct in determining past events and various patterns. That research would be historical in nature since he would be using various sources to produce a narrative and an explanation. To develop the example further, Bob would question Matthew, coworkers and other sources, check patterns, and then based on that, come up with a solution. Whatever decision is made, Bob will make sure to document it, so that either he or future manager can decide what other behavioral modification is needed to address failing production.

However, Bob is held bondage by his evidence in the same way a historian would be. If evidence is missing, vague, incomplete or worse incorrect, then whatever decision Bob will make will be suboptimal. However, like a historian, Bob can somewhat overcome these issues through adding additional sources and expanding his perspective. Likewise, when Bob gathers the facts, he must construct a narrative based on the relevant sources and needs to provide an explanation to support that narrative as well as the resulting decision which will follow. In other words, nearly every management task requires careful consideration of historical sources – whether it is financial, marketing, operational, legal and various other types of reports. In addition, a manager may have to interview people (whether it is for hiring or address work issues). Finally, a manager will need to consider a wide range of sources (which we historians would call triangulation) before deciding how to handle business problems. This is the reason why the undergraduate and graduate curriculum uses case studies – we seek to train our students to think things through like a manager who actually is a historian.

In a similar vein, the management scholar is also a practicing historian. This statement would surprise many in the field who believe that history is only the domain of historians. In fact, one of the reasons why scholars do not submit to a management history journal or become members of the Management History Division at the Academy of Management is the belief that either they do not have a degree in history or that they do not perform historical research. Such an opinion should not surprise. Most management scholars in the

academy either develop, create or empirically test theory. In fact, as I and my coauthors have written, the need for theory often precludes historical research unless it is testing or developing a theory (Muldoon *et al.*, 2013, 2018, 2020; Bendickson *et al.*, 2016a, 2016b). As such, much of the work that has been produced within management history would not qualify – as a great deal of our work is atheoretical in nature.

However, even the theorist is a historian. A theorist is often required to examine the history of the theory to understand the underlying theoretical assumptions and propositions of the theory. Another important area of consideration is that we need to track how a construct has changed over time, such as leader member exchange moving from role theory to social exchange theory. Both approaches require an important consideration over how a theory, construct or even a body knowledge has changed over a time period. By conducting this research, producing a literature review or reading works of the past, the management scholar is acting as a historian, because they are paying attention to the history of their field. If we accept this consideration, then a scholar is a historian even if the focus is not historical in nature, but rather theory building. Likewise, when scholars attempt to improve measurement or create a measure, they pay attention to the history of the construct they have in mind. Indeed, when developing a measure, one has to demonstrate validity (whether that validity is content, criterion, construct or incremental *et cetera*) to do so requires a careful consideration of other constructs, which requires the scholar to examine works of the past. In this regard, the scholar is a historian.

Yet, the field of management does not consider this as important as it should be. Indeed, in the field of doctoral studies, there are few, if any doctoral seminars offered in management history. In fact, I would bet money that most management scholars have not read Frederick Winslow Taylor, Elton Mayo, Herbert Simon, Chester Barnard or Mary Parker Follett. These names, and others, are often a ceremonial cite used to generate legitimacy for claims of the scholar, without full consideration of what these thinkers actually meant nor the times in which they wrote. This is a very common issue in academia. Indeed, if one reads the corporate social responsibility literature, one will learn that Milton Friedman supported “win at all costs” approaches, when, in fact, he maintained very clearly that businesses should adhere to the rules of the game (Muldoon *et al.*, 2022c). Scholars would also be surprised to note that despite Mary Parker Follett’s reputation for conflict solutions, her ideas, could be used to stifle decent, which occurred during the First World War. There are numerous examples of this tendency within the literature.

One of the articles I read in my doctoral training was Art Bedeian’s (2004) article “The Gift of Professional Maturity,” in which he argued for the need to examine the roots of the past, as no management faculty could offer the brilliance and insight of the great minds of management of the past. In fact, our theorizing and research has a path dependence on what had occurred in that we build upon the works and thoughts of previous generations. For example, the doctrine of empirical testing of management comes from Taylor. Our notion of theory building and separation of management research from management practice, comes from our desire in the 1950s to distance ourselves from management practice, a decision that Khurana (2007) has covered so ably on his book on the modern business school.

However, despite Bedeian’s status as an exemplary scholar (Muldoon *et al.*, 2022a, 2022b), few have adhered or considered his viewpoint. Once again, the culprit is our desire for paradigm development, as we assume that our theories should hold under all circumstances and have very little historical influence. Accordingly, we believe that money will always motivate, when in fact, there are numerous societies where workers were not motivated by money, but by shrinking work. In addition, we believe that individuals strive for fairness for themselves, but again, there are societies where fairness is a group consideration. Management consultants dub the next big idea as groundbreaking, but, it is

nothing more than a regurgitated theory (Tourish, 2019, 2020), or, in popular parlance, old wine in new bottles.

Our curriculum demonstrates this as we still teach Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, despite the rejection of his theorizing by academics (Dye *et al.*, 2005; Bridgman *et al.*, 2019) since it did not predict. Likewise, Herzberg's two-factor theory and Skinner's behaviorism are also staples in principles and organizational behavior textbooks despite their status as dead theory. In the academy, our theorizing also reflects this notion. When we consider theories such as agency theory, we never consider the academic, economic or social circumstances in which they emerged. For example, agency theory has its roots in the work of Berle and Means, whose work analyzed how shareholders lost control of the company due to going public and how managers gained power to the extent that market forces no longer controlled companies (Smith *et al.*, 2022). Their purpose in doing so was to justify regulation of the economy due to the lack of market forces. However, in the process, they ignored the ownership rights of customers, employees, suppliers and other stakeholders. This omission has led to a reduction of some of the efficacy of agency theory – which by examining the historical origins of the theory (Bendickson *et al.*, 2016a, 2016b). Indeed, even finance scholars are arguing for broader viewpoints of management (Zingales, 2000).

Our theorizing places the profession in a very abstract realm that often ignores reality. Our attempts to build a paradigm over the years have increased this disconnect. People are not electrons, as they do not act according to scientific law. Rather than act, at least partially, according, to the historical circumstances they find themselves. As such, our attempted to develop a paradigm has largely come to not because we do not consider the historical underpinnings of theory or research as fully as required.

This has had detrimental consequences in both our theorizing, research and teaching. In essence, we are modeling the behavior of the physical sciences. However, even in the physical science, devotees of Kuhn (1970) would clearly argue that historical context gives rise to science. The reason is obvious. Theories and research are conducted by people, whom have a history, beliefs, ideas, normative conclusions and training. In essence, to understand a theory, we need to understand the theorist. Even our embrace of theorizing is an example of our willingness to embrace science due to the history of management lacking rigor, a claim since at least 1930s. Therefore, studying context is important to understanding management theory and practice.

As such, I believe that the *Journal of Management History* can be an exemplar to trace the history of the field, both in theory and practice. In doing so, we can illuminate better the contour of our own profession, we can justify our teaching better, and we can further the field. I believe the time is now to start this conversation. Since the time I was made an Associate Editor of the journal until now, we have witnessed a global pandemic, wars, inflation, recession, and, if economic trends hold, potentially even a depression. In addition, the specter of a world war hangs over our head and can come from the Ukraine or Taiwan conflict. From a business standpoint, we are dealing with the emergence of artificial intelligence, the too-close relationship between big business and big government and the emergence of quiet quitting.

Our journal welcomes submissions that accomplish the following tasks. Firstly, a history of management practice, thought, theory, construct or biographical management leaders or scholars. Secondly, there must be a theoretical contribution, broadly defined. This theoretical contribution can be used to explain why a theory came into being, testing, a theory, profiling a theorist or extending theory. Thirdly, a consideration of how history informs management practice or research.

Lastly, we remain a broad church of big tent. For example, we welcome research informed by a variety of philosophical orientations, including empiricist, modern, postmodern, poststructural, postcolonial and feminist, to name a few. We also encourage submissions that draw on methodologies. Our inclusivity is reflected by our editorial board and especially our associate editors. We thank you for your time and consideration.

The current slate of articles reflects the vision of the journal. I believe the reader will find each to be important, interesting and impactful. Our first article by Chester Spell and Katerina Bezrukova analyzes how history can aid in the aftermath of the social and economic consequences of COVID-19. Our second article, by Franziska M. Renz and Richard Posthuma, is a bibliometric review of the articles in psychological ownership. Enrico Berbenni, Chiara Cantù and Stefano Colombo is the third article and covers the banking relationship between Italy and Egypt between 1924 and 1940. Our fourth article by Luisa Unda covers the emergence of credit unions in Australia. Roshni Das's article is our fifth and offers a systematic review of the notion of time at the workplace that integrates an important construct in the literature. For the sixth article, Michele N. Medina-Craven, Kathryn Ostermeier, Pratigya Sigdya and Benjamin McLarty provide an overview of personality research, one of the most important topics in management, since the 21st century. Our final article by Ngoc Dung Tran, Phuong Hoa Dinh, Dinh Hoang Uyen Nguyen and Van Vinh Nguyen offers an interesting overview of principal agent problems at the English East India Company: a study of the Tonkin factory (1672–1697).

Each of these papers either reflect the best of the old vision of the journal (which is still welcome) of examining cases of management practice and thought in the past; and the new vision that examines how history can inform current management practice and research. These are not really competing visions as there is more in common with these articles than differences. Each is theoretically and historically solid and makes a compelling case for study history. We are lucky to have such authors and papers.

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