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Abstract

This paper explores narrative in Business History and business histories as a means of understanding the absence and presence of women. We develop the argument that narrative is constructed in the historical research process, and note the implications of this for our understanding of business history as product and practice. We suggest that business historians work with a distinction between *stories in description*, generated by participants as found in traces of the past, and *narration through analysis*, created by historians writing in the present. We suggest that business historians can work productively with this differentiation, and that histories will be better able to consider the position of women in both forms of narrative. We conclude with reflections on the nature of the archive and feminist perspectives on history to outline a research agenda that would develop our argument empirically and conceptually.

Keywords: narrative, organizations, gender, feminism, women.

Introduction: Women in history - absence and presence

It sometimes appears that history has an infinite number of 'undersides',[1] with claims of exclusion and silence made for peasants, employees, the unemployed, specific industries, global regions, and, perhaps most frequently, women.[2] Each of these silences is a choice with political implications. In this paper we focus on the most numerous group of those often described as partially or completely excluded from business histories, women. Boulding, for example, begins her monumental history of women with the stark assertion that the book 'was originally conceived to correct a massive injustice – the wholesale omission of recognition for the contributions to the histories of civilizations by one half of the human beings ever to have populated the earth'.[3] In business history, scholars could note recently without ambiguity or fear of challenge that women remained as absent from contemporary historiography as one hundred years before.[4]

Feminist historians have suggested a range of explanations for this evident exclusion of women. Primary among these is the argument that history as a discipline maintains a conservative patriarchal structure and culture.[5] The discipline displays the characteristics of a 'domestic' gender regime in which the position of women is seldom discussed as a political or social concern, either in the histories written or within the community that writes them.[6] Other arguments involve epistemology, while yet others focus on the varying legitimacy of empirical materials in writing history. The idea, materiality, and practice of the archive have featured prominently in this latter discussion. The image of the corporate archive in particular, as a collection of relatively formal 'traces' of an organization, is that it is dominated by male voices and male concerns.

However, despite the slowly increasing volume and range of historical analysis that places women at or near the centre of the historical narrative of modern business, both women and analytics seen as related to women (gender and feminism) remain marginal to central debates in business history. Is this a problem of 'sampling' and therefore the result of historians' actions? Or are women less present in business history because historical researchers lack evidential traces to work with? These explanations are doubtless partially accurate. Here we explore another possibility, that acts of narration are central to understanding how and why women, gender and feminism remain marginal to business history. In particular, we provide a partial deconstruction

of the nature of archives and the research methods used to explore them in the hope, following Decker's example, of shedding more light on business historians' methodologies and their implications to the benefit of our histories and the human subjects we narrate around.[7]

Into the archive: Practices and effects

The relationship between corporate archives and published business histories is often noted as a key concern for historians, but much less frequently written of reflexively.[8] What discussion there is can be organizational, epistemological, or ontological, and emotional.[9] When public debate does happen, it should also locate the archive economically and politically, as Schwarzkopf argues and Decker demonstrates – companies and countries outside the global north seldom possess the resources for the kind of archiving common in North America or Western Europe, for example, for reasons related to political history and current economic reality. This section approaches the archive in this spirit, as a political, economic and methodological entity, seeking to understand its narrative function and form in relation to women specifically.

The archive as a repository of individual files has been necessary to the making of history's disciplinary power and knowledge from the late eighteenth century.[10] It is sometimes observed that every historian should experience archival dust and the struggle to balance the minimum empathy necessary for understanding against recurring anxiety about the epistemological status of the archive itself.[11] Equally important, a defining convention of business history as a discipline is the preference for specific forms of archival research over, for example, public documents or life history interviews, to convey authenticity and authority.[12] The firm plays a central role as a legal entity in the development of the most prestigious modern archives. Individual organizational source collections have been a mostly male preserve, wherein neophyte and experienced business historians elevate examination of sources in difficult-to-access archives as a masculine activity.[13] Corporate archives are also likely to contain mostly masculine voices, rendered neutrally through formal bureaucratic documents. These two features paradoxically make masculinity invisible as an analytical category and as an experience to most historians.[14] Business history's deep attachment to the study of 'the firm' embeds this neutrality and encourages understanding of its masculinity as marginal.[15] This is not only the case in business history – it is also true in organization studies, where 'neutral' terms such as strategy, structure and competitiveness are rarely interrogated for their implicit gendered assumptions.[16] The long-

established sources and practises of the contemporary business historian's craft impose a relatively rigid frame within which to write, thereby omitting much of historical and theoretical significance.

The content of archives and alternative sources delimit the nature of traces very differently, and therefore the position of data generated in relation to what is being explained.[17] Women in particular are positioned very specifically by the ways in which archives are constructed (literally by corporations and figuratively by historians), and by narratological conventions of different modes of representation in data. Corporate archives tend to contain stories without human actors except in a formal sense, encouraging historians to tell stories *about* women as a category, positioning women and gender as abstractions in the stories of institutions and industries[18]. This is helpful in a basic sense, inasmuch as women are at least an empirical presence. We find this approach in, for example, the history of the aviation industry, which has been the subject of a considerable body of literature created by men and women business historians who have focused on writing-in 'women' as the 'missing' of two biological categories.[19] These accounts, as well as other business histories of aviation not explicitly focused on women,[20] compare the social and biological categories of women to men in aviation and as aviators, but neglect the emergence of the categories themselves. There is little in-depth work tracing the historical emergence of the concept of the aviator and whether the role is socially gendered. Wohl, for example, describes the 'dominant image of the aviator' as 'that of the flying ace, a knight of the air who jousted with blazing machine guns in chivalrous combat above the stalemated and entrenched armies of the ground'.[21] The language in the description hints at an association of the aviator with masculinity, but the idea is not pursued for its conceptual significance.

A second example of this approach, which we might describe as 'add women and stir', relates to the work of the person usually described as the 'founding father' of contemporary business history, Alfred Chandler. Chandler focussed on the details of organisational structure as much as strategy, on routine administration as much as executive decision-making, and thereby produced an invitation to study work organisation and labour *including women*.[22] We are not aware of this invitation being taken up, as historians in this tradition have chosen to focus on the traces of the past found in archives, and therefore on mostly masculine voices relating to strategic planning and executive action. Alongside the empirical difficulty of finding women in such archives, there is also the challenge of finding an interpretative context for the analytical historical narrative that focuses on gender as a socially constructed category.[23] This is eminently possible - in her

foundational 1986 essay, 'Gender: A useful category of historical analysis', Joan Scott suggests that to write gender into history would transform research and destabilise established truths, large and small.[24] Scott's clumsy title, somewhere between a question and a declaration, reflects profound methodological uncertainties,[25] as she insists that 'gender' should not simply register as a synonym for the inclusion of women.[26]Nonetheless, she is clear that gender as an analytical category should involve unsettling and historicising concepts, categories and practices defined either as gender neutral or natural. For Scott, even the surface neutrality of demographic statistics is suspect because they are predicated upon the naturalness of 'the household' as the basic social unit of society.[27] A failure to read against the grain of such records is to naturalise that which is socially constructed in history, and to confirm the assumptions of the anonymous bureaucratic authors of such sources.[28] To read against the archival grain is to discover and, more importantly, produce those 'discrepant stories' where official categories are challenged, disrupted or subverted, and so provide 'ethnographic entry into the confused space in which people lived, to the fragmented knowledge on which they relied, and to the ill-formed and inept responses that knowledge engendered'.[29] This approach to historical research in business history would, we suggest, lead towards the reframing of gender as a constitutive element of both business and history, rather than seeing workplaces as neutral sites where gender is simply embodied. It takes us towards the idea that to organize and to manage is to engender, and that to be organized and to be managed is also to engender.[30]

Reading against the grain in this way has ethical implications as much as methodological effects. Business history could, until very recently, be confidently described as 'predisposed to economic and political conservatism', resistant to representing firms and their lead agents as institutions and individuals that bear some responsibility for damaging or inequitable outcomes.[31] This is an ethical failing as much as a methodological one. If the historical narrative constructed through identification of sources, dataset construction, analysis and reporting does not register the ethical then it is likely to remain positivist, whether this is intended or not.[32] This contrasts with the development of women's and gender studies, disciplines which have always been overtly ethical and often openly political.[33]

Narrative in and around archives

Practising history in the way we have suggested means engaging with the analytical notion of narrative and the closely associated empirical category of stories. The empirical stories

represented or excluded in archival traces provide the base material for historical analysis. Alongside that, the concept of narrative in organizations plays a central role in the approach to re-reading archives and histories that we are proposing. Gabriel's typology of meanings to be found in organizational stories sets out the cognitive aspects of storytelling, the ambiguity and contradictory nature of stories, and their interpretations[34]. This leads to identification of three primary narrative functions that stories permit: the ability to turn passivity into activity, to turn powerlessness into control, and operation as a symbolic coping mechanism. Stories can become forms of symbolic resistance for employees, frustratingly unknowable or uncontrollable narratively from a managerial perspective. Storytelling is thus understood as a means of expressing, enacting and resisting the social conditions of power.[35] However, the emphasis on symbolic significance and concentration on meaning may background the analysis of any practical events which form the context for the narrative. This conceptualisation of tends towards an image of the story as petrified artefact, rather than as a personalised process of narrative event-based iterative sense-making, always creative and artful.[36]

Engaging with the idea of narrative in organizations and organization studies can also involve recognition of the temporary, fungible, political and ideological nature of stories. Theseways of thinking may, as we are suggesting here, also be relevant to understanding corporate archives. Stories are performed in narrative, just as archives are socially constructed, in order to make sense of otherwise equivocal situations. Stories cannot be 'wrenched from their natural performance contexts and treated as objectified social facts'.[37] As both organizational practice and social science method, then, storytelling and narrative analysis should be seen as practical activity, a means of meeting situated interpretive demands, and subsequently of constructing analytical accounts of that activity.[38] The product (story or archive construction) and process (narrative analysis) are mutually constitutive, in organizations and in research.

The additional sense of storytelling and narrative construction as methodological and ethical act is already present in historiographical debates that surround business history. The most challenging description of history as an outcome of iterative and creative sense-making processes is found in the historiography of Hayden White. White argues for history as a form of narrative whose contents are as much invented as found.[39] In approaching history as narrative, White problematizes the nature of historical knowledge and its foundations. For White, *all* of history, events and their traces as well as published histories, is a combination of stories and narrative. Historical narratives are constructions that have more in common with literature, fiction and

nominalism than they do with science, fact and realism. In this, White challenges the belief that history can be understood from an ideologically innocent viewpoint, where facts are found in stories in the archive and the past is discovered in a disinterested way. In drawing these controversial parallels between history and fiction, White disrupts the privilege accorded archived facts, repositioning them as fictive constructions: histories become 'the fictions of factual representation',[40] in which historians make choices on how to tailor research questions to suit their narratives. Agentic choices entail the selection of certain traces of the past over others, differential relevances are ascribed to each trace, and traces are then positioned in relation to others narratively such that all assume a particular meaning. At each step, historians engage as free agents to construct the past as history in a creative and inventive way. Historians are not so much recovering the past as writing it anew. Though writers of fiction *may* imagine events while historians' traces *necessarily* relate to actual events, White notes that the process of fusing and ordering events or traces into a culturally recognizable form that will act as a narrative object of representation closely resembles an act of literary creation. For White, whether facts exist, even what counts as fact, loses relevance as a methodological question. What assumes importance is the meaning a trace assumes based on the way a historian orders it into a narrative. It is through the construction of narrative that history's stories come into being.

In explicitly drawing parallels between history and fictive literature, White disrupts the aim of realist historians who feel it possible and desirable to capture *what actually happened in the past*. This is evident in two ways. First, following Collingwood,[41] White notes that the past is ontologically absent. Even if we could objectively study the past and capture it as history, verification of the past against history would be futile given this ontological absence. Second, White very effectively shows that no study of the past is ideologically innocent.[42] Ideological innocence or rejection of ideology are, as he notes, ideological positions in and of themselves.[43]

Reading and doing history narratively for White involves liberating history from the twin burdens of realist, truthful certainty and linearity that are, by definition, singular in representation. He illustrates this in anatomizing how the formal coherence of historical narratives is always imposed retrospectively. Coherence is achieved by imposing a meaningful form on a meaningless past. The form, or 'mode of emplotment', is chosen from a selection housed in the historians' disciplinary toolbox. White's term emplotment was once considered a monstrous neologism but is now a commonplace.[44] For us, this is White's most relevant illustration of the narrative nature of history. Emplotment is not an innocent structural or

technical device, but a process of forced coherence in which the present is caused by the past; all events are ascribed meaning and importance in terms of this causal process.[45] White develops this argument most fully in *Metahistory*, his account of nineteenth-century historical consciousness, taking stock of the discipline while problematizing the epistemological status of historical knowledge. This book documents the various modes of emplotment that have been used to write history. For White, the past and its stories only *become* narrative history when they are transformed through emplotment. The programming, encoding or sequencing of artefacts, traces or events into a specific kind of plot structure creates histories. The process of selecting a mode, structure or typification to order otherwise meaningless traces into a meaningful and coherent narrative is always active. Through emplotment events assume meaning, histories gain their status as such and assume an explanatory capacity. During the period of formal historical consciousness, a number of modes of emplotment have been developed, becoming so recognizable to communities of readers and historians that they form part of a collective cultural endowment so familiar as to be beyond question. The familiarity of the forms that mould the content of the past into historical narrative is compounded by their utility in that they make deciphering history less burdensome. The consequence when writing history is that the types of stories or narrative histories that can be constructed around a particular event/set of events are limited to the number of modes of emplotment developed and legitimized.

That a mode of emplotment pre-figures the content of a history into a narrative form *prior* to an historian stepping into an archive has significant consequences for historians and history, especially those working in corporate archives. However, ironically for us here, *Metahistory* neglects gender and gendered modes of emplotment. Despite this, we believe that narratives and emplotment can inform the development of gendered business histories that move beyond the simple consideration of women. Per Hansen,[46] for example, suggests that business historians might use 'traditional' sources in new ways. This could mean a shift from searching for true causes toward analyzing the meaning of language used to describe women, and how that has changed over time. Hansen's argument and our complementary suggestions here rely on business historians' willingness to try a different analytical strategy that acknowledges narrativity, such as social constructionism or poststructuralism, which in turn has consequences for the status ascribed to the resultant history. For narrative as a gender sensitive mode of emplotment, this means reading against the grain by drawing on categories of thought to highlight, for example, the construction and maintenance of gender[47], gendered divisions of labor[48] and

patriarchy[49]. In the next section we illustrate this in our description of two recent research projects that foreground narrative and gender as central empirical and methodological themes.

<u>In and around the archive: the British 'marriage bar' and Pan American Airways</u>

Two examples from empirical research we have been engaged in illustrate this argument and its key methodological problematics in the production of historical narratives. First, we look at interpretations of the British 'marriage bar', the common 20th century managerial practice of requiring women to leave a job, profession, or organization on marriage. The dataset we have been constructing is composed from a range of sources. We have examined corporate and non-corporate archive data on the implementation, erosion and cessation of the marriage bar, mostly in the mid-1920s and in the two decades after 1945. We also collected data in a very different narrative form, through life history interviews with women who were subject to the bar.

The corporate archive material comprises meeting minutes, managerial memos, and staff records – the formal, bureaucratically oriented organizational stories *about* women that provide snapshots in organizational time (sometimes literally – see image 1). Women are present only as resources, bodies whose cost must be calculated against productivity or skill. Discussions about the bar take place within board discussions of reports on machinery, workflow, or return on capital expenditure. These ordinary impersonal calculations were premised upon the extraordinary acceptance of women employees. All of the major British banks introduced the marriage bar as an essential and necessary part of their mechanisation drives. There were no experiments with male operators; the existing exclusively male, pen-based administrative procedures were compared to rationalised, mechanised and feminised labour processes.

[insert image 1 around here]

The new tasks offered to women were repetitive, tightly controlled, high speed, and impersonal, in that there was extremely limited contact with other staff and none with clients. Women employees had distinct, lower salary scales and were excluded from the inspection system that was so central to the male banking career. Male bankworkers' exclusive mobility across the branch network was part training, part proving ground; women were confined to a single branch and a limited 'family' of tasks. Women had jobs, not careers.[50] The presence or *absence* of inspection and assessment was gendered and gendering. Men's character was to be self-formed

under the duress of routine, while women were only to escape their tightly controlled work environment upon marriage.[51] Before 1939 managerial control was not mediated through a layer of female supervisors, a distinct female work culture, or any overlap in the work roles of female and male employees. Gender was inscribed in the machine and the task,[52] just as gender was inscribed into the service transaction and embodied in the employee in airlines (see below). This left little scope for females to develop informal bargaining power. Even managing their powerlessness was difficult for young women bank employees. They were few and widely scattered; they were tightly bound to their mechanised tasks; they were fixed to specific locations, such that their immobility limited the prospects of developing a shared work culture. Control and resistance were not part of the organisational stories told about women. Representations could only be abstract, managerial representations of costs, labour turnover, and productivity.

The cost-benefit analyses of mechanisation calculated the number of permanent male career bankers nominally displaced by women.[53] Archival categories such as 'temporary' and 'supplementary' were not neutral accounting terms, but referred exclusively to women. Female labour was a necessary condition of – rather than a response to - the expansion of branch networks or the competitive strategies of individual banks. There was no causal sequence from executive strategy to expansion via mechanisation and feminisation, but rather a logic of entailment: mechanisation was always understood as necessarily a feminised process. Equally, although female labour was now a permanent feature of the bank workforce, the banks preferred that specific women were employed for relatively short tenures. The female marriage bar was the banks' chosen instrument. Banks also introduced and modified dowries to incentivise female staff to marry at around 23 years. At age 23 male and female salaries were equal, growing to a differential in favour of men of 40% within five years and 80% a decade later.[54] Salary scales and actual salaries underestimate the earnings gap between male and female bank workers. Married men received double the annual bonus of bachelors; women were ineligible for bonuses awarded on marriage and for dependent children.[55] The male bank career represented an economic and moral project of the self that was denied to females whose status was defined conclusively at their point of entry.[56] Equally, fewer than one in ten were transferred between branches, and these were overwhelmingly local transfers. Around one-third of the male clerical workforce was transferred annually, typically to broaden their technical and commercial experience.[57] Training for females was restricted to specific or, at most, adjacent machines; male training was geared to long-run career progression.[58] Mobility, training and inter-branch transfers were not neutral

processes but segmented the banks' internal labour markets according to gender and confirmed the definition of male and female roles and possibilities.

In the long run, routine female work was designed to provide a sustainable organisational base for the life-long male career. The strategic importance of women to the gendered nature of the organisation was more often inscribed in technical and economic evaluations of new technology and only rarely acknowledged by executives. Reviewing more than a decade of female employment, Barclays' Staff director reassured a sceptical subsidiary bank that female efficiency was greatest 'in her earlier years' but that their long-run importance for the male career was that 'promotion to senior positions is quicker because women do not compete for senior work'.[59] This was precisely the experience of Lloyds Bank male staff hired after mechanisation began in 1925 compared to their pre-1925 peers.[60]

Bank archives provide only glimpses of these taken-for-granted gendered assumptions, and only when read against the archival grain. The signification of female bankwork can only be understood in terms of its differences from the language, categorisation and experience of male bankwork. Male bankwork signified agency, albeit constrained by tight behavioural norms. Female agency had only a liminal organisational presence. The most significant expression of female agency was, therefore, to marry and so exit the organisation. Until 1939 UK banks welcomed this form of female agency as natural and critical to continuously rejuvenating female staff groups and containing labour costs. Female bankworkers became a more heterogeneous category that signified agency *and* passivity, permanence *and* temporariness, and a degree of geographical and organisational mobility. Similarly, Melissa Fisher reads the cultural logic of the games of finance into the changing ways that women and men define themselves, their roles and their relations to the organisation. Fisher notes that the entry of women into high finance brokerage coincided with a moment of disruptive technical innovation and deregulation.[61] 1920s British bank mechanisation was a radical innovation in terms of the labour process and opened up space for female workforce participation but only by confirming their temporary status, secondary to that of marriage. The cost of female inclusion was their acceptance of their subordination. Through an engendered reading of bank archives we gain a sense of the experience of female bankwork and how the changing categories of 'male' and 'female' were constitutive of that experience.[62] Engendering analysis *produces* those discontinuities that permit historical ethnography, while avoiding a teleology of progress towards gender equality.[63]

Even if we remain only within formal corporate archives, there are still important questions to ask about the status of the data, such as in the Pan American Airways (PAA) archive. This is a 'classic' corporate archive; it was made possible on financial and document donations from the company and its ex-employees through a foundational grant made on the death of the corporation in 1991. The result was around 1,500 cubic feet of files, including technical documents, photographs, public relations material, internal publications, and managerial communications. This paper archive is supplemented by a series of oral history interviews. Many business historians, such as Corn, Douglas, Kolm and Barry,[64] have shown an active interest in writing women into the history of the aviation industry through this archive. However, approaching the archive reflexively is imperative to understanding how and why gender has been constructed as it has within the archival stories of commercial aviation. When reflexivity is not central to the researcher's engagement with the archive itself, it is in danger or reverting to an inert collection of source material.

Mills, for example, has used the PAA archive reflexively to argue that organizations participate in the construction of gender, sexuality and the sexual division of labor, including through the construction and maintenance of archives. Though the materials housed at the PAA archive are not classified according to these categories, examples of the construction of gender within the organization are apparent when reading against the grain in organizational newsletters. The PAA archive reveals considerable variations in the construction of gender over time.[65] Dye and Mills draw on materials from the PAA archive to demonstrate Acker's gendered organizational logic over various time periods including the 1940s and 1950s, as well as the 1970s and 1980s.

Reading against the grain of the PAA archival materials from the 1940s proves interesting if only because of the influx of women from the war effort and the non-traditional work they were allocated. Newsletters documented this temporary norm with articles, photos and captions featuring work now performed by women. The sheer quantity of photos of women doing men's work hints at the novelty of this changing division of labour: women are now seen wearing coveralls performing tasks such as cleaning spark plugs, or splicing cables. However the captions associated with the photos frequently refer to adult women as 'girls'. The celebratory language conveys, with a tone of forced confidence, that the task *will* be successfully completed against the odds. Caption after caption spotlighting women performing men's work suggests that the audience may lack assurance in the re-gendered labour process. Other captions compare the new (female) and usual (male) labourers, rather than merely describing them. As if to reverse the

popular opinion, comments are made about female workers being just as good and occasionally better at performing the work. The photos and captions exemplify what Acker[66] calls the construction of divisions of sex and gender. The large quantity of photos of women performing otherwise unremarkable work does not necessarily disturb traditional divisions of labour, but may instead highlight it. The comparison of women to men as opposed to, for example, the comparison of women of different geographical divisions engaged in the same labour, reinforces the construction of divisions along the lines of sex. These descriptors of men and women contributed to the making of a still-pervasive understanding of masculinity and femininity.

Though the PAA archival materials of the 1970s illustrate a substantially different gendered business logic, they can be shown to point to a *gendered* business logic nonetheless. Over the 1970s, employment equity initiatives assumed popularity at PAA (and beyond). Of interest in this time period is the alignment between the motivations behind equity initiatives and the initiatives themselves. Dye and Mills offer the following illustrative quote from the PAA archive[67]:

> No Nonsense About Women's Opportunity – Women came to hear
> what's in store for them at Pan Am at two major meetings sponsored by
> the Women's Opportunities Council late in June. They were assured that
> opportunities for women to move up and into management are expanding
> – and that the airline's top leadership is solidly behind the Women's
> Opportunity Program…He [Seawell] emphasized that Pan Amis fully
> committed to improving job opportunities for women within the
> corporate structure – not just because it is required under federal law but
> because its good business and a sensible use of valuable personnel
> resources. (Pan American Airways, 1974c, p. 24).

While the promotion of women into positions of authority and higher pay is positive, the end of the quote exposes the motivation for the initiatives: the promotion of women's opportunities is good for business. The quote makes one question what is of importance, the promotion of women's rights or the promotion of good business? Any answer reveals the extent to which gendering is intractably bound to business logic. Using the archive reflexively allows the production of data with interpretive depth.

Narrative methodologies in business history

For historically interested researchers whose home discipline is organization studies, reflection on the methodological status of data and the researcher's visible hand is commonplace. However, it seems that for trained historians practising business history, this practice is less common, certainly in an epistemological sense. In a contribution to the rapidly developing debate between researchers practising organization studies and business historians, Decker suggests that those historians who have a new institutional home in business schools might better integrate by explaining their methodologies. Decker identifies a series of problematic issues, however, when historical methods are viewed only through a social science lens. First, she suggests that the serendipity inherent to historical research is seen as methodologically illegitimate; second, there are concerns about the inevitable presence of the subjective in data collection and analysis, and especially in the construction of analytical historical narratives; and third, the expectation of replication through consultation of the same data sources in historical research is often not meaningful to social science methodologies. We think that each of these problems can be mediated if the tendency to think in normative or positivist terms[68] is complemented with other approaches. In other words, if some historians more willingly engaged with post-positivist or post-structural methodologies, as we have outlined here, and especially the status of stories and narrative in data collection and writing research, then we would see a more variegated history.[69]

During data collection and analysis in the forms we have described, the researcher occupies a position that involves acceptance that there is no pristine or authentic form of contemporary or historical reality. Stories of events, generated by participants and researchers, including those lodged in formal archives, are necessarily partial and probably incommensurate.[70] A narrative approach to writing history by its nature can permit ambiguity and live with paradox.[71] Stories from within and around organizations may be analysed as much for *how* they are told and *how* the tellers shape them(selves) as for the content.[72] Meanings and motives read through and against the stories are key analytical tools to develop a convincing narrative from the research setting.[73] The researcher's task becomes one of exposing the otherwise taken for granted nature of existing categories (men / women) and their associated meanings to reveal *how* they are generative of a gendered business logic. The task entails liberating the categories from their rigid connotations to create space and open possibility for the emergence of alternatives. Neglecting these tasks means falling into the trap of equating reported experience with authenticity, and leads to an acontextual empiricism which tends to result in realist representation.[74]

To be clear, we are not making a case for a form of 'anything goes'. While different versions of an event may provide differing interpretations of the thing itself and its meaning, the root of an empirical story remains a 'reportable, storyable item'.[75] Events will always be bound into narrative by the researcher during data collection. Symbolism and social construction of meaning retain their importance in the narrative construction, but practical material events remain central to the analysis of archival stories. Reading those stories contrapuntally may help organizational researchers describe both what the subject does and also what s/he makes of it[76], before moving the experiences to the level of analysis through construction of theoretical narrative.[77]

Discussion and conclusion: Gendered narratives of business history, and the promise of feminism

Closer engagement with research methodologies such as those outlined in this paper should enable business historians to contribute more, and more significantly, to theory development about the firm's past and present, and thereby be more recognised by organization theoristsfor their contributions. Story and narrative's dependence on each other, as stories are made meaningful and intelligible through narrative, is more evident in business history than any other research craft practised within the business school. Historians have, we would suggest, a unique opportunity to achieve greater legitimacy through an existing sensitivity to narrative and storytelling, that requires only clarity in methodological debate to communicate.

Historians are not alone in this. The wider social science 'crisis of representation' that developed through the 1980s, that White contributed to, only became salient to the outpost of organizational research after calling in at many other disciplines. Czarniawska gives an explanation of this tardy arrival, in her observation that there has been a lack of attention to how organization theory is written because of its relative newcomer status.[78] Narrative analysis has often been marginalised in organization studies by the desire for research based on rationalist, scientistic positivism.[79] This makes the discipline's practitioners more likely to subscribe to the legitimatory ideals of the natural sciences in striving for acceptance into the canon of academic subjects, rather than seeking to problematise them. The crisis was based around problematisation at a fundamental level, building on the notion of language being a relative system, not invested with any absolute meaning. Interpretation therefore becomes key to reading and writing, displacing claims to absolute truth or exclusive authorial control over texts. The writer has no claim to control meaning, and can only present a version of what really happened in tandem with

the reader, who constructs the text through reading it. We have argued here that one way for those involved in writing business history to engage with this debate, and avoid the possibility of endless relativity, is to reflect on the role of the researcher in the location of empirical stories and narrative constructions of historical text.

This involves moving away from the 'the monastic conceit of disinterested objectivity in the ivory tower, where the dispassionate, panoptical gaze of a Master Subject surveys all',[80] which we think has been common in business histories. As an approach this is necessarily of limited use when analysing organizations as complex social settings. History, as events, as stories, and as narratives of knowledge, are never inert objects. As Jenkins argues, 'the attempt to describe things 'as they are' is doomed to failure. Without *some* perspective or, at the very least, a set of animating questions, there is nothing to report. Contrary to empiricism, the facts *never* speak for themselves'.[81]

We have illustrated our argument with reference to the corporate archive as a specifically gendered institution. Such archives are central to thinking through the status of narrative in business history, especially in relation to how women are represented in histories. Consideration of this issue has multiple implications. As we have shown, reading against the grain of archives can result in very different historical narratives. In addition, the demographics of the archivist profession are changing rapidly. The Society of American Archivists conducts periodic surveys of its members across a range of issues.[82] The most recent, published in 2006, notes a significant shift in the profession's demographics. In 1956, 67% of professional members were male; in 2005, the proportions were almost perfectly reversed, with 65% of archivists female. The profession seems likely to feminize further in the future, as the proportion of women entering the profession touches 80% of the total cohort under thirty years of age. Such a rapid demographic change must have significant implications for the practices and products of the archivist community and therefore the conduct of writing history. One already visible effect may be the recent 'archival turn' in feminist analysis.[83] The rise in the number of institutional archives devoted to feminist activism and organizations suggests that activists, archivists, and academics are all contributing to this broadening of material available to researchers in the most legitimate form possible for historians.

Contemporary feminist scholars such as Jacqueline Rose emphasise that feminist perspectives can ask questions that no other way of thinking can even imagine the need to ask.[84] If we simply

write women into the conventional concepts of the firm, management and competitiveness that dominate historical writing, then we implicitly accept the gender neutral assumption of these concepts and others. As Mary Yeager argues, there is an alternative - to understand that incorporating women changes everything.[85] Writing women's voices historically entails re-writing repeatedly narrated implicit masculinities of work, management and organization. Only by adopting a more meaningful conceptualisation of voice, as entangled with the narration of trace stories, will 'the significance of silence in discourse and of the power relations inherent in the relationship between the said and the unsaid… be recognized and… contribute to our understanding of the 'doing' of gender in… contexts such as enterprise'.[86]

Hence the narrative shift we are proposing goes beyond just acknowledging the existence of sources as stories and histories as narratives. More women archivists, archives of women's action, and feminist analysts will produce changes in what traces of the past are available, how history is written, and what history is understood to be. Feminist perspectives inevitably encourage 'reading against the grain' of both archives and published histories. We might also expect women and/or feminist archivists to create different structural conventions that in turn help make other realities come to life in written histories. Finally, we would expect these archivists and archives to be more open to analysis of the social construction of gendered history, and therefore to considering the narrative dynamics of archiving and writing history.

Representing women and gender are, however, also dependent on the actions of a range of other actors in the historiographic process, and on institutions produced through social action and relations.[87] Woolf argues that history as a discipline was initially and crucially supported by women's participation in the 'social circulation' of its knowledge, and that debates on the nature of sex and gender should be part of the bedrock of modern history.[88] This has clearly not always been the case. Institutions do change, however - this journal, for example, has recently published full papers that make use of feminist perspectives and a significant number of book reviews that reference feminist theory and practice.[89] This implies that perpetuation of either ungendered or a-gendered history might come to an end.

Business historians are uniquely well placed to make this happen. The community's unique insights into the political, social and cultural context of firms and related organizations can surely contribute more, if sources, data, archives, interpretations and theory building are understood in a more reflexive and inclusive way than has hitherto been the norm. Walby's early work

exemplifies the creative consultation of general archives such as the England and Wales census and trade union membership records, to trace the presence, absence, and experience of women in business and social history, and through that to develop feminist social theory.[90] More work of this nature, to explore established corporate archives, 'other' archival sources such as Mass Observation, and newly established archives of feminist activism, can only enrich business history and broaden its relevance to the wider communities with an interest in it. More than fifteen years on from Philip Scranton's observation that women remained somewhat absent from research agendas and synthetic historical narratives, considerable work remains to be done in both senses of making business history.[91] Public consideration of how we approach traces, data and narrating histories are a good starting point for that work.

From the beginnings of modern history, women have contributed accounts of their experiences with firms. As Gamber also tells us, '… the stubborn fact of their [women's] existence demands that scholars take note', and many have.[92] However, the ways of 'taking note' vary. We have presented a linked set of suggestions for collecting traces and analysing data through discussion of stories and narrative, that would avoid more of the 'add women and stir' histories that assume the existence of a homogeneous deterministic grouping of people typed by sex or a separate 'women's culture'.[93] Looking for women and gender in creative places, perhaps with the assistance of feminist theory, beyond the corporate archive, has always been practised, and may be achieving more legitimacy. If it can continue with even more methodological and narrative legitimacy, then it has the potential to enrich all debates in business history. Historians still need to listen carefully today and avoid easy answers when considering the many intersections that the firm, women, and gender have had.[94] To do so will involve more than simply writing histories of business with women included as an 'aspect'; it can, and perhaps should, mean reconsidering the business of making and writing histories of the firm, even if that means yet more complication for established narratives.[95]

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Image 1: Women and mainframe computers, Midland Bank, 1962

Notes

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[1] Boulding, *Underside of History*.

[2] See respectively: Thompson, *The Making*; Burrell, *Pandemonium*; Jacques *Manufacturing;* Jahoda, *Employment*; Cooke, "The denial of slavery"; Decker, "The silence," 161-163 and Cummings and Bridgman, "Limits," 253-255; Walby, *Patriarchy*.

[3] Boulding, *Underside of History,* xiii.

[4] Gamber, "Gendered Enterprise", 188.

[5] Gamber; Boulding; Woolf, "A feminine past?", 679.

[6] Walby, *Future*, chapter 3.

[7] Decker, "Silence" 169-170.

[8] Schwarzkopf, "What is an archive," 1.

[9] See respectively: Decker, "Silence"; Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, and Procter "Social Remembering," 466; Taylor, Bell, and Cooke, "Business history," 162.

[10] Woolf, "Feminine past," 678.

[11] Steedman, *Dust*.

[12] Berkhofer, *Great Story*, 72.

[13] Featherstone, "Archive," 592.

[14] Gamber, "Gendered Enterprise"; Downs, *Writing*, 84.

[15] Kwolek-Folland, "Gender," 2, 4.

[16] Smith, *Gender*, 131.

[17] Czarniawska, "The Styles," 253-254.

[18] Peiss, "Vital industry," 219-220 .

[19] Corn, 1979; Merryman, 1998; Jarros, 1993; Millward, 2008; Barry, 2007.

[20] Wohl, *Republic*.

[21] Wohl, *Republic*, 112.

[22] Yeager, "Feminist Business History," 13.

[23] Gamber, 190.

[24] Scott, *Gender*.

[25] Butler and Weed, "Introduction," 1-2.

[26] Scott, *Fantasy*, 4-5.

[27] Scott, *Gender*; 113, 123; Poovey, *Social Body*, 131.

[28] Cabrera, "Language," 35.

[29] Stoler, *Archival Grain*, 185.

[30] Acker, "Theory of Gendered Organization".

[31] Gamber, "Gendered Enterprise", 199.

[32] Ezzamel, and Willmott, "Registering the 'ethical,'" 1021.

[33] Walby, *Future*.

[34] Gabriel, *Storytelling*.

[35] Coffey and Atkinson, *Making Sense*, chapter 3.

[36] Czarniawska-Joerges, "Narration or science?", 26-28; Coffey and Atkinson, *Making Sense*, chapter 5.

[37] Boje, "Storytelling organization," 107.

[38] Gubrium, and Holstein "Narrative practice," 166; Whittle and Wilson, "Ethnomethodology," 55-56.

[39] White, *Tropics, Metahistory*.

[40] White, *Tropics*, 121.

[41] Collingwood, *The Idea*.

[42] White, *Metahistory*.

[43] Jenkins, *History*.

[44] Vann, "The reception", 148.

[45] Kellner, "Monsters", 151-2.

[46] Hansen, "Business history", 2012.

[47] Mills, *Organization*.

[48] Calás and Smircich, *Woman's point of view*.

[49] Prasad, *Gender*.

[50] Blackburn, "*Union Character*", 71.

[51] Kwolek-Folland, *Engendering*, 43, 49.

[52] Cockburn, *Machinery*.

[53] Lloyds Bank Archives (hereafter LBA) HO/D/Org6, "'Report of Sub-Committee on Mechanisation' to Organisation and Economy Committee, 1931".

[54] Seltzer, "Impact", 466.

[55] LBA HO/St/Wil/7.0, "Bonus," October 1938; Barclay Bank Archive (B352/pBB6, "Staff Handbook," 1935.

[56] McKinlay, "Dead Selves", "Notman".

[57] LBA HO/St/off/5575, "Staff Transfer," 5 February 1932.

[58] LBA A664, "Male Staff Training," 25 August 1934.

[59] Halifax Bank of Scotland Archive HBOS ACC 2012/012/SH19/02, Tuke, Staff Manager, Barclays, to Dempster, British Linen, "Women Staff," July 1937; see also Seltzer, "Impact", 1056.

[60] Stovel et al., "Ascription", 369.

[61] Fisher, "Herstories" 306.

[62] Boydston, "Gender," 570.

[63] Ackrill and Hannah, *Barclays*.

[64] Corn 1979; Douglas 2004; Kolm 2003; Barry 2007.

[65] Mills, *Sex*.

[66] Acker, *Hierarchies*; Dye and Mills, *Dueling Discourses*.

[67] Dye and Mills, "Discourses," 431.

[68] See Heller, "Late Victorian", Heller and Kamleitner, "Salaries".

[69] Denzin, and Lincoln, *Qualitative Research*, 'Introduction'. In the current fourth edition, the editors pursue an increasingly separatist agenda for assessing qualitative research. This stands in contrast to recent calls for the use of mixed methods.

[70] Gubrium and Holstein, "Narrative practice," 173.

[71] Czarniawska-Joerges "Narration or science?," 27; and for the *necessary* paradoxes of feminist politics of considered by in Scott, *Paradoxes*.

[72] Gubrium and Holstein, "Narrative practice," 165.

[73] Coffey and Atkinson, *Making Sense*, 57.

[74] Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data*, 46.

[75] Gubrium and Holstein, 166; see also Coffey and Atkinson, *Making Sense*, chapter 3.

[76] Van Maanen, *Tales,* chapter 6.

[77] Foucault, *Order of Things,* 352; see also Derrida, *Fever*, 68, where he similarly understands the archive as a particular space and, more importantly, as an open, infinite promise of all that is known and knowable. For a cautionary note on Foucault's most abstract definition of the archive, see Osborne, "Ordinariness," 53; to locate Foucault's genealogy as a research strategy and methodology, see Rowlinson, Hassard and Decker, "Research Strategies."

[78] Czarniawska, "Four times told," 8.

[79] Rhodes and Pullen, "Narratives and stories," 584-585.

[80] Kondo, *Crafting*, 303.

[81] Jenkins, '*History?',* 7.

[82] E.g. Anon. "Archival Census".

[83] Eichhorn, *Archival Turn*.

[84] Rose, *Women*.

[85] Yeager, 'Women'.

[86] Simpson and Lewis, "Silence", 1268.

[87] Walby, *Patriarchy*.

[88] Woolf, "Feminine past," 647.

[89] See e.g. Honeyman, "Engendering,"; McLeod, "Quality control,".

[90] Walby, *Patriarchy*.

[91] Scranton, "Introduction, " 187.

[92] E.g. Woolf, "Feminine past,"; Gamber, "Gendered Enterprise", 190.

[93] Woolf; Gamber, "Gendered Enterprise," 190.

[94] Gamber, "Gendered Enterprise," 216.

[95] Peiss, "Vital industry," 241.