REPOSITIONING COMPANY ARCHIVES AS A DATA SOURCE FOR ORGANIZATIONAL RESEARCH: SOME EVIDENCE FROM A COMPARATIVE CASE STUDY

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Extended abstract (1.382 words)

Recent literature within management and organization studies has shown considerable interest in the use of historical material and the application and development of an historical perspective. A particular call to action has been raised on the use of archival research methods and materials in the study of intra-organizational micro-processes (Barley and Tolbert 1997). This paper addresses at least some of the challenges - that have not been extensively discussed in management and organization studies - that emerge when conducting such research.

Several definitions on what is historical research on management and organization have been presented (see e.g. Lawrence 1984; Kieser 1994; Leblebici and Shah 2004). What we find essential on these definitions is that historical research on organizations is and should be interested in revealing generative mechanisms that underlie those processes and sequences of events that we observe over time (Kieser 1989; Tsoukas 1989). While a large

number of studies have concentrated on long-term change processes among organizations, the mainstream here has been on nomothetic instead of idiographic research (cf. Ventresca and Mohr 2002). Hence, the main emphasis has been on the examination of change in the structural characteristics of large groups of organizations over time applying either institutional (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) or ecological (Hannan and Freeman 1977) frameworks. From the perspective adopted in this paper, this kind of research is problematic especially because it pays limited attention to the context in which these structural changes occur and the extent to which individual organizations differ from each other in the way they implement similar structural characteristics (Feldman and Pentland 2003).

Another, much less popular, stream of historical organization research has applied idiographic research designs concentrated on theorizing on a specific object of research (e.g. Langton, 1984; Kieser, 1989; Leblebici et al. 1991; Hargadon & Douglas, 2001). This has promoted historical approaches from being positioned as supplementary (e.g. Goodman and Kruger 1988) to being positioned as an independent research method. While historical research can also be positioned as reorientationist (Usdiken and Kieser 2004; Clark and Rowlinson 2004), we here work under an integrationist approach (cf. Usdiken and Kieser 2004; Leblebici and Shah 2004). Hence, the building of social scientific theory is being extended to also include approaches more typical of humanistic research (e.g. Zald 1996). Moreover, an historical approach is essential especially because we cannot recognize change processes in institutionalized organizational structures and practices unless we examine them intensively over a longer period (Kieser, 1994; Calori et al., 1997). Here this means that we emphasize the arising of organizational phenomena, their connections to their temporal and social context and the actors' own interpretations. Such defined historical study also allows us to simultaneously examine events taking place at several levels of analysis.

While the conceptual foundation for such historical organization research seems relatively well developed, we argue that much less attention has been paid to the requirements that this kind of research poses for empirical research material. This is problematic because the adoption of an historical research approach does not offer 'off the shelf' solutions to how to conduct empirical research on the field. Even if problems related to obtaining of research access were omitted the developing of adequate methods of analysis require situation-specific tailoring. Here we focus on the use of company archival material in general and minutes of management and board meetings in particular to discuss at least some of the challenges that emerge when intra-organizational archival material is being used for idiographic historical organization research.

As far as previous research in the field of management and organization studies is concerned, the use of corporate archives in general and minutes of management and board meetings in particular is not extremely rare (e.g. Child and Smith 1987; Pettigrew 1987; Hinings, Brown and Greenwood 1991). However, there are few examples of studies in which the use of such sources is explicitly reported in the analysis (e.g. Rowlinson 1995; Rowlinson and

Hassard 1993). We find it peculiar that as far as research on corporate top management is concerned, works relying extensively on interviews (e.g. Pettigrew and McNulty 1995) are much more common than works relying on systematic analysis of archival material on board activities. This is especially so if we accept the idea that archival materials are less biased than are personal accounts of individuals recalling these events (Anand and Watson 2004). In any case, whereas business historians have recognized problems related to the quality of corporate archives as empirical sources (e.g. Armstrong 1991), such discussion has not been raised in the management and organization domain. Simultaneously, the use of such sources for the study of intra-organizational processes is being encouraged (Barley and Tolbert 1997).

This paper draws on a comparative case study concentrating on top management decision making on two major industrial firms, Enso and Kymi-Kymmene, based on the use of minutes of management and board meetings and their enclosures, 1960-1995. This research is a part of a larger research program on the paper industry (e.g. Laurila and Ropponen 2003; Lamberg et al 2004). The two firms examined in this study are established corporations in the sense that they are characterized by more than hundred years of industrial activity under formally defined reporting and decision-making policies. While either of these firms does not operate under the same name as between 1960 and 1995 they are identifiable parts of current Stora Enso and UPM-Kymmene corporations. Before these major mergers taking place in 1998 (Enso and Stora) and 1995 (UPM and Kymi-Kymmene), all the formal decision-making bodies for these firms, such as the board, the management board and annual general meetings have been held regularly and all minutes of meeting with their enclosures are restored in company archives. We have been allowed full, continuing access to these archives. Moreover, as established firms, the activities and operations have also been covered both in business histories and in more general Finnish economic histories. Our aim here is to discuss some problems related to the use of archival material that we find crucial for management and organization studies in general. Points that we are going to make include the following.

First, although we consider minutes of meeting as embodiments of thinking that took place at the time of their writing there is no reason to take them as true statements of the values and intentions of their authors. Instead, we expect that even minutes of corporate boards are also tools of impression management (Arndt & Bigelow, 2000). Those who prepare the minutes have interests to influence the way they themselves are perceived by choosing some forms of expression and omitting others (Hardy, Lawrence & Phillips, 2000). This tendency is especially vital if the authors expect intense critique and opposition (Hirsch, 1986; Arndt & Bigelow, 2000). As researchers of such documents, we therefore must pay close attention to the context in which individual statements have been produced.

Second, for researchers interested in observing organizational action in the long term, we would say that it is extremely difficult to find company archives in which intra-organizational decision-making would be coherently covered

over a longer period of time. Instead, there is considerable variation in the nature of the corporate documentary material over time. More concretely, individual minutes of meeting, for example, vary with respect to whether the arguments used to justify the position taken to individual projects are mentioned in them or in the enclosed memos. The length and the amount of detail in which individual investment projects are examined also vary a lot. Individual managers thus have an impact on the quality of written documents that remain as sources for archival studies even for established firms. In consequence, the validity of all research relying solely on the written documents of formal decision-making bodies of organizations may be jeopardized. It is difficult to obtain sufficiently standardized documentary material that would permit exhaustive study on long-term changes in the phenomena that they were originally prepared to address. Interestingly, on the basis of our experiences obtained here it seems that the large extent of variation in the quality of organizational documents is not totally random but instead partly dependent on contextual characteristics. The fact that we have evidence of both the nature of archival material produced at each period and the nature of corporate activities and its context allows us to explore this relationship.

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