History as a Mode of Inquiry in Organizational Life: A Role for Human Cosmogony

Frank J. Barrett[1] and Suresh Srivastva[1,2]

Inquiry into social and organizational life has been characterized predominantly by a structural-functionalist orientation, following the influence of sociologists such as Talcott Parsons. While this orientation has produced a great deal of knowledge and insight in the field of organizational theory, there are ways in which this orientation has led to unintentional consequences. The structural-functionalist orientation tends to generate a snapshot approach to research by focusing on the givenness of social structures and in so doing, adds to a sense of reification of organizational processes. Organizational life is a socially constructed reality. This is easily forgotten because by *nature*, social institutions begin to degenerate into recipe knowledge for its members, and original meanings and intentions that once guided social arrangements get lost. This paper proposes that we need a methodology which attempts to capture the historicity and continuity of organizational life, and the contingencies and decisions made through time. We need to pay attention to the human cosmogony, the human creation of the world through contingencies, accidents, and choices, to attempt to re-discover the original intentions and choices of predecessors. A brief review of historians and historical philosophers' views of methods for studying human action is investigated.

KEY WORDS: organizational inquiry; cosmogony; history; organizational change; social construction.

INTRODUCTION

The field of organizational theory has been characterized largely by a structural-functionalist orientation to social life. There has been a research tendency to study organizations as made up of structures that perform functions for the necessary survival of the overall system. The methods that further this theoretical orientation have been largely logical-positivist and have

[1]Department of Organizational Behavior, Weatherhead School of Management, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio 44106.
[2]Requests for reprints should be addressed to Suresh Srivastva, Department of Organizational Behavior, Enterprise Hall, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio 44106.

led researchers to focus attention to uncovering patterns in social life, to demonstrate transhistorical, enduring regularities in order to demonstrate the stability and overall social order of organizations.

The structuralist-functionalist orientation has generated research that attempts to measure social structures and emphasizes the sense of order, the ongoing maintenance of organizations. Research has focused on the *givenness* of *the present* order and largely ignored the past, the historical.

In this paper, we would like to explore some of the theoretical assumptions of the functionalist approach to organizational theory and the tendency to view organizations as static, reified structures. We would like to discuss the assumptions behind the positivist methodology and how this methodology has reinforced this functionalist orientation and the tendency to ignore the continuity, the ongoing history of organizational life. We will discuss the historical nature of social institutions, how historical development is at the very heart of social instutions. We would suggest that perhaps historical theorists and the methods of historical inquiry are helpful in *understanding* organizational life as opposed to the functionalist effort to *explain* organizational structures.

The primary thesis of this paper is that there is a need to study organizations as evolving, transforming social creations, to study the *human cosmogony* of organizations. *"Cosmogony"* suggests "the creation of the world." By human cosmogony of organizations, we mean the study of how the present evolved from day-to-day choices, conjectures, accidents (not some predetermined force or enduring pattern that establishes regularity and upholds order). We need to learn from historians to approach our subjects more as artists than, perhaps, as scientists. Once we begin to "de-reify" our perception of organizations, to see social arrangements as choices and habits that evolve from previous choices (rather than explaining the function of the habits themselves), we can heighten our own awareness as potential creators. Once we see social arrangements, not solely as rational, goal-seeking structures, but as evolving and malleable, we can become empowered to create bolder forms of organizing.

THE LOGICAL, POSITIVIST APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONS

We would like to trace for a moment the basic assumptions that underlie the structural-functionalist paradigm that has guided so much of our understanding of organizational life. St. Simon (1964) and Comte (1953), the founding fathers of sociology, saw sociology as emulating the methods of the natural sciences. The task of the new discipline would be to explain

the relationship between the various parts of society as it evolves in progressive stages toward a new social order, the industrial society. Society and groups were seen as organizations that behave according to natural, external laws. Similarly, Spencer (1873) saw society as a self-regulating organization that will evolve into a more complex and integrated social system. Durkheim (1938) was less concerned about the progress of society and paid more attention to analyzing social order and the dangers of anomie and disorder that threaten society. For Durkheim, the past was not seen as stages culminating in the present, unlike the positivists for whom the past was seen as a step-by-step temporal process of evolution. Durkheim's analysis of social order played a strong influence in the development of the functionalist paradigm that would find its culmination in the work of Talcott Parsons.

Parsons (1949) articulated his functionalist theories in the turbulent 1930's, that resonated with America's readiness to see society in terms of firm, clearly-defined structures (Gouldner, 1970). Parsons' theory of society as a self-maintaining, homeostatic system with a variety of mechanisms that contribute to internal stability epitomizes the structural-functionalist paradigm. The metaphysical assumption that underlies the conceptual scheme is that the social world is one whole and that there are a multiplicity of differentiated structures that simultaneously contribute to its wholeness. While this scheme offers the advantage of conceiving a a complex social world in its wholeness, it engenders a detached perspective of social life and a strong preference for the present order, an investment in the functional structures that maintain the present order. In this fervor for studying "structures," the everyday, ordinary temporal life of concrete human beings fumbling through relationships in social groupings, gets overlooked. As Gouldner (1970) wrote, the functionalist's quest for order takes on the character of an ideology.

Much of organizational theory is rooted in the organism metaphor following the structural-functionalist paradigm (Morgan, 1986). Organizations are viewed as goal-setting, purposeful entities that seek to maintain equilibrium by adapting to the environment. A short review of a few representative theorists helps to expand this point. Selznick (1957) looks at goal-directed formal action and informal activity that aid the organization's internal adaptive process in relation to this environment. March and Simon (1958) saw organizations as rational constructs built around limited human rationality seeking equilibrium and maintenance. Katz and Kahn (1966) viewed organizations as open systems with people, technology, and resources as inputs to a purposively rational process geared to maintain homeostasis and offset entropy. Reminiscent of Parsons' "functional imperatives," they saw social analysis as geared toward identifying how the subsystems and transactions with the environment serve to maintain the system. Thompson (1967) discussed how organizations are open systems that seek to offset threat and un-

certainty by acting as if they were closed systems, exhibiting a "technical rationality" that seeks to protect the technical core by "buffering," "forecasting," and "leveling."

A great deal of effort in research in organizational life has addressed itself to testing these theories. True to the structural-functionalist paradigm, the research has been predominantly logical-positivist, a point we would like to return to. A glance at a few important studies will give a flavor of the trend. Woodward's (1965) classic study which opened the avenues for empirical, quantitative measurement of organizational structures (categories were created for organization technology), found that organizational structure is contingent upon the organization's technical production system. Lawrence and Lorsch (1967) further advanced "contingency theory" when they found that organizational structures are more differentiated or integrated, depending on how stable environmental demands were.

Because of the emphasis to explain current social order, equilibrium, and the mechanisms of maintenance, Burrel and Morgan (1979) refer to this paradigm as "the sociology of regulation." The emphasis on understanding the interdependent nature of an integrated social system has led theorists and researchers to attempt to identify and measure organizational structures through logical-positivist methods. *These efforts have generated a misleading picture of the ongoing nature of organizational life.* Burrel and Morgan (1979) conclude: "In an extreme though pervasive form, much of contemporary structural functionalism manifests itself in a host of empirical snapshots of reified social structures" (pp. 53-54). This metatheoretical orientation of logical-positivism needs to be addressed. To the extent that organizations are purposeful, goal-seeking entities, the structural-functionalist orientation has been helpful in our understanding of organizations. The paradigm has provided a useful metaphor, a way to get our hands around an elusive phenomenon.

However, our romance with finding transhistorical principles and enduring patterns of behavior have blocked us from realizing the primary goal of science: making human *action* and *interaction* intelligible and understandable. In our efforts to *explain why,* we have been limited in *understanding how.* In a search for general patterns and structures, we have lost sight of the world of contingencies, choices, and dilemmas that do not fall into structural patterns. Human beings are simply not reducible to static properties. Human events are meaningful because of the possibility inherent in choiceful action, not because of inevitability.

The empirical methodologies that have generated a picture of purposive, goal-seeking organizations have operated under limited assumptions about human nature and the nature of inquiry itself. This empirical orienta-

tion assumes that science should identify recurring, systematic patterns, that prediction and capacity to control destiny are among the chief aims, that the task is to explain permanence among flux, and to do so by identifying transhistorical, valid principles, that the stable, fixed, and unmalleable patterns in human affairs should be discovered and affirmed.

Organizations are nothing if they are not the result of human choice. However, it is questionable to what degree human intention and human action can be captured, let alone measured, by empirical constructs (Gergen, 1982). Human events and choices, such as decisions regarding how to organize, have meaning because of the possibility inherent in the choices, the variety of options and interpretations available, and not because of the dictates of necessity of some enduring pattern or structure. Searching for transhistorical, generalizable patterns that order and maintain a social arrangement ignores the human capacity to direct and re-direct destiny and so truncates our sense of choices available in creating newer, perhaps bolder, forms of organizing. The more we attempt to delude ourselves into thinking that organizations are made of enduring structures that purposively further a large order, the more we further a sense that men and women act solely according to general laws and patterns. Such knowledge building may be creating a sense of choicelessness, a learned helplessness in future organizing decisions. When it becomes expected or appropriate to follow a common pattern in the service of a larger order, the door begins to close on infinite potentialities. Our inquiry needs to appreciate that it is also in human nature to avoid becoming static and predictable. Humans have a unique gift, the potential for what Gergen (1982) called "the autonomous envisioning of alternatives." Humans have the ability to reconceptualize, continuously re-frame and do not have to accept the apparently "given" as immutable. Unger (1987) summarizes this point quite well:

> The aim is not to show that we are free in any ultimate sense and somehow unconstrained by causal influences upon our conduct. It is to *break loose from a style* of social understanding that allows us to explain ourselves and our societies only to the extent we imagine ourselves as helpless puppets of the social worlds we built and inhabit or of the lawlike forces that have supposedly brought these worlds into being. History really is surprising; it does not just seem that way (p. 5).

Hazelrigg (1989) warns that if we succumb to the temptation to search for enduring patterns, we invite passivity and inactivity:

> If a "found world" is nothing more than a "made world" traveling under disguise, if the [social organizational world is made and imagined] from beginning to end, then to continue "telling our stories" in the traditional language of "found world" is to reproduce passivity in regard to responsibility for the world. Indeed, it is to reproduce abdication of that responsibility. Stories so told, practices so enacted, are stories/practices of a "world" the most elemental basis of which (e.g., "unchanging forces

of nature") are placed outside the domain of human responsibility because they are placed outside the domain of human will. That is an enormously dangerous consequence of any retention of the "found world" language of storytelling (p. 165).

THE HISTORICAL NATURE OF SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS

Inquiry into organizations, if it appreciates *cosmogony,* can serve to cleanse our perceptions and de-reify our basic assumptions, liberating us to act in a world that appears more malleable. Therefore, this is a call for social scientists to study organizations as evolving, transforming, social constructions, malleable to human choice. Understanding the human cosmogony of organizations involves understanding the creative birthing of different social arrangements: the irrational, accidental, conjectural moments as well as rational and purposive actions that give birth to various organizational arrangements. Last, understanding human cosmogony is an attempt to frame the future from learnings of the past so the *present can be understood.* In this sense, we are advocating a "history of the present." Historical inquiry can act to direct our efforts not toward explaining how something functions, but understanding how and under what conditions something was created, the choices considered and not taken, as well as the paths chosen.

In order to understand why an explorative history would be beneficial for members of a social institution, we would like to look at a few social theorists who concern themselves with investigating the process by which social arrangements and contracts become institutionalized, harden over time, and begin to take on the appearance of "facticity" (by "facticity" we mean the process by which social reality becomes reified and takes on the character of a given, pre-determined, and unalterable structure). It is useful to revisit in more detail how this false consciousness is built into the very process of institutionalization. First, we would like to look at this process from the perspective of the individual subject and then to look at it from the perspective of the larger social order.

The dilemma we wish to address has been most acutely articulated by Schutz (1967) and Berger and Luckman (1967). Simply put, the individual often encounters a world of pre-established meanings and thus, interprets this as a closed, pre-determined, and impermeably objective reality to which she must adapt. Most forget that the social world is a manifestation of human intention and expression.

Following Berger and Luckman (1967), the human relationship to the world is characterized by "world openness" (p. 47). For non-human animals, many biological and organic developments that occur *inside* the womb, continue to develop for human animals outside the womb after birth. As the human enters the world, it appears to her as already objectivated, providing

stability and direction for her development and completion as a human product. It is a world that appears so real and so present that it is taken for granted as such and becomes the world of everyday life, "the world of paramount reality." As she experiences her existence in a spatial and temporal world that society has standardized for her, she suspends her doubt about her existence and allows it to orient her in everyday life (Schutz, 1967). Thus, the process by which "paramount reality" is actually created is easily misperceived.

Out of the world of everyday life that I share with others, the most real and undeniable experience is the "face-to-face interaction" (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Schutz, 1967) in which the other's presence is concretely available to me. Here I experience the other's subjectivity directly as she simultaneously experiences mine. Because the other is ongoingly available to me, she does not so easily fit into anonymous patterns I may have formed. When I do not encounter the other face to face, he is less immediately real to me and his remoteness makes it easier for me to think of him in "anonyous, typificatory patterns." His presence is more remote and his expressions are less likely to break through my typifications of him. Our experiences, in fact, consist of a continuum of interactions, ranging from intense to anonymous abstractions, depending on the degree of closeness or remoteness. Hence, my relationship to my predecessors, those from the past who are no longer available to me, can become an empty projection.

The question arises as to how meaning and purposes become sustained in larger social units. Our subjective experiences do not have to remain locked within our inner consciousness, but can become *objectified through language.* By naming our experiences, they become available for others to understand. Language becomes capable of "carrying" accumulative meaning and experience that transcend the actual moments' naming. Meaningful, purposeful human activity lends itself to repetition and habitualization. One of the benefits of routines is that humans can get by with a minimum of decision making. Institutions are constructs of habitual action that become typifications. In order to adequately understand any institution, *we must understand its history,* how reciprocity has become transformed over time:

> All human activity is subject to habituation. Any action that is repeated frequently becomes cast into a pattern, which can be reproduced with an economy of effort and which, *ipso facto,* is apprehended by its performer as that pattern. Habitualized actions, of course, retain their meaningful character for the individual although the meanings involved become embedded as routines in his general stock of knowledge, taken for granted by him and at hand for his projects into the future. Habitualization carries with it the important psychological gain that choices are narrowed. . . . These processes of habitualization precede any institutionalization. . . . The question then becomes how do institutions arise? Institutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. . . . Reciprocal typifi-

cations of actions are built up in the course of a shared history. They cannot be created instantaneously. Institutions always have a history, of which they are the products (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 54).

The effect of history and habitualization became even more evident when a new generation enters the scene, for then the process of institutionalization takes on a new character of objectivity. The *process of transmission* of activity to a new party who has not experienced its meaning first hand, strengthens the sense of reality for all the participants. A "real" social world is only possible when a new generation appears. When a new person enters my social world, it appears actual to me and to the new arrival, and my original subjective manifestations are now discussed as facts not of my own making. Hence, the institutional world and its history are experienced as an objective reality.

Because the original creators' intentions were objectified for others to share and have been transmitted to more distant others through time, they become only partially available for some who have not had the original experience or any contact with the originators. The predecessors who originated the social interaction that has become habituated, faced dilemmas, made choices, and lived in a world of contingency. Yet, new arrivals experience these habits as undeniable facts. The original creators can reconstruct the circumstances and meaning of the social world they act in, but recollection does not interpret the present world for the second or third generations. The originators' powerful, meaning-laden world becomes translated into simple, easily-memorized recipe knowledge, rules, and procedures that I now face as coercive. Hence, my relationship to the founders of the institution to which I now belong may be an empty projection. Still, it is one that orders my experience.

When institutions experience a history, false consciousness in the form of reification may emerge. Reification occurs when the individual does not see her authorship of the world, but sees it as an objective "thing," unmalleable and impermeable. Reification occurs when a gesture is isolated and given a meaning separate from its sources (Berger & Pullberg, 1965). This is a reversal of the actual meaning-bestowal process: "No longer is the gesture an expression of the person, but the person is defined as the embodiment of an abstract quality of which the gesture is a symbol" (Berger & Pullberg, 1965, p. 205). Thus, as social constructions go through repetition and habitualization, the social world takes on the appearance of non-human facticity. Roles are seen as the embodiments of abstractions and theories are built to further harden the abstractions and to explain and legitimize. Reification occurs, then, as the individual forgets that the world is a human production.

The objectivation of the social world means that it confronts man as something outside himself. The decisive question is whether he still retains the awareness that, however objectivated, the social world was made by men, and therefore, can be remade by them (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 89).

Through social action, men and women together produce the world. Because the social world is a manifestation of human subjectivity, by and of itself, it has no meaning other than that bestowed on it by humans. Hence, society is incomplete, forever in the process of becoming, of being created.

> Social structure is a part of the objectivated, the produced world. Social structuration is part of the human enterprise of totalization. It follows that social structure is nothing but the result of human enterprise. It has no reality except a human one (Berger & Luckman, 1967, p. 95).

Ironically, however, man does not experience social reality as open and pliable; he often experiences the world as closed an pre-determined, something to which he must adapt. At some level, man forgets that the social world is a human production; it appears impenetrable to human intentionality. Hence, a paradox: man produces a world which denies him as producer. To the extent that man perceives the world as distant and that it attains the character of objectivity, man is reifying the world, dehumanizing the world. The result is false consciousness; the actual production of the world is misunderstood.

HISTORICAL MODE OF INQUIRY: THE EFFORT TO UNDERSTAND HUMAN ACTION

This paper is a challenge to knowledge creation from both the perspective of actors within organizations and the social scientists who study them. A primary thesis of this paper is that an awareness of history can be de-reifying for the actors engaged as well as for students of organizations. Since collective human action achieves habituation and institutionalization over time (or to put it another way, human actions require a history before they achieve the appearance of facticity), parhaps an awareness of history can be restorative. Historical awareness allows members to perceive social institutions as human creations and thus amenable to human choice in the present. With this in mind, we would like to put forth a few principles of human cosmogony.

Social Life is Historically Constituted

We confront the world with forms of language and cultural preconceptions already in place, and it is these forms that determine how we understand the world. Forms of reasoning, "legitimate" conversation topics and behavior, categories and distinctions of thought, tacit premises that inform decisions, are historically and culturally constituted forms of shared agreements about what exists and how one should relate. These parterns of language and discourse are capable of carrying accumulative meanings that are

transmitted and inherited. In this sense, *history is alive in the present* (which is not to say that history determines the present).

What distinguishes history as a field is its interest in the role of time in human affairs. Time is relevant only because the human being is not fixed at birth but is endowed with consciousness and the capacity for purposeful action. In encountering others, the person acquires an identity and definition through choices and deeds so that what a person is at any moment is not the result of some inexorable unfolding of a predetermined pattern, but is a totality of the person's past experiences. Every human expression of activity "bears the stamp of historicity" (Dilthey, 1959), is a product of the past, and carries the past within it. Hence, every individual is defined not only by his or her own past, but also by the past that persists in the ideas and institutions that shape his or her thoughts and actions. History has a deep and penetrating influence on present actions. As Dilthey writes, "History is not something separated from life or divided from the present by distance in time" (Dilthey, 1959).

The journalist, Theodore White, in a remarkable book, *In Search of History* (1978), acknowledges the powerful role of the cultural-historical ideational context in shaping people's lives. He reports his discovery that:

> You could separate people out into the large and the small. . . by whether their identities came from their own ideas or from the ideas of others. Most ordinary people lived their lives in boxes, as bees did in cells. It did not matter how the boxes were labeled: President, Vice President, Executive Vice President, Chairman of the Board, Chief Executive Officer, shop steward, union member, school teacher, policeman, "butcher, baker, beggerman, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian Chief," the box shaped their identity. But the box was an idea. Sir Robert Peel had put London policemen on patrol 150 years ago and the "bobbies" in London or the "cops" in New York now lived in a box invented by Sir Robert Peel. The Sterling Professor at Yale and all the great physicists at the Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge, England, alike, lived in a box, labeled by someone else's idea. When a pilot awoke in the morning he would go to the airstrip feeling that he was the hottest pilot in the whole air force— but he was only a creature of Billy Mitchell's idea—and even if he was the bravest astronaut in outer space, he was still a descendant in identity from Robert Hutchings Goddard's idea of rocketry.
> All ordinary people below the eye level of public recognition were either captives or descendants of ideas. When they went out to work in the morning, they knew what they were supposed to do in the office, in the store, at the bench, on the line. They did their jobs competently, or happily, or grimly. Sometimes they hated the man above or below them; more normally the atraction of the job, whether in a coal mine or in a newspaper city room was not so much the money as the comradeship. Yet what a man did was what he was, and what you did, whether you knew it or not, fell to you from other men's ideas (White, 1978, pp. 17-18).

Hermeneutic philosophers understood the influence of the past in shaping present experience. It is the forestructure of understanding, the anticipating consciousness that grasps forward out of a network of possibilities, that makes knowledge possible (Heidegger, 1962). The human being exists in an implicit horizon imbued with purpose and potential that cannot be under-

stood by isolating objects within this field of contextual experience. It is this horizon, this projection of possibilities that is the condition for anything being known at all. Once we recognize this horizon, we can begin to see that *knowledge is dialogical*. All understanding involves a projection of possibilities as subject and object to co-participate in a fusion of horizons. This is the sense in which the process of understanding is similar to a person encountering a work of art (Gadamer, 1975). The subject brings his or her biases to an experience and the art "speaks up" and stimulates something in the perceiver as they meet each other. In this sense, all understanding is *historical and prejudicial*. Listeners' biases, accumulated from past experiences, do not get in the way of understanding but *bring forth meaning*. Anticipating, expecting, and projecting make knowledge possible as an object "pulls" something in the subject who brings an expectation of coherence. Thus, we can begin to place the activity of understanding and knowledge acquisition in the "space between" actor and object.

Human Cosmogony Is a History of the Present Which Aims to Reconstruct the Life Space Within Which Past Actors Lived

What, then, is historical understanding and thinking? It is understanding that takes account of the historicity of human life, an effort to apprehend each phenomenon as it existed at a particular moment whithin a unique cultural context. It is this tacit network of potential meanings within the sociocultural horizon that the historian seeks to make explicit. The historian seeks to discover how past actors experienced and interpreted the world of everydayness. This is the spirit behind the dictum of the nineteenth century philosopher of history, Wilhelm Dilthey (1959), who proposed that the historian should seek to understand not only the choices and deeds enacted by past actors, but also the possibilities considered and the choices *not* made:

> However we may took at them, deeds express only a part of our being. Possibilities that lie within us are destroyed by the deed; action is detached from the background of the life structure (Dilthey, 1959, p. 220).

The interpretive act of understanding past actors and discovering the "background of the life structures" requires awareness of the contingencies and possibilities inherent in all human action if it is to approximate *life as it was lived in its complexity*. And this complexity involves the social-cultural horizon that delimits the range of meaning, anticipation, and expectations of past actors. Human cosmogony is a reconstruction of the emergence of what was deemed knowable and the conditions of the possibility of action. Therefore, in approaching the continuity that always accompanies historical change, the historian explores the connections between the phenomena

and the panorama of contingencies not lived; he looks for what preceded the phenomena; he examines the particular process of change through time that produced the phenomena; he attempts to grasp each phenomenon as fully, concretely, and profoundly as possible. Also, in order to understand past actors, we must understand *their* version of history and *their* versions of the future.

Human Cosmogony Is a Narrative Reconstruction of Particular Description

The temptation, of course, is to look for causes of past events and actions. Because history is so complex, philosophers have long tried to discover some principle that might explain why the past had to happen the way it did and put forth a prediction for the future. These deterministic theorists concentrate on the course of history and attempt to demonstrate a basic purpose or meaning that reveals an overall plan or pattern. The theories of St. Augustine, Hegel, Marx, and, more recently, Toynbee, fall into this tendency. The historian, Benedetto Croce (1959), warns us not to succumb to this temptation to engage in historical determinism, to treat human needs according to some abstract classification. A methodology that searches for these causes "slays the living act thought by thought" (p. 231). As comforting as it is for the human mind to search for and discover causality, historical inquiry should patiently reconstruct by conjecture, without implying any necessary or uniform co-variation. Also, there is a tendency to see the past as a reflection of the present. This is the *teleological fallacy,* the belief that events occurred in the past simply for the purpose of creating the present.

Historical inquiry distinguishes itself from the social sciences in just this: it seeks to understand and explain by particular description rather than by general law. It considers concrete human activity in the setting of particular times and sequences of events. Whereas historical determinism casts determining forces as abstract, monolithic, and external to human activity, human cosmogony emphasizes contingencies, choices, and freedom inherent in human nature. It claims that while the past projects a strong influence on the present, *no* event, trend, or deed is inevitable. Humans are the only animals capable of fresh, new action at any given moment (Arendt, 1958).

In Order for History to Be Valid as Human Cosmogony, the Researcher Must Be Fully Engaged with the Past

Most theories of historical knowledge have aimed at distinguishing the relationship between history and science. It was the historical philosophers, particularly W. Dilthey, who first began to explicitly attack the positivist the-

ory of knowledge. Contrary to the logical-positivist epistemology which advocates that the researcher remain detached from the object of study in order to eliminate bias in his search for neutral facts that lie out there to be discovered, understanding human action through historical inquiry *requires* that the researcher empathize and identify with past actors if the history is to have any validity. This is the sense in which Croce (1959) distinguishes between history and chronicle. Chronicle consist of the records of events and deeds, while history is invested with the researcher's life: "The deed of which the history is told must vibrate within the historian" (Croce, 1959, p. 227). Similarly, Collingwood (1959) contends that the mere compilation of the testimonies of authorities and witnesses is "scissors-and-paste history" that treats documents with "respectful attentiveness." Such testimonies must be approached with critical, torturous questioning as the historian injects herself into the particularities of the past. The historian brings the past to life in the present as a dynamic, living experience, as a creative thought-force in the here-and-now that re-stimulates the events of his own life: This constitutes the historian's test of validity:

> When the development of the culture of my historical moment presents to me. . .the problem of Greek civilization or of Platonic philosophy or of a particular mode of Attic manners, that problem is related to my being in the same way as the history of a bit of business in which I am engaged, or of a love affair in which I am indulging, or of a danger that threatens me. I examine it with the same anxiety and am troubled with the same sense of unhappiness. . . . Hellenic life is on that occasion present in me (Croce, 1970, p. 228).

This presents a special challenge to the researcher. In order for the historian to present a sense of the social-historical context in which past actors were embedded, he, himself, must be *open to being stirred* by the actions and thoughts of others. He must adopt a stance of wonderment and curious anticipation: "Never, in fact, does an interpreter get near to what the text says unless he lives in the *aura* of the meaning he is inquiring after" (Ricouer, 1969, p. 351).

Ordinarily, when we seek to understand an event, we do so in reverse of its actual occurrence. We apprehend the effect and reason back to the motive or stimulus. Empathic identification involves imaginatively recreating others' experience *in the order in whcih the process occurred.*

> . . .complete empathy is dependent on the possibility of the understanding following the order of events themselves, on its advancing forward as the course of life itself advances. So is the process of self-projection expanded. To relive is to recreate in the same direction as the original events (Dilthey, 1959).

Collingwood (1959) in his classic, *The Idea of History,* revived the philosophy of history when he advocated his *theory of re-enactment.* The true objective of historical understanding is to understand the actions of others

by re-creating or re-enacting their deeds in our own minds. Thus, the biased subject is not to be eliminated in order to produce "objectivity." The values and experiences of the knowing subject are not obstacles to be overcome, but are indispensable tools for studying the past. The historian must engage a full range of cognitive, emotional, passionate experiences in order to understand the past. In this sense, the gesture of historical knowing is a dialogue between past and present. Greenblatt (1980) speaks of this struggle to re-enact and the inevitable projection of one's own life in one's material. He speaks of:

> ...the impossibility of fully reconstructing and reentering the culture of the 16th century, of leaving behind one's own situation: It is everywhere evident in this book that the question I ask of my material and, indeed, the very nature of this material are shaped by the questions I ask of myself. I do not shrink from these impurities—they are the price and perhaps the virtue of this approach—but I have tried to compensate for the indeterminacy and incompleteness they generate by constantly returning to particular lives and particular situations (pp. 5-6).

Hence, historical research is inevitably an interpretive enterprise, a piecing together of contextual "facts" selected by the historian to present a narrative idea or argument. As a work of interpretation, the historian seeks to capture a holistic sense of the life-world of participants and in so doing, imaginatively participates in this re-creation. To cite an example, in her historical reconstruction of the formation of a public agency, Simmons (1985) found herself re-living intergroup conflicts, blaming and taking sides with one group or another. Her challenge was to reconstruct the order of events in order to understand how different stakeholders justified their feelings without succumbing to an impulse to judge one perspective to be correct. Notice how personally stimulated and invested she becomes in the culture. She finds it beneficial to:

> ...*order* empathic insights correctly in time, so that the development of emotional attachments and the progression of events feed into one another as the history actually unfolded. I found that the single most valuable method of historical research was to read through the data from the beginning after every datum had been painstakenly located and placed in proper order. It was only then that I could make sense of the inconsistencies, and only then that I could feel the first stirring of an idea, the coincidences of fragments of ideas about Dexter, the churning of political organizing in the community, the grim, grinding processes of the bureaucracy, the tragedies of conflicts in the making, the casualties of those caught in the explosions of system conflict, the painful cathexis of planners to an emergent dream, and the pain of being severed from that dream, leading inevitably to the recent past, when the Dexter *I* had lived during the past two years finally made sense. When I finished that chronological pass through history, I felt I had myself given birth to Dexter (1985, p. 289).

In this sense, the challenge to the historian is to continue to live in the world of past contingencies and to resist over-identifying with one group or version at the expense of others. Human cosmogony cannot reduce complexities by using a single interpretive point of view, but must stay close to the

particularities and retain alternative hypotheses of behavior for a longer time, entertain conjectures, and not push too quickly for resolution.

Henry Pirenne (1970) labels history "the subjective science." While it is bound by rigorous scientific method of establishing and analyzing acts, history is a creation of the imagination, a constructed narrative that relates events to one another that at the time were seemingly unrelated and disparate. The historical narrative is akin to the hpothesis, a conjectural reconstitution of the past. Any notion of one complete history is misleading because there are infinite number of ways to tell the story, to accent certain events or features, and de-emphasizing others.

Carl Becker (1970) takes this argument a step further. Historians cannot deal directly with past events because they are ephemeral and have disappeared. These vanished realities give way to pale images and reflections about past events. Contrary to our habit of thinking of history as part of the external world, facts of actual events, the fact exists only imaginatively: "In truth, the actual past is gone and the world, re-created imaginatively, is only present in our minds." Even documents and records of past events are only ink on paper, a product of what someone else had in mind about an event or ideas. The historical fact, then, is nowhere except in the mind of the historian.

> At all events the historical facts lying dead in the records can do nothing good or evil in the world. They become historical facts, capable of doing work, of *making a difference,* only when someone, you or I, *bring them alive in our minds* by means of pictures, images, or ideas of the actual occurrence (Becker, 1970, italics added).

Hence, it is the interaction of the historian's treatment of the event and the human capacity for re-enactment that brings the past to life and allows the facts to make a difference. It is critical if history is to be used as an organizational intervention, that history not be reconstructed in such a way as to rigidify beliefs about what it must be; the historian must help participants develop methods to study their own history which reveals the complexity of events rather than simply repeat their current views about them.

There are important implications of this contention. An infinite number of affirmations of a single event becomes feasible. Thus the emphasis is on which affirmations the historian chooses and how he relates them. It is the purpose he has in mind which leads him to choose some affirmations. The meaning is not in the events themselves, but in the interpretation given by the historians. We usually assume that the present is a product of the past. However, it is equally true that the past is a product of the present.

Organizational Data and Historical Diagnosis

The kind of historical inquiry we are proposing here poses some methodological challenges for the researcher. How does one achieve access

to the materials and data needed to reconstruct the story of an organization? Researchers tend to establish short-term relationships with organizations and often shape research questions to accommodate available data. Longitudinal studies are rare.

Ideally, a researcher would have access to events and participants in *real* time, as action unfolds. Kimberly and Miles (1980) studied the actors and events surrounding the birth of an innovative medical school for a 4-year period in an attempt to understand what kind of forces shape the process of this organizational creation. They describe how the process of institutionalization modifies and limits the original innovative spirit. They describe the atmosphere of experimentation, the role of faculty, the cultural context surrounding the experiment, the role of the entrepreneurial Dean. They describe the process by which the medical school becomes formalized, integrated with the larger university, and begins to modify the innovative spirit. Barrett (1990) acted as a participant-observer in his study of a management group over a 5-year period as managers evolved from a traditional, bureaucratic mode of organizing to the creation of egalitarian and participatory forms of organizing.

When doing retrospective diagnoses, the analysis of documents and retrospective interviews are called for. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. Archival papers, memos, and official planning documents are often rich and reliable, especially for establishing the order of events, but can seen unreliable, since they are often created to present favorable public presentations. Also, human memories bend themselves to distortions in cognitive recall and reporting of events. It is not only a question here of whether informants are telling "the truth" about events in the distant past, but the challenge to the researcher becomes discovering the informant's investment in *the meaning* of events. Contradictory evidence will emerge, but the researcher needs to make sense of these anomalies in an effort to understand the life background from which distortions emanate. Subjective cognitive representations already carry a bias, but when time intervenes, especially of significant duration, these cognitive representations are likely to become distorted and re-interpreted. As the hermeneutic philosophers demonstrated, however, all knowledge involves prejudice and bias. Therefore, these "distortions" need not be eliminated as "contamination" of retrieved experience. The emphasis becomes making sense of the informant's effort to create an interpretive meaning of events.

Simmons (1985) reconstructed the planning process and formation of "Dexter," a public service agency 15 years after the actual events. The use of second order data, retrospective interviews and documents, gradually revealed a cogent narrative of the agency's creation. She faced the challenges we are describing here but she was able to reconstruct a specific cultural model

to understand gestures of distortion and occlusion as she sorted out what was deemed "true" in what context, at what time, for each person. What at first seemed like obstacles, become clues to her narrative. An important representative (A.L), who was clearly present at a significant meeting between important stakeholders had no memory of other group members. She reports of her struggle of making sense of this lapse:

> I knew, from minutes of meetings, that A.L. had sat through many meetings with representatives of the criminal justice system, people whom he knew well; yet he had "forgotten" them. Triangulating A.L.'s self-report against archival evidence, I was able to form hypotheses about the reasons for this peculiar distortion. Perhaps the criminal justice system had been shut out of the real action; perhaps the real planning took place behind the scenes, so that the committee meetings were only a charade of participation; perhaps A.L. had been involved in conflictual interactions with the representatives of the criminal justice sytem, so that he wished to "forget" that they were present. These hypotheses, formed out of an analysis of distortion in self-reports, led me to seek evidence about the relationship between A.L. and the criminal justice system and about behind-the-scenes planning activities. Some hypotheses turned out to be supported, others contradicted. None would ever have been formed had I not taken "forgetting" as potential data (Simmons, 1985, p. 293).

Contradictory evidence, forgotten data, distorted interpretations, are all clues to the panorama of lived contingencies in which actors constructed a horizon of understanding.

Pettigrew (1985) combined real-time data, retrospective interviews, and the analysis of documents in his study of the history of ICL. He abandons the linear view of the strategy-formation process and presents an important picture of the evolving incremental character of strategic change. He describes what kind of managerial processes encouraged continuity and change, how and when a need for change was sensed, how planning and action were justified, and what led to the implementation and stabilization of change.

A PROPOSAL FOR HISTORICAL INQUIRY INTO THE SOCIAL ORDER OF ORGANIZATIONS

We believe that there is a need for a historical inquiry, not for the sake of the past, but for what historical understanding can do in the present. The basic assumption behind historical inquiry can be liberating because the story of human behavior through time assumes that humans are capable of change and choiceful creation. The human actor has a unique ability to allow the past to come to life within him in the present. This is so central that "man has no nature, what he has is history" (Ortega y Gosset, 1970). Historical understanding assumes contingency in human affairs, in the possibility of alternatives. If there are no alternatives in human action, then history can be dispensed with, and laws can be cited to explain the outcomes of events and the evolution of social forces:

> History is concerned with the contingent. Its criteria are qualitative. It must take account not only of what happened, but how it happened and need not have happened (Leff, 1969, p. 10).

The truth that this kind of history carries is the truth that social reality is a human construction, that awareness of this truth can liberate humans to transform their world, question imposed constraints, and empower them to recreate, to re-own, to "name" their own world.

Perhaps because of the way we came into the world, we pre-consciously accept social arrangements as given, and something we adapt to. We are born into a family that existed before we were born; patterns, roles, habits, mores, customs, and values are already established when we arrive. We learn to adjust to these pre-established structures and perhaps an unintended consequence of this learning is that we continue to adapt to boundaries and accept the givenness of existing social structures.

Each year the Jewish culture celebrates the Seder passover. Jews gather together to re-enact the story of their race, to experience the suffering that their forefathers endured. The Torah explicitly calls on parents to teach new generations about the unique race they have been born into, specifically to teach them about the Exodus, the story of how the Jews escaped from Egyptian enslavement and spiritual degradation. The Seder is an annual re-enactment that renews old meanings, brings the past into the present to face Jews today, to challenge them to understand the pains and joys of their ancestors, to relive the back-lashings of their enslaved ancestors, to guarantee that young Jews understand *what it means to be a Jew now:*

> *Every Jew should regard himself as though he* were freed from Egyptian slavery, to begin the march from the field of his bondage toward Sinai, where Israel would receive the gift of the Ten Commandments. Let everyone think, delve, innovate, find ways to relate the adventure of the old to the challenges of today (*The Hagadah*).

The Seder is a special night of inquiry, where Jews are encouraged to be inquisitive about their past, to re-own it, so that they can experience a fuller meaning in the present, a challenge to make something of their lives now. We propose that organizations need a "special night of inquiry," a time when members take account of their place in the present and begin to explore the past, the origin of the social order, an inquiry that explores details and dilemmas of the past only to return to the present with a richer, fuller understanding.

We would like to cite another example of historical inquiry that gives new meaning to the present. It is a more personal and solitary exploration of the Irish poet, Seamus Heaney. Here the poet begins with the hard, cold reality of his existence in the present. He begins a departure from the burden of this existential dilemma into the past, making connections with his ancestors, looking at the meaning they made out of their lives, the burdens and

particular dilemmas they faced. When he returns to himself in the present, it is with a new liberating, purposeful sense of himself, a richer understanding of his place in the moment and the future.

Digging

Between my gier and my thumb
The squat pen rests; snug as a gun.

Under my window, a clean rasping sound
When the spade sinks into gravelly ground:
My father, digging. I look down.

Till his straining rump among the flowerbeds
Bends low, comes up twenty years away
Stooping in rhythm through potato drills
Where he was digging.

The coarse boot nestled on the lug, the shaft
Against the inside knee was levered firmly.
He rooted out tall tops, buried the bright edge deep
To scatter new potatoes that we picked
Loving their cool hardness in our hands.

By God the old man could handle a spade,
Just like his old man.

My grandfather cut more turf in a day
Than any other man on Toner's bog.
Once I carried him milk in a bottle
Corked sloppily with paper. He straightened up
To drink it, then fell to right away
Nicking and slicing neatly, heaving sods
over his shoulder, going down and down
For the good turf. Digging.

The cold smell of potato mould, the sequelch and slap
Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge
Through living roots awaken in my head.
But I've no spade to follow men like them.

Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.

   In the same way, historical inquiry can be a liberating activity in organizational life, liberating both because of a new understanding of the present and potential for a richer future. Social structures inevitably lose meaning over time and diminish into habit. As new members enter the organization, in adjusting to pre-established social arrangements, they internalize roles and prescriptions while the original intentions and meanings that once drove them are unavailable. Hence, an organizational history that tells the story of how social structures were created can be de-reifying, restorative, and empowering for present organizational members. World religions

and cultures throughout history are founded on cosmogonies, a story of how god or gods created the world, how they created form and matter from primordial energy, how and why man and woman were created, and what his/her proper place is in relation to the rest of creation. These myths organize perceptions of the world, they reveal intentions of the gods and give meaning to human life on earth. These creation myths seek to re-enact and renew meaning in the present.

We propose that human cosmogony in organizational life is needed, a story of how and why structures were created *by man and by woman,* a story of how these objectivated social structures that we experience as given were once primordial energy and emerged as manifestations of human intentionality. We need this awareness so that we can have a richer awareness of the present.

Perhaps exploring organizational history as a human creation is threatening. Erik Miller (1986) writes that as organizational members, we have a basic need to depend on the existing power structure to provide us with direction and orientation. To explore the past the way that it is proposed here is to perceive fallibility where we have desired to see stable omnipotence. Perhaps that kind of awareness is frightening. Isiaha Berlin (1957) saw a similar fear when he took issue with those who perceive history as deterministic, the result of unfolding vast impersonal forces. If history is due to the operation of these spiritual or material forces, then free choice, free will, and human responsibility are dispensed with. One must look to larger forces for explanations of human action. Berlin admits that it is positive learning to realize there are many forces acting on us and which limit our choices, but if man accepts the inexorable movement of history, he sees history as larger and wiser than he; the weight of responsibility is attributed to these forces rather than to human action. Perhaps we desire to see history as an unfathomable, purposeful, fixed order because to do otherwise would be to face our own *freedom and responsibility.*

Hazelrigg (1989) writes that the premise of much scientific inquiry undetermines our capacity to construct the world. The vocabulary of such deterministic inquiry puts the construction of society and organizations beyond the power of human intention:

> Such is our quest for assurance of safety that we construct an assuring agent, clothe it in dim mists of forgotten Origin, and name it this or that intelligence to be accorded our everlasting homage. The name may be Providence, Divine Wisdom, Nature's Laws, Natural Right, Reason in History, Historical Laws, Unmoved Mover—it is all the same. And it is the same when we ask the authority of a *theoros* to tell us the ready path to all that we wish the world to be but is not the ready path to our Utopia: asking the *theoros* to tell us that, just that, requires as our earnest the presumption that there are as yet "laws" that stand behind us, or can stand behind us, as a univeral intelligence—some sort of certification, scientific or otherwise, about an outward march of history—and to which we have only to put ourselves in harness for its direction, like ingredients in a recipe for cosmic stew (Hazelrigg, 1989, p. 69).

An historical history should be faithful to the concrete depicting key events and decisions that shaped the organization's identity. There must be a rigorous attempt to establish *contextual* "facts" to discover and analyze documents and records that disclose changing policies to identify the influence of important actors and shapers of policies. Yet, a history that does nothing more than this is a "chronicle" (Croce, 1959), "a scissors-and-paste history" (Collingwood, 1970), waiting to become living history. A history that relies on the events to tell the story relegates the past to abstraction and increases a sense of reification of both past and present social structures.

A history should attempt to "get inside" the events and the original actors' experiences. It must de-reify social reality by challenging the anonymous, empty projections members have of predecessors and founders and bring them in closer proximity to the present. The history should strive to recreate the experiences of past decision makers. In a sense, it should be a history of contingencies and dilemmas, a story of conjectures, of decisions made as well as possible paths *not* chosen, revealing that past decisions assumed to have been rational were quite accidental and arbitrary, generating unintended consequences. It should be a history that focuses on particularities and avoids interpreting events as instances of trends. A history that "flattens out" the particulars, the sometimes trivial and equivocal reality faced by past actors, encourages a false consciousness and further reifies impressions.

The organizational historian must take stock of his own position in the present, his own visions and values, because every history consists of moral decisions, an interpretive process that reveals as much about the historian as it does the actors and events he interpets. The historian is in the superior position of creating the narrative, of selecting and creating facts. The historian, then, must have a keen awareness of the present, of the dilemmas the organization faces *now* that are generating this particular inquiry into the past. The organizational historian and present organization members must acknowledge their hope, their visions, their fears and intentions because they are in this sense full participants in the history.

SUMMARY

The continuity of organizational life needs to become central if we are to truly understand the present and unleash choices for the future. We need to rediscover original intentions and choices of predecessors because *by nature,* social institutions begin to degenerate into "recipe knowledge" for its members. Roles are created merely for the function of maintaining institutions. To study only those roles is to study the outer shell of organizations. Over time, the original purposes of social structures and arrangements dimin-

ish and become replaced, and the goal of members becomes the self-preservation of the institution. It is often at *this* stage of organizational life that theorists and researchers enter the scene. What they see is not the full story.

Awareness of history, under certain conditions, can de-reify our perceptions of social life, enrich understanding of the present, and empower actors in the present to become more expansive envisioners rather than merely adapting to present social reality. It is important to learn from historians that intelligibleness of history is not due to the events themselves. History cannot be seen as an inexorable movement, even though such a view would be tempting given the progress in modern technological processes. There is no unfolding, discoverable order. While such a view seems harmonic and reassuring, it is in actuality disempowering because it fosters a sense of determinism and necessity rather than possibility and free choice.

We need to understand historical acts from the perspective of those who lived them, to "re-live" experiences empathically as one would enter the mind of a poet in order to understand a poem. In this way, we need to empathically attempt to make a chronicle of events become living history, to study the inside of action rather than the outside of events, to understand the contingencies, the choices not made, to look at concrete particularities, not general abstractions. Organizational inquiry should be more of an art than a science. Finally, in order to understand human action, we need to study the life of ideas, the act of thinking itself.

Such historical inquiry nurtures an awareness that is empowering because it enlarges our world. Historical understanding presupposes that through time, humans are capable of development and choiceful creations. Perhaps without an awareness of history, organizations will become *more* bureaucratic and less malleable as roles emerge whose only function is to maintain present structures and create behavioral prescriptions.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

FRANK J. BARRETT is a PhD Candidate in Organizational Behavior at Case Western Reserve University. He received his BA Degree in 1975 in government and internal relations and his MA Degree in 1977 in English from the University of Notre Dame. He is also an active jazz pianist. He has worked with the Cleveland Foundation, Cleveland Clinic, University Hospitals, General Electric, and municipal and county government agencies. His current research interests include the role of language, metaphor, and myth in group processes and the creative management of conflict.

SURESH SRIVASTVA has been Professor of Organizational Behavior in the Department of Organizational Behavior since 1970, serving as Chairman of that Department from 1970–1984. Before coming to CWRU he was a Senior Professor from 1962–1969 at the Indian Institute of Management in Calcutta and was Visiting Professor at the Alfred P. Sloan School of Management at MIT from 1966–1967. After receiving his PhD Degree in Social Psychology in 1960 from the University of Michigan and having taught at that University, Professor Srivastva joined the Department of Psychology and the Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of California at Los Angeles from 1960–1962 where he did teaching and research.