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ARCHIVAL ETHNOGRAPHY

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Introduction

The use of archives as a site for data collection remains somewhat unusual in management and organization studies, where qualitative researchers prefer data 'generated in the course of the organizational research' (Strati, 2000: 133–134). Documents drawn from archives may have been used to support the analysis of interviews or provide background information (e.g. Rojas, 2010). Arguably this has been changing in recent years, with more and more articles published that are based entirely on archival research (Decker, 2010; Hampel and Tracey, 2017; Maclean et al., 2018; McKinlay, 2002; Mutch, 2016; Wadhwani, 2018). In a recent *Academy of Management Journal* editorial, Bansal et al. (2018: 4) highlighted that the ongoing 'historic turn' has led to a greater appreciation for the 'key principles of historical analysis,' including a 'preference for authentic archival data over retrospective material.'

However, there are relatively few methodological and reflective pieces about how to approach archival research for organizational scholars (Barros et al., 2019; Decker, 2013; Mills and Helms Mills, 2011), nor can archival research be simplistically understood as a method that is disconnected from the kind of historical narrative scholars seek to produce. An objectivistic corporate history will approach an archive differently to a realist analytically structured history (Rowlinson et al., 2014). Our focus here is on interpretive approaches such as ethnographic history, which provide a deep and empathetic understanding of events and processes from the perspective of the actors involved (Vaara and Lamberg, 2016). This requires an approach to archives as a site of ethnographic fieldwork, which we call archival ethnography. Not only has there been an ongoing exchange of ideas between ethnography and history over the years, exemplified by microhistory (Ginzburg, 1992; Levi, 1988) and other historical traditions (Stoler, 2009), but ethnographers frequently draw on archives and historical sources. Most importantly, ethnographers' conception of fieldwork focuses on how researchers engage with the site, rather than the site itself. Okely (2007: 360) maintains that 'the field can never be just a physical site. It is in the head, whole body and beyond one designated locality.' Archival ethnography requires researchers to conceive of the archive as a site for fieldwork, but one that reflects and filters sources from historical sites that are no longer accessible to direct observation (Mills et al., 2013).

We will outline the relationship between fieldwork and ethnography, and its relevance to archival research before we fully develop our methodological approach that casts archives as sites for historical fieldwork. Here we focus on the opportunities and limitations inherent in working with archives, especially organizational archives, and the way in which they are important mediating sites for historical investigations. In particular, we draw on the distinction between narrative sources and social documents (Rowlinson et al., 2014) and the way in which the researcher's (and archivist's) presence co-constructs the archive. Finally, we draw on historical traditions such as microhistory and Laura Stoler's history in the subjunctive as inspiration for the kind of archival ethnographies that can be written from organizational sources.

Ethnography and History

Deep archival research is the hallmark of 'good' history. More than this, deep archival research is essential to the identity of the historian as a historian. In large part, the authority of the historian rests on the range and volume of archival sources cited in their footnotes. This is about establishing both the novelty and the legitimacy of their account; original sources are also a subliminal signal to other historians that much archival dust has been ingested. Archive fever, it would seem, afflicts all historians alike. Similarly, in no small measure, the ethnographer's legitimacy rests on the experience of the researcher: just how long and immersive was their time in the field (Van Maanen, 1988: 46). Just as fieldwork confirms the professional identity of the anthropologist, so the individual becomes a historian in the archive. In both cases, simply being there is crucial to the research process and to the making of the researcher.

Yet one would search in vain for the most obvious rules about how to do ethnography. The fieldwork rules that do exist are prosaic: take notes quickly, certainly within twenty-four hours; keep a reflective diary. Of course, this also means that there are few methodological rules for historical ethnography to break. Nor are the methodological advantages necessarily skewed towards the contemporary ethnographer. Unlike the fieldwork ethnographer, in the archive, documents can be checked for accuracy and context, interpretations confirmed in ways that are impossible for the fieldwork ethnographer.

Ethnographers and historians share an approach to research that requires, to some extent, the immersion in the 'lifeworld' of others. For Paul Willis (2000), the ethnographic imagination entails a radically different research process from the linearity of large-scale survey work. Here, only the researcher is active, constructing order and meaning. There is nothing of this detachment in the deep, immersive fieldwork of ethnography. There is, though, a sense of loss, then detachment, in Michael Agar's (1980) famous description of the returning anthropologist as a 'professional stranger.'

Ironically, given his rejection of any claim to scientificity, Willis suggests that ethnographic research involves experimentation in the fullest sense. Ethnography necessarily collapses the distinct phases of thinking, testing, and writing into a single messy and improvisational process. Indeed, the implication is that the messiness of the research process is not something that has to be accepted, with regret or apology, but celebrated as the hallmark of ethnography itself. More than this, the ethnographic project entails working conceptually during fieldwork and thinking empirically when writing up. The making of meaning, then, is accepted as a shared capacity of researcher and respondents alike. The ethnographer's practice is a heightened, more quizzical version of the ethnographic imagination everyone exercises to make sense of their social world. The ethical and intellectual responsibility of the ethnographer is to relay this sensemaking as naturally, as faithfully as possible. Perhaps there is – or can be – more to Thomas Osborne's (1999: 52) metaphoric aside that 'for those who work in the historical disciplines, the archive is akin to the laboratory of the natural scientist.'

The ethnographer watches and listens, shares – somewhat vicariously – in the lifeworld of others. In this sense, archival ethnography is, by definition, non-participant observation. No doubt, the reliance on text, perhaps leavened by some images, means a loss of being able to observe gesture or the tone of conversations. Some of this loss can be offset, perhaps, if the researcher has personal experience of a similar situation.

The lengthy, solitary fieldwork of the anthropologist mirrors the immersion of the historian in the archives. Both are distinct activities, personally and professionally transformative, performed in spaces that are both found and made. Both types of professional strangers experience dislocation from their normal family and professional lives, sometimes discomfort, and often isolation. For the historian, the archive as a place refers more accurately to the search room, a kind of ante-room to the private, secure shelves where documents are stored. Documents are requested by – and delivered to – the historian. Search rooms vary from oak-lined opulence through to the shabby functionalism of local government offices. The historian works at tables under the eye of an archivist and, occasionally, roaming security personnel who protect documents from autograph hunters. Search aids range from sophisticated online catalogues to much-thumbed index cards packed just *too* tightly in filing drawers.

Experiences of corporate archives vary. Sometimes the historian is given no access to in-house digital systems and has to rely upon the kindness of an archivist who must, then, engage their own ethnographic imagination to figure out what sort of files might be relevant. Where they are given access to catalogues, the peculiarities of organizational evolution as much as the interpretation of organizational change by the cataloguing archivists can make finding the right files difficult without help by the archivists. The documents are produced to a schedule dictated by where documents are stored, or delivered en masse on one or more trolleys, only to overwhelm. Other archive users, by no means all historians – genealogists, architects, and enthusiasts of all kinds – are a source of easy distraction: wondering what they are searching for, their sudden movements or preternatural stillness.

All historians, whether positivist or postmodern narrativist, stoop over their files, *all* share something of an addiction to archive dust. Even Foucault was not immune to archival fever (Foucault, 2004: 4–5). The documents themselves come in all shapes and sizes, all the more difficult to handle or turn pages quickly when one is wearing cotton or neoprene gloves provided not to protect you from the dangers of archival dust, but to preserve the files from human contamination. The natural rhythm of archival research must be slow and deliberate, even if the pace is hurried by budgets or travel schedules, or the abiding anxiety that the next file, the one that might be missed, would provide the lodestone (Steedman, 2002). The physical form of the 'document' can be another reason for archival anxiety. For example, the voluminous case papers of a major British employers' organization, the Engineering Employers' Federation, were transferred onto film stock in the mid-sixties. On the side of each box is a warning that the film will deteriorate within ten years; that is, some forty years ago. The film-reader is temperamental and awkward to use; the images are often upside down or even require a mirror to read. The task is physically draining, essential, and feels oddly urgent. Perhaps this is the allure of the archive: the sense that one is becoming privy to secrets untold and conversations never intended to reach beyond a few ears.

Hand copying documents exactly is the 'artisanal task' that constitutes the historian's archival labour process. This, the distinguished historian of pre-revolutionary France, Arlette Farge, argues, is not a task that should be resented but treated with reverence as the process through which 'meaning is discerned' (Farge, 2013: 17). This is far removed from any sense of data capture through the lens of a digital camera, or smartphones, which are increasingly the standard of contemporary archival researchers. Farge is not embarrassed to concede that there are no general rules about how documents are selected or rejected, but uses a simile that alludes to the practice of micro-historian Carlo Ginzburg:

> To be honest, there is no ideal way to do this, nor are there any strict rules to follow when one is hesitating over the selection of a particular document. The historian's approach is similar to a prowler's; searching for what is buried away in the archives, looking for the trail of a person or event, while remaining to that which has fled, which has gone missing. Both presence and absence from the archive are signs we must interpret in order to understand how they fit into the larger landscape. When travelling this unmarked trail, you must always guard yourself against … the imperceptible, yet very real, way in which a historian is only drawn to things that will reinforce the working hypotheses she has settled on.
>
> *(Farge 2013: 70–71)*

Archival work does not apply theory to data, can only rarely formally test hypotheses. Farge conveys the sense of the provisional nature – 'working hypotheses' – of the historian's fieldwork that, if done well, develops their ethnographic imagination through their labour. Geoffrey Jones, a leading business historian, concludes that the reason for the abiding, perplexing marginality of business history is 'fundamentally methodological' (Friedman et al., 2014: 61). What is required, argues Jones, is that the business historian's deep archival research has to be 'translated sufficiently into convincing general propositions and concepts.' Yet very few grand theories survive a close encounter with an archive.

Narrativist historians evade the question completely by focusing exclusively on the finished product at the expense of methods sections (Bryant, 2000: 496; Durepos et al., 2017; Rowlinson, 2004; Yates, 2014). Archival research can produce counter-examples, questions, and qualifications but only rarely the type of generalizable propositions that would satisfy the positivist. We agree that methodological work is necessary but see archival work as contributing to knowledge in more ways than just theory building or testing. Moreover, we are concerned that this preserves the distinction between 'the archive' and 'theory,' ignoring the interactions between them. 'Theory' can also be more than just generalizable propositions and concepts, for example, critical theory. Rowlinson et al. (2014) define ethnographic history as inherently theoretical and analytical, but assuming a self-consciously angular theoretical approach (see also Megill, 2007: 110–111). They challenge van Maanen's assumption (1988: 76) that 'ethnographers have to construct their texts from the field, whereas the texts used by historians and literary critics come prepackaged.' Instead, historians laboriously construct narratives on the basis of a deep engagement with the archival source material, interconnecting theory and data not just through the way they interpret sources, but how they go about finding them in the first place.

Archival research lends itself more easily to exploratory research approaches. Carolyn Steedman (2002: 70) refers to the archival moment as a strange professionalized kind of transubstantiation of neglected, dusty files into a narrative driven by the historian's sense that they have acquired a deep empathy with their subjects. This strange exercise in the ethnographic imagination takes place through an elaborate process of transcription. If Farge is correct, then this mundane, yet strangely profound act of copying serves to transform the archive into a liminal space, that is neither fully empirical nor yet more than provisionally theorized. It takes time to make the liminal space that is fieldwork. This is no less true of the archive than it is of a Moroccan hill village. There are striking similarities between Farge's description of her painstaking work in the judicial archives of Paris to James Clifford's writing up his notes in the field as 'this moment of initial ordering, the making of a neat record' as crucial to the anthropologist's fieldwork process:

> 'Good data' must be materially produced: they become a distanced, quasi-methodical corpus, something to be accumulated, jealously preserved, duplicated, cross-referenced, selectively forgotten or manipulated later on.

> A precious, precarious feeling of control over the social activities of inscription and transcription can result from creating an orderly text. This writing is far from simply a matter of mechanical recording: the 'facts' are reflected, focused, initially interpreted, cleaned up.
>
> *(Clifford, 1990: 63)*

The physical act of copying, of glancing back and forth from the document to the notepad, compels the historian to assess the importance, typicality, and the meaning of *this* particular document to achieve a kind of 'critical intimacy' (Spivak, 1999). Hand-written copies are categorized thematically, linked to secondary texts also categorized thematically, with open questions recorded. The historian-archivist is producing their own filing system, which links data across time, place, and theme. Producing a series of intermediate archives, each a different liminal space, both physically and temporally one more step away from the original ethnographic site. The historian's 'finished' narrative, then, entails the translation of their own archival ethnography as well their production of text (Moore et al., 2017: 39). Farge stresses the craft-like nature of this work that the basic operations are prosaic, but the capacity to make fine judgements is based on experience. In a very real sense, by imagining 'being there,' the historian is painstakingly constructing a different archive, also geared to knowledge production, even if the specifics of that knowledge remains tantalisingly elusive during this moment (Comaroff and Comaroff, 1992: 35).

Historical imagination, the counterpart of ethnographic imagination, has long been recognized as an important element of historical work since R.G. Collingwood:

> The historical imagination differs … in having as its special task to imagine the past: not an object of possible perception, since it does not now exist, but able through this activity to become an object of our thought.
>
> *(Collingwood, 1946: 242)*

Historical imagination is necessary to reconstruct an image of the past, as it does not exist in present experience. This image needs to be tied to the evidence (archival and otherwise), but it will never come as close to the past as 'a photograph to its original because the historian's likeness is drawn from unorganized and mostly incomplete features, haphazardly surviving' (Little, 1983: 27). Collingwood likens this to a 'web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points,' though he cautions that these fixed points provided by evidence require critical investigation rather than passive acceptance as authoritative statements. Thus seeking to reconstruct an account of past events needs to be a critical endeavour and draw on the knowledge not just of the past but also of the present. These accounts should be coherent and consilient (comprising all the available evidence in an explanation) (Whewell, 1840), which makes historical narratives similar to ethnographic accounts that seek to provide 'thick description.'

Implicit in Clifford Geertz's notion of 'thick description' is that this is an inherently, necessarily theorized account, and *not* a neutral atheoretical deductive process.

To abuse one of Geertz's aphorisms: historians study archives, good historians study processes in and through archives (Rabinow, 2008: 35). The archive becomes, to paraphrase Donald McKenzie, an engine, not a camera (MacKenzie, 2008). Here we are speaking of the modern archive. That is, the archive not just a repository of information, but the archive as a place of knowledge *production*. From the late nineteenth century, state papers were not retained and stored but actively used: first, to ensure systemic and personal accountability; second, to ensure relevant information was available; third, to produce knowledge upon which to base and evaluate policy.

The rapidity and scale of bureaucratic information growth triggered all manner of innovations in filing systems (Cole, 1913). This was accompanied by detailed instructions that covered how to file in date order, how to allocate alpha-numeric codes that signified the file's relative importance and allowed cross-referencing (Moss, 2005: 584–585). The humdrum work of filing clerks was to produce the impossible archive: a system of knowledge that aspired to becoming comprehensive: 'the sense that knowledge was singular and not plural, complete and not partial, global and not local, that all knowledges would ultimately turn out to be concordant in one great system of knowledge' (Richards, 1993: 6–7). The archive became the laboratory of bureaucracy. To be a modern state was to form an archive. We can go further: to be a modern organization was to form an archive. The fantasy of linked files producing infinite knowledge and endlessly extending power was not confined to the hubristic imagination of the British empire (Richards, 1993). Organizations of all kinds aspired to know more about their employees and customers, not just how they had behaved in the past but how they were likely to behave in the future. Such ambitions were no less evident in the frustrations of British employers attracted to scientific management but who were thwarted by the complexity and sheer scale of administration required to track the costs of tasks and workers producing highly diverse products. Today, big data has taken up the mantle from the pre-digital catalogued archive.

If we accept the existence of the archive as a specifically modern form, then our interlocutors are also moderns. We must also jettison any notion that documents are nothing more than 'relics' with an analogous status to the accidental survival of statuary or papyrus. Rather, the archive records the project of knowing and making modern individuals and populations (Manoff, 2004). Archivists become co-producers of the historian's text. Archivists are often courteously thanked for their help in locating documents, but rarely acknowledged as members of the collective architect of the archive itself.

Archives as Fieldwork

Even though archives are significant resources for research in their own right, they are not discussed as a standard in textbooks covering management and organizational research methods (Bryman and Bell, 2011; Silverman, 2011; Symon and Cassell, 2012). Where they are discussed, it is to highlight the limitations of organizational archives, which are 'collected, processed and expounded according to the organization's criteria and for the purposes of social legitimation' (Strati, 2000: 158). This is in contrast to the centrality of archives in other fields such as history, and literary and communication studies among others (Castellani and Rossato, 2014; Combe, 2010; Ramsey et al., 2010). From this stem vastly different definitions of what an archive 'is,' and how one can work with it (Manoff, 2004). Discussions of archives in organization research, however, have remained rare (Barros, 2016) as has guidance on how to work with it (Decker, 2013).

Documents drawn from archives are different from many of the documents commonly used in organizational research, in that they are often not published, not in a serial format, and only exist as a single unique copy in one archive, frequently only on paper and not digitized. These documents have been sifted and catalogued by archivists, and as many organizational archives are private, archivists both formally (through access negotiations) and symbolically (through the way these are catalogued) control the access of researchers to these documents. These documents (or images, artefacts, recordings) survive as traces from the past and are curated as part of the archive, which becomes the site for fieldwork focused on the past. While the past is ontologically inaccessible, epistemologically the archive offers a window into past events. This view on the past is not unproblematic, as it is clearly mediated by both the site (the archive) and the (historical) researcher. As the historian Richard Evans paraphrased, we see the past 'through a glass, darkly' (Evans, 1999).

Something of this was recognized some fifty years ago in Harold Garfinkel's (1967) account of the intractable difficulties encountered in transforming hospital records into a form that would allow quantitative analysis. Initially frustrated by what appeared to the wilful incompleteness of what were supposed to be standard hospital forms, Garfinkel concluded that these documents were better regarded as elements of a conversation between knowledgeable strangers who might never meet but who shared profound forms of technical and organizational tacit knowledge. 'We start,' Garfinkel (1967: 200–201) insists,

> with the fact that when one examines any case folder for what it actually contains, a prominent and consistent feature is the occasional and elliptical character of its remarks and information. In their occasionality, folder documents are very much like utterances in a conversation with an unknown audience, which, because it already knows what might be talked about, is capable of reading hints. … the *folder contents much less than revealing an order of interaction, presuppose an understanding of that order for a correct reading*. [Emphasis in original.] The understanding of that order is not one, however, that strives for theoretical clarity, but is one that is appropriate to a reader's pragmatic interest in the order.

Following Garfinkel, then, archives can be read for discrete pieces of data but, more productively, as ways of eavesdropping on tacit conversations between insiders which assume tacit knowledge to convey meaning. For the ethnographer, the moments where those tacit meanings are unpacked, clarified, or challenged are potentially the most revealing about that wider conversation. Importantly, Garfinkel reminds us that archival ethnography is neither novel nor unusual. In common with the ethnographic project more generally, understanding and translating tacit knowledge inscribed in otherwise cryptic asides or flawed entries in a records system is something most knowledge workers do most days in organizations. In short, the shortcomings and ambiguities of any complex record system that entails a major effort to recode data, if not to render the exercise fatally flawed, becomes an opportunity for ethnography: why did those categories – so clear-cut in principle – become ambiguous in practice? What other tacit knowledge was being produced in the silences and ambiguities of incomplete forms? Symbols are read as performative, not constative: in terms of what they do, how they operate, and whom they marginalize and exclude.

Archival sources, nevertheless, have certain advantages over retrospective interviewing, which suffer from hindsight bias and sensemaking when it comes to an empirical account of past events (Wolfram Cox and Hassard, 2007). Archival documents frequently offer more accounts of how events unfolded that are more attentive to details, as they were produced closer in time to the events they refer to. While this is known as a primary source, we instead draw on the distinction between *social documents* and *narrative sources* (Howell and Prevenier, 2001) as these offer a more substantive differentiation than just primacy. Any archival ethnography depends on gaining access to an archive rich in social documents, as these are key in facilitating 'fieldwork' in the past, rather than a problem on account of their lack of uniformity.

Social documents are 'nonintentional' historical sources, produced in the process of running an organization. Examples would include minutes of meetings, business correspondence or email, reports and handover notes. These are inherently valuable to any archival ethnography because they are less susceptible to incorporating a narrative about the past. *Narrative historical sources*, on the other hand, are emplotted – that is, they tell a story (Dobson and Ziemann, 2009: 10) – and therefore it is difficult to avoid the problem of 'narrative contagion' (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009: 115), whereby the plot from narrative sources is imported into the construction of a historical narrative (Rowlinson et al., 2014). Historical sources can be immensely helpful in interpreting social documents that may otherwise be difficult to understand, similar to secondary historical literature. However, archival ethnography ultimately seeks to gain a relatively direct access to the processes and concerns of actors in the past, rather than the narrative sensemaking that occurred with the benefit of hindsight.

Ethnographic History

Ethnographic history, according to Rowlinson et al. (2014) is a distinct narrative strategy distinguished from corporate history by ethnographic sensibilities, an angular theoretical stance, and a conscious refusal to emplot the sources with an over-arching 'meta-narrative.' Reading sources 'against the grain' is the methodological corollary of this approach, and we see archival ethnography as a way to unpack these statements and get closer to what we actually do when we work in an archive. Archival ethnography is ethnographic fieldwork in the past, as it can be vicariously experienced through historical sources, especially those social documents high in immediacy and a holistic understanding of the archive as a 'made' and 'processed' collection with its silences and volubility. Theoretically, this approach is influenced by Foucault, Bakhtin, and critical theory more generally. The influence of ethnography not just as an approach but as a perspective and a style of presentation is also significant. In history, this has been most noticeable in microhistory and 'subjunctive history', and these approaches offer rich methodological guidance.

Microhistory is a historical tradition, which focused on the lesser known past, on individuals that did not make it into the history books, dissenters and sometimes persecuted groups and minorities (Ginzburg, 1992; Le Roy Ladurie and Bray, 1981; Levi, 1988). By painstakingly following individuals through various archives (Ginzburg and Poni, 1991) and reading the records of the inquisition like ethnographic fieldnotes (Ginzburg, 1989, 1992), they opened up an alternative understanding of the past that challenged existing narratives (Iggers, 2005; Magnússon and Szijártó, 2013).

Methodologically this kind of work requires an attitude of bracketing off the researcher's perspective in favour of first understanding the historical setting (Ginzburg, 2012; Ginzburg et al., 1993; Levi, 2012). Only after the researcher has gained some insight into the life worlds of historical subjects should we switch back to considering theories, present-day attitudes, and contextual information. In this, the microhistorians have perhaps been most explicit in what they consider 'reading against the grain' to mean. They seek to interpret the unintended content of historical sources. For this, contextual knowledge not accessible to the people at the time is necessary, as well as the knowledge that comes from hindsight, i.e., knowledge of outcomes. Finally, an angular theoretical perspective that stops researchers from taking sources at face value, while simultaneously being able to challenge some present-day assumptions about the past.

In outlining how this can be done, Carlo Ginzburg, one of the foremost microhistorians, draws on the ethnographic notion of balancing the emic and etic dimension (Ginzburg, 2012). While emic refers to an insider's perspective, etic is a more comparative perspective, that of a more distant observer, also reflecting the temporal positions of historical subjects in the past and historical researchers in the present. Archival ethnography may start from etic questions but will be challenged by emic answers, which transforms our initial interest into a richer understanding of the past, without abandoning the theoretical and conceptual insights of the present (Ginzburg, 2012: 107–111). This distinction between the particular as the emic and empirical, and the etic and general as theoretical, makes archival ethnography an approach that balances critical conceptual work with rich archival insights.

The other major methodological discussion relevant to archival ethnography is Ann Lara Stoler's (2009) reflection on writing 'history in the subjunctive' in the archives of the Dutch East India Company. The 'subjunctive' refers to epistemic anxieties, i.e., fear of what might happen, but also the hopes for a specific kind of future that never occurred. This requires that archives should not be approached with an 'extractive attitude' but 'ethnographic sensibilities' (Stoler, 2009: 92–99). Stoler problematizes technical instruments so that official accounts are read as the products of complex labour processes that establish, modify, and extend the categories that are used to understand and manage populations (Scott, 1990: 84–85). She also highlights that an interest in certain research topics 'gets you nowhere, unless you know how they mattered to whom, when, and why they did so (Stoler, 2009: 9–10).' To read 'with the grain' is to read the *form* of the archive as well as its substance: to read the archive as a process of knowledge production. The danger of the archive being treated as a meta-narrative is avoided by Stoler who looks at where knowledge production hits the sand and delivers inconsequential or unsatisfactory results. The knowledge produced – much as Garfinkel observed fifty years ago – *always* overflows the formal procedures, the immediate need for knowledge (Blouin and Rosenberg, 2012: 119; Stoler, 2009: 50). The taken-for-granted is rarely written down and even more rarely challenged epistemologically.

Ethnographic history treats archival sources as texts for the interpretation of culture, seeking to gain an impression of 'what it was like to be there' (Stone, 1979: 14). Thus, texts are not used to report on the issues that they were ostensibly written about (the constative), but rather what they tell us about commonly held assumptions and intentions (the performative):

> I ask what insights into the social imaginaries of colonial rule might be gained from attending not only to colonialism's archival content but to the principles and practices of governance lodged in particular archival forms. The … focus is on archiving-as-process rather than archives-as-things. Most importantly it looks to archives as condensed sites of epistemological and political anxiety rather than skewed and biased sources.
>
> *(Stoler, 2009: 20)*

Clearly, this kind of research focus requires approaching archives with a flexible direction to research, and open to serendipity. Stoler emphasizes the importance of 'dissonant sources,' the occasional evidence of dissent and resistance in organizational archives that enable researchers to go beyond the constative and read other sources against the grain. Stoler highlights the importance of non-events – what could be imagined but which did not occur – as another way of understanding how archives can reveal choices *not* made and potential options that were not realized.

Archival Ethnographies in Practice

Both authors have experimented with archival ethnographies, especially when interpreting the (often unexpected) visual materials (photographs, cartoons, doodles) in business archives. One of us considered the way in which organizations ascribed meaning to their corporate architecture in the past, and reflected on how this was shaped by the subjunctive history of hope and aspirations embedded in the promise of colonial independence and economic development (Decker, 2014). Tropical modernist architecture was seen as a beacon heralding a brighter future, and business archives revealed how seriously foreign firms engaged with it. Other types of architectural creations, such as colonial bank branches or the later post-modern headquarters or mock-colonial offices, were not accompanied by such an extensive production of brochures, photographic collections, and other public relations activities. The fact that modernist corporate architecture was heavily promoted emphasized the importance of these buildings in the minds of their creators. This is where archival ethnography's reflection on why material exists on some topics and not others makes use of what is absent as much as what is present in an archive (Spivak, 1988; Trouillot, 1995: 48–49). It also requires an understanding of what kind of archive one is dealing with, and in how far the structure of the collection and the location of sources permits one to draw conclusions about the structure and intentions of the organization (Decker, 2013; Stoler, 2009: 9–10, 20). The modern, or modernizing, archive reflected organized methods of collecting and codifying information, of making data, of understanding populations and markets. The modern archive is organized hierarchically, not thematically, and this powerfully suggests causation, agency, and effect. Alfred Chandler's famous aphorism that 'structure' follows 'strategy' implies that business history *should* be written from the vantage point of corporate headquarters. Ethnographic history, on the contrary, focuses on the bureaucratic labour processes tagged as 'structure,' the better to understand how managing was imagined, and how being managed was experienced.

Unexpected and 'dissonant sources' (Stoler, 2009: 181–185, 252) can also reveal what is important in more circumspect ways:

> discrepant stories provide ethnographic entry into the confused space in which people lived, to the fragmented knowledge on which they relied, and to the ill-informed and inept responses that knowledge engendered. Coherence is seductive for narrative form, but disparities are, from an ethnographic perspective, more compelling. It is the latter that opens onto competing conventions of credibility about what and where evidence could be trusted and those moments in which it could not.
>
> *(Stoler, 2009: 185)*

As some companies were beginning their modernist building programme in West Africa in the 1950s, various sources recounted how an unpopular regional manager was deceived about the date of an important branch opening celebration. Organizational politics and intrigue highlighted how new modernist architecture was a status symbol inside and outside the firm, and structured relationships and management practices.

Decker's (2014) 'Solid Intentions' piece also provided an opportunity to reflect on the limitations of archival ethnography. Comparing the material found in different business archives study can be challenging because these collections reveal idiosyncratic patterns of organization, documentation, and communication within different firms (Decker, 2014: 168). As an in-depth research approach that requires sometimes oblique search methods to discover the unexpected, it is effectively impossible to claim to have searched large archives comprehensively. Similar to any ethnographic study, as researchers we can never claim to have observed everything or to present a representative sample. These constraints of archives are much the same as any other form of participant or non-participant observation. A researcher visiting an organization will only ever gain a partial impression, may find certain areas withheld from view, and will be faced with misrepresentations or situations she can only imperfectly interpret. Working with archival documents, researchers face very similar problems in terms of which documents were created and survived, by whom, for what purpose, etc. However, in contrast to ethnographers, they cannot physically interact with the people and places they study. Material that is absent, or confusing and misleading, often cannot be reconciled or explained, and there can be no follow-on questions to ask for clarification. Gaps or silences in the evidence cannot easily be bridged, and can derail a research project's direction, as conceptual development is driven by what archival sources are available and accessible.

Another example of this serendipity is the 'Dead Selves' piece (McKinlay, 2002). Banking archives exemplify the governmentalist logics embedded in mundane practices. Rapid expansion of retail branch networks from the closing decades of the nineteenth century triggered centralization and innovation. All branches operated as miniature replicas using uniform procedures, operated by staff rotated through the network as their careers progressed. Local conformity was assured through snap inspections. The very idea of the career as a tournament in which individuals competed on merit rather an as a reward for long service, was developed in the 1890s (McKinlay, 2002). Careers were logged in bound ledgers, a material form that made tracking cohorts or the systematic comparison of individuals all but impossible. The form itself suggests the deep uniformity of banking careers, on the one hand, and yet the capacity for the intense scrutiny of an individual, especially a suspect individual, on the other (McKinlay, 2013: 142–143, 2015). Over time, even though there was no attempt to develop numerical scoring, the ledgers' lexical system gained depth and nuance even as the commentaries they recorded became more economical. The archival form attests to the career system's focus on the individual as they made key transitions: the point of entry; their first promotion; their capacity to deal with different types of task and clients. After a decade, for all save highly specialist functions, the 'bankman' was assessed on his conformity to an ideal type of reserved masculinity, polite but never deferential, clear but rarely assertive.

Buried among innumerable folio-sized ledgers, all embossed with a gold 99 on their spines, was one that concealed more than a decade of cartoons drawn by one low-flying clerk, William Shirlaw, to entertain himself and a small group of confidantes, who had similarly low expectations of their career progression. Evidently, the careers of this group of clerks had stalled: none were transferred to gain managerial experience. Several hundred cartoons speak of mild subversion and a caustic humour exercised at the expense of their peers and, especially, their superiors. This was the hidden world of the Victorian bank clerk, standing at least one remove from the idealized 'bankman' and sceptical about the promotion of procedural justice as the trade for their daily bureaucratic drudgery. But even their choice of where to hide their irreverent cartoons was revealing. Ledger 99 was the suspense account used to record shortfalls that prohibited daily accounts to be reconciled. Such shortfalls were highly unusual, and Shirlaw and his co-conspirators knew that they would not be discovered easily by even the most sharp-eyed inspector. Understanding the labour process of bank administration allows us to understand not just how inspection operated but the bureaucratic nooks-and-crannies it did not reach. The form of the archive was not devised for the benefit of historians but reflected the ways that the bank managed itself as an organization and how it imagined its officers, as 'bankmen' who embodied the bank's values.

Conclusion

Archival ethnography opens up a new research site for fieldwork, one that offers a tentative and intriguing view of organizational pasts. Just as fieldwork remains *the* rite of passage for the anthropologist, so the archive is where the historian was made. The social documents maintained in many organizational archives provide rich perspectival material to research with ethnographic sensibilities if they are approached not with a presentist, theory-driven mindset but rather an inductive, emic and exploratory attitude. Ethnographic fieldwork is not just a metaphor for this kind of research, but rather a good guide as to how we can approach archives as research sites that allow us access to the past. This access to past events is neither unproblematic nor unlimited, nor is archival ethnography the only way in which archives can be used for historical research. As an intellectual and political project, ethnography intends to give voice to the otherwise voiceless, especially those at the very margins of mainstream society. In this respect, ethnography overlaps with microhistory and history from below, the political project to reinstall the experience of ordinary people otherwise excluded from historical narratives.

What this approach offers is deeper understanding of how actors understood events and processes at the time, and what their fears and expectations of the future were. This rich reading of a time and place is value-laden and perspectival, and opens up different kinds of research topics and questions, for example, the use of images and artefacts. It also allows a better understanding of how processes unfold over time, such as symbolic representation through architecture or the emerging notion of careers as a disciplining force. This approach integrates the use of archives into organizational ethnography, and management and organizational research more broadly.

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