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Oral History and Organizational Research: Challenges of Building Knowledge about the Past

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Abstract

Oral history has been increasingly used in management research in recent years, bringing to the forefront the view of individuals about past organizational phenomena. However, this use has not yet fully explored the construction of knowledge about the past. Instead, it has focused on studying the present and, therefore, hardly distinguishes oral history from qualitative methods such as case studies and in-depth interviews. How then should we use oral history and its historiography that has made it quite distinctive in history? How should we use individuals' views to construct new knowledge of the past? This paper addresses these two questions, advocating for the use of oral history both as a theoretical-methodological approach and subfield of history, as well as firmly engaged with historical organizational studies. To that end, we review the trajectory of oral history, then we analyze 16 Brazilian papers on oral history, highlighting the distinctive characteristics of the approach, and, finally, we present research possibilities in historical organizational studies.

Keywords: oral history; historical perspective; historical turn; historical organizational studies; qualitative methods.

Introduction

Oral history has been increasingly used in management research in recent years, bringing to the forefront the view of individuals about past organizational phenomena. However, this use has not yet fully explored the construction of knowledge about the past. Instead, it has focused on studying the present and hardly distinguishes oral history from qualitative methods such as case studies and in-depth interviews. How should we use oral history and its historiography that has made it quite distinctive in history? How should we use individuals' views to construct new knowledge of the past? This paper addresses these two questions, advocating for the use of oral history both as a theoretical-methodological approach and subfield of history, and as firmly engaged with historical organizational studies.

The inclusion of history – its methods and problematics – in management research is relatively recent, dating back to what was later called the historic turn (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Clark & Rowlinson, 2004). The cross-fertilization with history gave birth to historical organizational studies (Decker, Hassard, & Rowlinson, 2020; Maclean, Harvey, & Clegg, 2016), which propose applying procedures concerning the nature, use, and interpretation of historical sources (Kipping, Wadhvani, & Bucheli, 2014; Lipartito, 2014), including their operationalization in organizational theory (Godfrey, Hassard, O'Connor, Rowlinson, & Ruef, 2016; Maclean et al., 2016; Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014).

However, it is noticeable that oral history has attracted little interest in this new subfield of organization studies. On the part of historical organizational studies, this lack of engagement with orality may derive from the archive fetish, visible in the preference of organizational scholars for written sources, such as corporate and public archives (Barros, 2016; Godfrey et al., 2016; Kipping et al., 2014; Lipartito, 2014; Rowlinson, 2004; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Decker et al., 2021). Since the institutionalization of history as an academic discipline in Europe in the mid-19th century, the historical source par excellence is the written document, such as archives, newspapers, books, or even material objects such as coins, clay utensils, and tools (Prost, 2012). Written documents represented a truthful expression of a historical event, overcoming the limitations of oral transmission as a source of the past, “the half-century or the century limit covered by historians who were eye and ear witnesses” (Le Goff, 2003, p. 9). For the traditional historical research, then, it was implied that the historian would not create his/her sources and that historical research would be “an activity that occurs in libraries and archives” (Tosh, 2011, p. 98).

The use of archives in historical research followed one of the rules of the historian profession, that of the retrospective view, which implied the researcher's distance from the object of study to ensure objectivity and neutrality (Ferreira, 2002). This distance is based on the idea of a rupture between past and present:

There was a belief that the historian's work could only truly begin when there were no longer living testimonies from the studied worlds. To interpret the traces of the past, these had to be archived. Therefore, professional historians should reject studies on the contemporary world as it would be impossible to guarantee the objectivity of studies for that period. (Delgado & Ferreira, 2013, p. 22)

As Fico (2012) adds, under this assumption “the historian present at the events, once the guarantor of a truthful narrative, became suspected of involvement, of bias” (p. 47). Thus, the assumption of objectivity restricted the possibility of studying the “recent past,” as Henry Rousso (2016) called it, leaving the study of this period to other social sciences and to journalism (Ferreira, 2002). As Delgado and Ferreira (2013, p. 22) argue, the historians’ detachment from the recent past ended up excluding oral testimonies and directing research to “historical processes whose outcome was already known.”

For Ferreira (2002), it was only from the 1980s on that oral history gained momentum in historical research. The academic context of that time encouraged qualitative research and studies about the individual’s experience, allowing for the growth of areas of knowledge such as cultural history, memory studies, and contemporary history. The acknowledgment that language and orality could also be documental sources expanded the range of possibilities for studies about the past. In this case, the researcher would almost always co-author the testimony collected. Historians nonetheless have only recently (and partially) accepted oral sources, and “even today, traditionalists in the historical profession remain skeptical and are not prepared to enter into a discussion about the real merits and weaknesses of oral research” (Tosh, 2011, p. 301).

Even with the skepticism of traditionalists, oral history ended up bringing a series of debates to historical research, especially on memory as both a source and object of historical research. How should we deal with the biases of the present and the failures, errors, omissions, and silences of memory? Oral history also highlighted the relationship between the individual and history, making individual experience and the subjectivity of the historical individual legitimate themes of historical research. These debates contributed in such a theoretical-methodological way that, for some, oral history’s status changed from a method to a discipline (Amado & Ferreira, 2006), and for others created the constitution of its own historiography (Dunaway, 2018).

Inside and outside the academic world, oral history emerged as a tool to rescue and empower marginalized communities and social groups (Ferreira, 2002). Mainly from the 1990s onwards, it has crossed the boundaries of history and expanded into other fields of knowledge, in the social sciences, in anthropology, in education, and other disciplines in the humanities. The main characteristic of its use among these fields would be, according to the Brazilian Association of Oral History (ABHO), “the carrying out of recorded interviews with people who have lived or witnessed events, circumstances, institutions, ways of life, or other aspects of contemporary history” (Apresentação, 1994).

Management research has also incorporated oral history, especially with the rise of qualitative biographical methods, which include biographical, autobiographical, life history, and oral history itself (Barros & Lopes, 2014; Sacramento, Figueiredo, & Teixeira, 2017). Some of these studies advocate its use in management for understanding entrepreneurial trajectories and organizational histories (Gomes & Santana, 2010), the everyday life and the voice of the ordinary man (Ichikawa & Santos, 2006), and reflexivity in the co-construction and social devolution of management research (Joaquim & Carrieri, 2018).

However, most management research approaches oral history as a mere method or interview technique, with little reference to contemporary history. In history, the delimitation of oral history’s historical time is noticeably clear: the recent past, whose outcome is yet to happen

and that remains in the present. The boundaries of this past are usually mobile and vary between each society, but are clearly delimited by the last great rupture, such as the Second World War, the Military Dictatorship in Brazil, or the fall of the Berlin Wall. Unlike history from other periods, the history of the recent past is defined by the “active presence of protagonists or witnesses from the past who can offer their testimonies and narratives as historical sources to be analyzed by historians” (Delgado & Ferrereira, 2013, p. 24).

In management, the definition of oral history – “a method that privileges the history of the recent past through the narrative or the oral history of social subjects” (Ichikawa & Santos, 2006, p. 182) – leaves no doubt as to its origin: the historical discipline, with its search for knowledge about the past and for human experience in time. However, since qualitative methods using oral testimonies abound in management research, besides the fact that the time studied is almost always the present, oral history has ended up being used interchangeably with in-depth interviews and case studies. Consequently, oral history’s origin and literature as a subfield of history – which make it distinct from other methods – have been poorly used, showing a lack of depth in oral history, in its use within history, and in the historical discipline itself. As argued by Decker et al. (2021), this type of research lacks historiographical reflexivity, that is, “an engagement with history as a source of theorizing as well as a repertoire of methods for researching the past” (p. 2).

In this sense, and unlike other management papers that discuss the method (Ichikawa & Santos, 2006; Gomes & Santana, 2010; Joaquim & Carrieri, 2018; Sacramento et al., 2017), the present article advocates for oral history as a theoretical-methodological approach or for filling the void between the method and discipline (Amado & Ferreira, 2006). With this approach, oral history research in historical organizational studies may incorporate history in a reorientationist way (Usdiken & Kieser, 2004), with greater engagement of historiographical concepts to “create more reflexive research on the organizational past that is not purely driven by organization theory but instead challenges assumptions about how we study organizations” (Decker et al., 2021, p. 14).

The next section details oral history’s trajectory, which allowed for the constitution of its own historiography, and discusses the debates it has brought to the historical field. We then analyze Brazilian papers that have used oral history as a method or technique and discuss them according to their view of history and their use of oral history.

Oral history as a subfield of history

Some (few) narratives about oral history trace its modern origin to the 1920s, to the study of Polish immigrants’ life stories by the sociologists William Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, who consolidated the life story method in the Chicago School (Goodson, 2001). For Alberti (2006), this experience had little impact on the historical discipline, which was still subject to the archive fetish. Most narratives situate the first generation of oral historians in the late 1940s, based on the work of the American historian and journalist Allan Nevis at Columbia University. Belonging at the time to the political sciences, oral history’s original aim was to document the thinking of elites and to collect material for future historians (Dunaway, 2018; Joutard, 2006). Oral history’s role was to supplement documentary sources, representing a privileged way of collecting political and business elites’ decision-making processes, and of behind-the-scenes information. It was history’s first transformation, since it allowed the use of memory as a historical source (Thomson, 2007), and the

creation of sources for specific research objectives, which was something unique in historical research (Ferreira, 2002).

The second generation of oral historians brought one of the main hallmarks of oral history, that of social transformation through the democratization of history. At the end of the 1960s, mainly in England and Italy, but also in the United States, oral history took on a political role. Militant oral history defied the then current elitist and hegemonic versions of history by presenting the history of minorities, of workers, and of women. For one of the main exponents of this generation, Paul Thompson (2006), oral history could lead to history's democratization, turning a community into an agent by building its own history. In the United States, curiously, one of the inspirations for this second generation of oral historians was the book called *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, who worked at Harvard as a visiting professor during his exile (Kerr, 2016).

At the time, militant oral history nonetheless faced criticisms for treating testimonies as if they were the truth, ignoring how they were shaped by dominant public discourses (Alberti, 2006; Popular Memory Group, 2006). By doing so, oral historians ended up discarding the need for the analysis and interpretation of testimonies. The critics pointed out that oral history tended to

transform the writing of history into a form of populism — that is, to replace certain of the essential tenets of scholarship with facile democratization, and an open mind with demagoguery. Such an approach runs the risk of constructing oral history as merely an alternative ghetto, where at last the oppressed may be allowed to speak. (Passerini, 1979, p. 84)

Despite these criticisms, oral history undeniably brought the view “from below,” treating memory as a source for people's history (Thomson, 2007). The possibility of contesting dominant versions of historical facts made the history of the recent past quite peculiar compared to that of other periods. Fico (2012) reinforces this peculiarity by arguing that one of the great challenges in the history of the recent past would be “the pressure from contemporaries or coercion by the truth, that is, the possibility of confrontation between this historical knowledge and witnesses' testimonies regarding the phenomena the researcher seeks to narrate and/or explain” (p. 44). This challenge takes place since the subject and object of research are immersed in the same temporality, which, according to the author, has not yet ended.

From 1975 onwards, oral history grew internationally, and specific journals and associations were created worldwide. In Brazil, despite its militant profile, oral history emerged among the political elites, with the creation of the CPDOC in 1975 at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, in Rio de Janeiro. To understand the process of assembling the Brazilian State and its path toward the military regime, the CPDOC conducted life story interviews with Brazilian elites, to know their “political and intellectual influences, conflicts, and ways of conceiving the world and the country” (Alberti, 2006, pp. 160-161). This use of oral history was different from that of complementarity in countries with a greater historiographical tradition, and it possibly represented the only way to acquire the desired information. For Meihy (2000), the popularization of oral history in Brazil, in turn, occurred with the country's re-democratization, sealing the method as “a new solution for the understanding of society, since it could overcome the dissatisfactions of social analyses molded according to

disciplinary alternatives framed as “traditional,” “conservative,” and “insufficient,” to point out alternative public policies” (p. 86). This may explain why oral history’s flourishing in Brazil – unlike in Europe and in the United States – occurred almost exclusively within universities (Meihy, p. 95).

It should be noted that oral history’s militant and political approaches aspired to legitimize oral testimonies in history, following the discipline’s positivist or realist criteria. Memory as a historical source was still highly contested, given its forgetfulness, failures, and selectivity. Part of oral historians’ job was to show how scientific the method was. A series of changes in Western thought in the late 1970s ultimately legitimized oral testimonies as historical sources, with the rise of post-positivist approaches such as postmodernism, post-structuralism, and cultural studies, which defied the objectivity of the researcher and his/her search for the truth, decreasing the distance between knowledge and interpretation and between history and memory. These changes marked the maturity of oral history as a field of investigation, predominated by the shift in the analysis of interviews from the content and the literal to the theory behind the interview and the context of its production (Sharpless, 2006).

Other changes in society would further allow the individual, memory, and subjectivity to become legitimate objects of historical research: (a) the memory boom in the literature and popular culture, spreading to social sciences through memory studies; (b) the rise of the micropolitics of identity, with movements of blacks, women, gays, and lesbians, replacing the grand narratives that lost momentum with the nation-state crisis, with globalization, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union; and (c) a “therapeutic effervescent culture,” greatly influenced by psychoanalysis (Riessman, 2008, p. 14). There was then a flourishing of social theories about human agency and conscience, about language, biography, the unconscious, experience, and identity-building in storytelling that triggered many “turns” in the social sciences and humanities. The founding ones for oral history were the cultural or subjective, the linguistic (Green, 2004; Sharpless, 2006; Thomson, 2007), the theoretical or interpretive (Shopes, 2014), the biographical, and the narrative turns (Chamberlain, 2006; Riessman, 2008).

The cultural turn was related to the influence of cultural studies and anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz, who made cultural history possible, expanding the scope of history to past practices, rituals, and ways of thinking. The 1950s and 1960s structuralist and functionalist view of artifacts and cultural activities as manifestations of rational objectives gave way to the view of them being fruits of human agents’ imagination; from the observable and the measurable to the symbolic and the semiotic (Chamberlain, 2006). There was also a greater discussion on agency, abandoning the deterministic view of grand social narratives and admitting identity work by actors. Oral history then shifted from the search for a historical truth to the interpretation of culture, of imagination, of symbolism, of myth, and of legend. The work of Portelli (1991) was groundbreaking, shifting the emphasis from what the narrators did in the past to “what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did” (p. 50).

When the cultural turn focused on language and discourse – the linguistic turn – material and social reality came to be treated as discourse-made, making reality and interpretation almost indistinguishable (Green, 2004; Shopes, 2014; Thomson, 2007). The historian’s objectivity was then contested, since it was hard to dissociate his/her discourse from his/her ideology and emphasis was placed on the “fundamental constitutive role of language and cultural discourses in shaping individual interpretations of experience” (Green, 2004, p. 35).

Therefore, the cultural and linguistic turns promoted changes in history and oral history, paving the way for new questions, such as the relationship between history and memory. Traditionally, the former was framed as the search for a critical construction of the past, “through a logical exposition of the events and lives of the past,” while the latter was framed as being guided by the interviewee’s emotions and experiences, where “the events are remembered in light of subsequent experiences and of the needs of the present” (Ferreira, 2002, p. 321). With the linguistic turn, however, despite their respective specificities, both history and memory could be treated as social representations of the past.

From the emphasis on taking oral history’s testimonies at face value, there was a shift towards a critical interpretation of the mediating structures of language behind the testimonies, and of “the forms and processes through which individuals express their individuality in history” (Portelli, 1991, p. ix). This shift, called the theoretical or interpretive turn by Shopes (2014), allowed the change from understanding the oral source as a document – which, after being evaluated for accuracy, could supplement information in a historical record – to seeing it as a text and a narrative construction, requiring care about memory, subjectivity, and identity, which are all subject to interpretation.

Portelli (1991) and Frisch (1990) also introduced the relational, intersubjective, and collaborative aspects of oral history as its distinctive marks, in what Frisch (1990) called shared authority, where both construction and authority over an oral history narrative would be shared between the interviewer and interviewee. In this sense, the influence of feminist scholars was crucial, who saw fieldwork as an unequal encounter between two people, with great influence on what was said. Consequently, the impact of research on marginalized groups and communities as well as the return of content became central concerns for oral historians, attributing ethics and care in the relationship between the researcher and researched as one of the distinguishing marks of oral history (Joutard, 2006; Portelli, 1997; Sheftel & Zembrzycki, 2016; Thomson, 2007).

The narrative turn’s contributions were twofold. The first lay in placing narrative as one of the main pillars of oral history: “An event lived by the interviewee cannot be transmitted to others without being narrated. This means that it constitutes itself (in the sense of becoming something) at the very moment of the interview” (Alberti, 2006, p. 171). Several oral historians then adopted narrative inquiry tools to describe and analyze oral testimonies (Chamberlain, 2006). The second contribution was the acknowledgement of the dialogicity in the oral history encounter, recognizing the researcher as part of the field, doing mediation and interpretation work. The ways of transcribing oral history’s testimonies began to matter, and researchers’ incisions were then included in the transcripts as well as in the analysis (Riessman, 2008). Oral history became a genre, “a verbal construct shaped by shared verbal device” (Portelli, 1997, p. 4).

The biographical turn legitimized biographical methods by connecting the individual and the social, since biographies and life stories “are rooted in an analysis of both social history and the wellsprings of individual personality, reach forwards and backwards in time, documenting processes and experiences of social change” (Wengraf et al., 2002, p. 246). The landmark of the biographical turn was the French sociologist Daniel Bertaux’s *Biography and Society* (1981), influenced by the Chicago School of the 1920s (Wengraf et al., 2002). Sociological life stories brought contributions to oral history:

Links with historians are now being built through a particular, quickly growing branch of this discipline, namely oral history. This expression refers to the works of those historians who study the twentieth century by using oral histories in the form of long interviews or (usually focused) life stories as one of their sources (...). The use of oral sources has led social historians to turn to sociology not only for methods of interviewing but for concepts as well. Thus, a clear pattern of convergence--exemplified in cross-references, joint conferences, and research projects--is visible. (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984, p. 231)

In fact, from the early 1980s oral history began to embrace life stories as a tool of emancipation and empowerment (Wengraf et al., 2002). Aspásia Camargo, the pioneer of oral history in Brazil, highlighted its importance for the CPDOC's oral history project:

we immediately started with the idea that we had to combine the individual's life story with the chronology of the period and the events in which he/she was the protagonist. It was a kind of overlapping of the broader chronology with the history of his/her life. This concept caused much surprise in the various international congresses I went to, but also much acceptance, for people saw the development of political history in Brazil. It was not simply narrative, but rather it was concerned with capturing a larger context than that of the actors and therefore bringing more information and understanding of broader things. (D'Araújo, 1999, p. 174)

Within the historical discipline, biographical studies also emerged with the rise of microhistory (Renders, Haan, & Harmsma, 2016) and with the return of political history – relegated to a second tier at the time of the *École des Annales* – especially in the CPDOC experience (D'Araújo, 1999; Motta, 2000). Biographies were then approached in two ways: (a) “in the same way as monuments, archives, symbols, and celebrations, that is, as places where national memory was fixed, Pierre Nora’s *lieux de mémoire*” (Motta, 2000, p. 9); and (b) in the relationship between the individual and the historical context, unveiling “the relationships between the individual actor – and his/her various degrees of freedom to act – and the historical network – and its varying degrees of conditioning activity” (Motta, p. 10). In this sense, the individual and his/her memory would give clues not only on the historical context but on a collective memory (Hodge & Costa, 2020).

Figure 1 summarizes history's main changes that allowed the legitimation of oral history and of memory as academic fields. The so-called weaknesses of memory as a historical source turned out to be their greatest strengths, giving clues on the meaning of the interviewees' historical experience and historical time, as opposed to representing mere flaws and distortions.

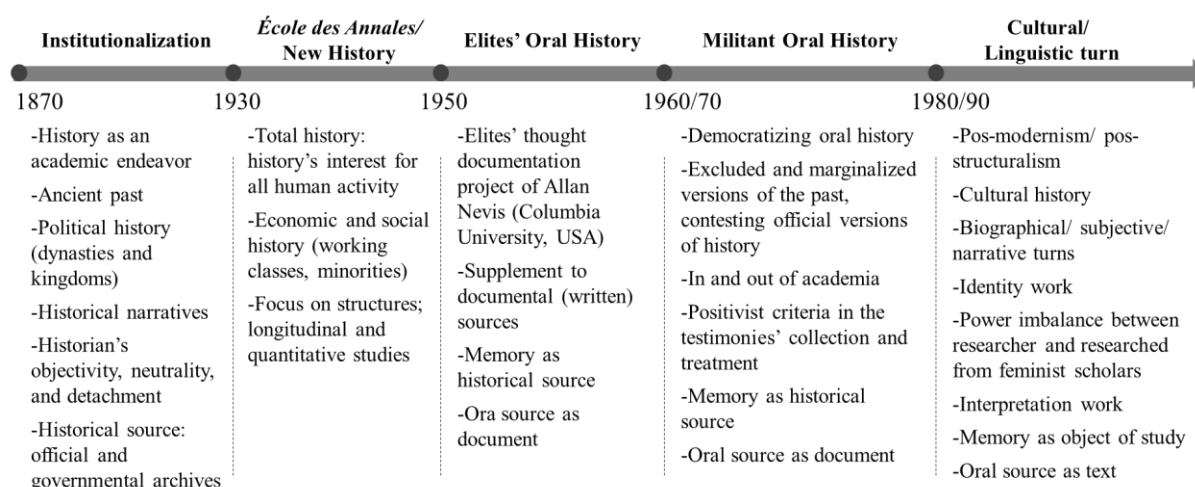


Figure 1. Transformations in history and in oral history

Sources: elaborated by the authors.

From the 1990s onwards, oral history was included with greater emphasis within history, according to two main approaches (Alberti, 2006; Joutard, 2006). The first presented a realist epistemology, treating oral sources as complements to official written sources, filling in information gaps and “guaranteeing the maximum veracity and objectivity of the oral testimonies produced” (Ferreira, 2002, p. 327). The use of interview scripts and data triangulation would control the testimonies' subjectivity (Joutard, 2006).

The second approach, of an anthropological and interpretative nature, assigns “a central role to the relationship between memory and history, proposing a more refined discussion of the political uses of the past” (Ferreira, 2002, p. 238). In this approach, oral history expresses “awareness of the historicity of personal experience and of the individual's role in the history of society and in public events” (Portelli, 1997, p. 6). Memory is now the object of study, and triangulation with documents and other testimonies is used to understand the reasons behind the deviations, silences, and failures of memory. Oral history in this approach is more than a method; it is a subfield of history concerned with the individual's historical experience, with the study of subjectivity, and with memory as an object of historical research.

While acknowledging these two approaches is helpful to situate oral history research, they fail to capture the variety and multiplicity of ways in which oral history has been used in different fields of knowledge, such as in history itself, in the social sciences, in anthropology, education, and other disciplines in the humanities, as indicated by the ABHO website. Dunaway (2018) synthesizes well the method's plurality by arguing that the 2000s consolidated oral history as “simultaneously a method (oral data collection), a subfield of history (oral historiography) and a resource for teachers, communities, and researchers of all kinds (oral history)” (p. 133).

Treating oral history as a method leads to the issue of multiple different uses in different disciplines with their own research and theoretical questions, not necessarily reflecting engagement with the oral history literature and the theory generated by oral historiography, as occurs in the case of management research. Consequently, there is an overlap between the approaches and

terms that arose with the post-positivist turns, some even used interchangeably, such as oral history, auto/biography, life history, narrative analysis, reminiscences, and life review (Bornat, 2007), as also discussed by Silva, Barros, Nogueira, and Barros (2007). For Bornat, these methods share the recording and interpretation of individuals' life experiences, besides the fact that the stories would always be requested ones, generated from the interview situation. These methods also share inheritances from history and sociology, from psychology and gerontology, and some of them – especially oral history and life history – even present a shared literature. For the latter two, which are the most used in management research (Colomby, Peres, Lopes, & Costa, 2016; Godoy, 2018), another commonality would be the emphasis on the researcher and interviewee relationship (Bornat, 2007).

For Bornat (2007), oral history distinguishes itself by using memory and testimony for a more complete or different understanding of the past experienced both individually and collectively. In turn, life history, according to the sociological approach of Bertaux and Kohli (1984), addresses individual life and the story told to understand social processes determined by class, culture, and gender.

These distinctions are nonetheless quite tenuous and restricted to certain uses of the methods according to the researcher's ontological and epistemological positions. Thus, to delineate oral history from life stories, we claim that oral history has a markedly greater emphasis on the relationship between micro and macro phenomena, on personal experiences of broader historical events. Oral history would be better positioned "to tap into the intersection of personal experience, historical circumstance, and cultural frame" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005) and to answer questions such as "How do individuals adapt to these major social changes?", "what are individual coping strategies?", and "how do individuals filter and respond differently to these changes?" (p. 155).

Based on this brief explanation of oral history's trajectory and treating oral history as a theoretical-methodological approach, we would like to advocate for its distinctive use in historical organizational research based on the following definition of oral history:

a powerful tool for discovering, exploring, and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past, how they connect individual experience and its social context, how the past becomes part of the present, and how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them. (Frisch, 1990, p. 188)

Uses and abuses of oral history in management research

One of the first published Brazilian papers to discuss oral history and management from a historic turn point of view is that of Gomes and Santana (2010), who present their case for oral history within a more comprehensive argument in favor of qualitative management research. The authors illustrate their point by presenting two uses of the method at the State University of Southwest Bahia (UESB): as a teaching method and as a tool for building the university's strategy. In the first case, oral history was used in a mandatory discipline of the management department. Students conducted life history interviews with local entrepreneurs and public managers, creating an entrepreneurship research group. For the authors, studying the local entrepreneurs' stories allowed the students to learn management as well change their perceptions on the "relationship

between administrator, citizen, family, and society” (Gomes & Santana, 2010, p. 13). In the second case, the authors showed how the diverse memories of professors, employees, and alumni took part in the organizational identity-building process and in the development of the university’s strategy for the future. The authors conclude by suggesting that:

Taking as a parameter the large number of studies and surveys that have been carried out in management research using the recorded interview technique, it is possible to infer that part of these interviews is Oral History. However, they are carried out without giving them that name and, possibly, without following the precepts that govern its execution, which would make them more robust from a methodological point of view (Gomes & Santana, 2010, p. 14).

The authors’ point acknowledges that, in a sense, there is sort of a gray area of oral history and other qualitative methods used in management. For the authors, however, opting for oral history could bring greater robustness to research with recorded interviews. Our argument departs from this view. Adopting oral history in those cases would not necessarily make research methodologically “more robust”; on the contrary, it could waste one of the main distinguishing factors of oral history in organizational research, that is, the understanding of the past and of history from the individual’s perspective. The focus on the past would enable a greater discussion on history and memory, on past and present, on rupture and permanence, on change and continuity.

Another paper that reinforces our argument that oral history has been used with no historiographical reflexivity is that of Sacramento et al. (2017), who analyzed national papers on oral history and life history in management research published between 2000 and 2015. The authors noted an increase in the use of these methods and identified the main themes of the 38 selected papers: the organizational learning process, entrepreneurship, impacts of organizations on personal life, and the professional/personal life trajectory. While this level of information does not seem to reveal much, these themes give clues about the lack of history of these studies, as they suggest the use of oral history for understanding a life or organizational process or trajectory, for the purposes of understanding the present.

An interesting comment by Sacramento et al. (2017) goes against Gomes and Santana’s (2010) assertion that oral history could bring more robustness to qualitative research. Sacramento et al. (2017) encounter difficulty in analyzing methodological aspects of the selected studies, mainly due to a lack of information on the method used by most papers. For the authors, “The omission may have occurred due to the incipience and lack of knowledge of the method or due to the lack of methodological rigor of the study” (Sacramento, et al., p. 71).

Joaquim and Carrieri (2018) also address the method by discussing the construction of an oral history project. The authors argue for the use of oral history “as an alternative to case studies, a method commonly used in organizational studies papers and even used in a simplistic way” (p. 306), reinforcing our argument that oral history, without reference to oral historiography, ends up becoming similar to other qualitative methods.

Joaquim and Carrieri (2018) address themes dear to oral history. The authors suggest the method as an alternative to the management mainstream to address “the historical [re]

construction of the droughts suffered and the drought brought about by irrigation in the São Francisco Valley, based on the memories and stories experienced in the Bebedouro Project” (p. 306), in Pernambuco. Emphasizing the implementation of the method, the authors problematize one of the fundamental themes in oral history: the relationship between the researcher and interviewee. With this focus, the authors discuss the process of transforming an oral interview into a written document and the social return of the interviews, following the “transcreation” approach of the Brazilian historian José Meihy. For the authors, the social return of the interviews could retrieve the view of oral history as a political act, going beyond academic debates to a more comprehensive social destination. In other words, the research must also impact the individuals surveyed, something that is not really explored in academic research.

For Joaquim and Carrieri (2018), the current organizational research on oral history has failed by

reducing oral history to something that can be apprehended, making it "a thing." That is, it is still objectified as a mere method, capable of apprehending the past through objectifying the lived life, when it should be approached as a reflective way of perceiving the process of [de] construction of history that takes place in the present time, based on the enunciations of invented traditions. (Joaquim & Carrieri, p. 307)

The authors criticize the realist approach of oral history, emphasizing the use of memory in the present. In this regard, the authors focus on a presentist view of the use of history and oral history, in the sense that “the past matters only in as much as it has relevance to the present” (Decker et al., 2021, p. 18), especially when they state that: “From a theoretical point of view, it is worth noting that oral history can be a great ally for organizational studies, since management that takes place in the present time is a reflection of practices adopted and perpetuated from the past” (Joaquim & Carrieri, 2018, p. 315).

Besides the above mentioned papers that focus on the method of oral history, a search performed in August 2020, in the SPELL electronic database, for management papers that included “oral history” in the summary, title, or keyword fields identified forty-five articles. Six of them (Maciel, Lins, & Fernandes, 2020; Rampazo & Ichikawa, 2013; Vale & Joaquim, 2017; Vieira, Lavarda, & Brandt, 2016; Vizeu, Guarido Filho, & Gomes, 2014; Zanini, Migueles, Colmerauer, & Mansur, 2013) explicitly reported using oral history as a technique, that is, “denying it any methodological or theoretical claim” (Amado & Ferreira, 2006, p. xii). In fact, in most of these articles, oral history is used to understand an organizational process, a company or an individual’s trajectory, to increase the understanding of the object of study, whether creativity management (Maciel et al.), strategic alliances (Vizeu et al.), strategy definition (Vieira et al.), or team management (Zanini et al.). In this sense, oral history and history itself are addressed based on a view that ranges from supplementarist to integrationist, where history is taken as “a complement in the construction of or refining general theories” or “a source of explanatory generalizations” (Usdiken & Kieser, 2004, p. 324). In most cases, oral history functions as a complement or part of a case study, always complementary to documental analysis and secondary to the study’s main objective. The same argument can be used for the other thirty-nine articles, which despite reporting the use of oral history as a method, ended up using it similarly to those that use it as a technique.

For questions of space, we chose to analyze in more detail only those papers published in journals with a rating equal to or above B1 in the Capes Qualis Periodicals during the 2013-2016 period, totaling the sixteen papers listed in Table 1.

The articles were grouped according to their use of oral history:

- Five articles that use organizational history/trajectory as a context.
- Four articles that address life histories/trajectories and individuals' lived experience.
- Four articles that bring the history "from below," introducing marginalized, silenced, or ordinary voices.
- Two articles that use organizational history/trajectory as a supplement to other sources and methods to better comprehend the studied organization.
- One article with little information about the method, but which approaches oral history similarly to in-depth interviews, with no history.

In the first group, which uses organizational history/trajectory as a context, the history of an organization or even an organizational process is collected through oral history and used as a context for discussing specific organizational constructs, such as the role of leadership in the process of creating Pacifying Police Units (PPUs) in Rio de Janeiro (Moraes, Mariano, & Franco, 2016); the formation of strategic alliances (Vizeu et al., 2014); cognitive and affective aspects of women's entrepreneurial action (Cortez, Ferreira, Ferreira, & Araújo, 2016); institutional logics that influence structural changes in a cooperative (Teixeira & Roglio, 2015); and the role of actors in social management (Iizuka, Gonçalves-dias, & Aguerre, 2011).

Of these articles, three selected a case study as a research strategy, combining oral history with document analysis and direct observation. In these articles, understanding the historical context of the objects of study is essential for their analysis, justifying the use of oral history as a privileged source for the reconstruction of organizational stories. Three articles in this category could even be framed as possessing a historical perspective. In two of them, the event itself could be considered a historic landmark: the creation of PPUs (Moraes et al., 2016) and the wild fern extraction program in Vale do Ribeira, made possible with the Environmental Legislation that created the Environmental Protection Area in the territory (Iizuka et al., 2011). The third article, by Teixeira and Roglio (2015), who analyze the organizational history of the Veiling Holambra Cooperative using an institutional logic approach, is the only one that used the historical analysis method to "clarify the context in which decisions occurred at different periods in the history of the cooperative" (p. 15).

In general, the studies categorized in this group, including those that are not classified as historical, go beyond the history of each organization to analyze the social and historical context of the phenomenon studied, and can be classified as integrationist (Usdiken & Kieser, 2004). In this group, oral history is used as a documentary source, with emphasis on the more objective aspects of organizational trajectories and histories and with little reference to the relationship between the past and present in the subjects' memories.

Table 1

Categorization of 16 Brazilian oral history articles published in B1 and A2 journals according to their use of history

| Articles | Objective | Area of knowledge | Excerpts from the article about the method |
|--|---|--|--|
| Organizational history or trajectory as a context | | | |
| Moraes, Mariano, and Franco (2016, p. 630) | To address the role of leadership in the history of the creation and planning of PPU's. | Leadership or strategic planning. | "(Oral history) allows the researcher to analyze history from the perspective of the actors who participated directly or indirectly in its construction." |
| Cortez, Ferreira, and Araújo (2016, p. 11) | To understand the influence of cognitive and affective aspects in women entrepreneurs' trajectories. | Women's entrepreneurship. Cognitive and affective aspects. | "The thematic oral history method was used. ... Thus, the surveyed companies' trajectories could be known not through written documents, but through the oral versions of those who enabled these trajectories." |
| Teixeira and Roglio (2015, pp. 11-12) | To analyze the influence of institutional logics on decisions about changes in Cooperativa Veiling Holambra's trajectory. | Institutionalism, institutional logics/cooperatives. | "A qualitative case study was conducted to analyze, using oral history, the influences of institutional logics on the organizational trajectory from 1948 to 2011." |
| Vizeu, Guarido Filho, and Gomes (2014, p. 133) | To discuss the phenomenon of strategic alliances considering the sociological analysis perspective. | Strategic alliances or sociological analysis. | "...case study of the constitution of a strategic alliance in the Brazilian hotel sector. Interviews and documentary data were analyzed qualitatively, combining traditional content analysis and oral history." |
| Iizuka, Gonçalves-Dias, and Aguerre (2011, p. 748) | To analyze the construction of the wild fern extraction program that took place in the municipality of Ilha Comprida. | Social management or decision-making processes. | "Oral history was used as a research methodology. Eleven personal interviews were conducted. . . Data, information, and interviews were systematized through a case study." |
| Life histories and trajectories or lived experience | | | |
| Pereira, Paiva, Santos, and Sousa (2018, pp. 163-164) | To analyze relationships between the meaning of work and the identity-building of prostitutes. | Meaning of work or identity. | Case study of a group of prostitutes. "In the interviews, we used thematic oral history, a method that has been widely considered to understand the plurality and connection of human experiences." |
| Bispo, Dourado, and Amorim (2013, p. 706) | To study the meaning that individuals involved in hip hop culture attribute to work. | Meaning of work or identity. | Oral history as a research method. "Oral history seeks to investigate the facts and events that are recorded in the memory of prominent individuals in the community, representing a very broad data collection technique." |
| Pinto and Paes de Paula (2013, p. 349) | To analyze the interpersonal violence experienced by subjects who work or have worked professionally in a junior company. | Moral harassment or interpersonal violence. | "Given the importance of an in-depth reading of the phenomenon, the qualitative research strategy adopted was the case study." Oral history was used "because it enables the researcher to recover, in each interview conducted, simple and complex relationships in relation to society, the group, and the subject him/herself." |
| Dourado, Holanda, Silva, and Bispo (2009, p. 357) | To investigate the meaning(s) that individuals in organizations located | Meaning of work. | "Oral history was adopted as a research method that can be considered a type of life history. It differs from the latter due to the greater |

| Articles | Objective | Area of knowledge | Excerpts from the article about the method |
|--|---|--|--|
| | outside the market enclave attribute to work. | | objectivity adopted by both the researcher and the speaker." |
| History "from below" or marginalized, silenced, or ordinary voices. | | | |
| Sousa, Pereira, and Calbino (2019, pp. 230-231) | To analyze the struggle and resistance process experienced by recyclable material collectors. | Work relationships or social exclusion. | "...we started by using oral history as a method and, more precisely, life trajectories, which were taken from oral reports and from the memory of social subjects, in this case, the ASMARE recyclable material collectors." |
| Cabana and Ichikawa (2017, pp. 292) | To understand how the subjects' daily practices undergo changes based on the changes in the workplace organizational identity. | Everyday life or organizational identity. | "We carried out the study at the Producer Fair in Maringá, using observation, thematic oral history interviews, and discourse analysis" (p. 285). "... we immersed ourselves both in the subjects' memories and reminiscences, as well as through close observation of their reality. We worked with different types of sources to, in some way, draw closer to the reality of the subjects in their daily actions, as well as to retrieve their history." |
| Rampazo and Ichikawa (2013, p. 104) | To analyze the role of organizations in the (re)construction of the identity of the riverside population displaced from their territories. | Identity. | "We conducted a qualitative study that involved documental analysis and semi-structured interviews using the techniques of oral history with the riverside population and representatives of the main organizations present to this day in the territory." |
| Xavier, Barros, Cruz, and Carrieri (2012, p. 41-42) | To understand the reconfiguration of the space - particularly of place, non-place, and in-betweenness- of peddlers and traveling salesmen in Minas Gerais. | Meaning of work. | "The story told based on the daily lives of those who do not have prominent roles in the narratives" (p. 41). "A study of a qualitative nature, in which the theoretical-methodological contribution of oral history was used as a source to retrieve the interviewees' activities, without intending to assume the role of historian." |
| Organizational history or trajectory as a supplement | | | |
| Zanini, Migueles, Colmerauer, and Mansur (2013, p. 108) | To understand the elements of informal coordination in managing teams that act in complex and unpredictable scenarios. | Trust, leadership, or team management. | "This stage of the research was carried out with the combined use of two qualitative methods: oral historiography, which helped us to reconstruct the institution's history, and in-depth interviews (individual and group-level), to understand how the institution is internally organized and the factors that contribute to creating the preconditions for effective actions." |
| Souza (2010, p. 73) | To understand sociocultural and economic relations that underlie representations and practices around artisanal production and commercialization and domestic work. | Public management or work and gender. | Case study. "The research objectives were answered in recorded interviews, which were guided by a semi-structured script, with ten members of the association interested in participating in the research; document analysis and oral history allowed us to understand the association in the context of the municipality of Viçosa." |
| No history | | | |
| Fernandes, Oliva, and Kubo (2020, p. 123) | To comprehend the necessary individual characteristics for the activity of an independent board member. | Upper echelons theory (organizational strategy and performance). | Oral history, "which allows for the obtainment of information about the whole, referring to the research object, and for the data to be checked and compared with other available sources." |

Sources: elaborated by the authors.

In the life histories and trajectories or lived experience group, the emphasis is on the lived experience of individuals concerning certain themes, such as interpersonal violence (Pinto & Paula, 2013) and work and identity, as in the case of prostitutes (Pereira, Paiva, Santos, & Sousa, 2018) and of members of cultural organizations and movements (Bispo, Dourado, & Amorim, 2013; Dourado, Holanda, Silva, & Bispo, 2009). What distinguishes these studies from the previous group is the focus on individuals, on their lived experience, and on the meanings of their experiences, which are themes at the very heart of oral history. There is, however, little or no discussion about the relationship between the past and present or about memory. Consequently, the use of oral history is very similar to in-depth interviews of an interpretive nature, which also emphasize the human encounter and individuals' view on a given theme. One example is that of Pinto and Paes de Paula, who use oral history within a case study

due to understanding that it allows the researcher to recover, in each interview, simple and complex relationships in relation to society, the group, and the subject him/herself, as well as “[...] reconstructing emotional, affective durations and rational reflections that radiate and intersect at certain times in a socio-historical space of certain social relationships”. (Pinto & Paes de Paula, p. 349)

Despite their mentioning a “socio-historical space,” this is not discussed in the analysis, which would have been interesting to locate interpersonal violence in a given social, historical, and cultural context. The use of oral history once again ends up “disappearing” with the case study, resembling in-depth interviews.

In relation to this overlapping of in-depth interviews and oral history, Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2005) point out that researchers dealing with human subjects can choose either one, depending on the research objective. One of the hallmarks of oral history is the biographical focus of the interview, which could not be noticed in research such as that of Pinto and Paes de Paula (2013), given the lack of details about the method. As for the papers by Pereira, Paiva, Santos, and Sousa (2018) and especially by Bispo, Dourado, and Amorim (2013) and by Dourado, Holanda, Silva, and Bispo (2009), who explicitly reported using the biographical method, there is an emphasis on the subjects' life histories, making it possible to frame these papers in the life histories group, since there is an overlap of the two approaches as discussed. While there was a real connection between life histories and the themes of each study, such as the meaning of work and identity, there was again little historical debate, especially in the analysis.

The third group, that of history “from below,” of marginalized, silenced, or ordinary voices, relates to the second generation of oral historians who introduced militant oral history, oral history's hallmark. Particularly, the study by Sousa, Pereira, and Calbino (2019) is an excellent example of militant oral history, especially as it highlights

the political importance of accessing ASMARE's history based on the narratives of subjects that are not commonly listed in official documents of public bodies such as the City Hall

or the SLU. The use of oral testimony is advocated here not only as an alternative possibility to narrate historical events but as an act of resistance to a society that legitimized itself through writing, mainly in terms of official documents, denying subjects and communities that do not use this technique the writing of history. (Sousa et al., 2019, pp. 230-231)

Besides introducing these stories of struggle and resistance through the voice of those who lived them, the authors engage in a critical interpretation of these discourses. They identify that the reframing of the garbage collector's work as that of an environmental agent, despite reducing work stigma and promoting social inclusion, ended up reproducing a sustainability discourse "that camouflages and keeps you in a situation of marginality. (...) However, it is equally important to pay attention to the risks implicit in sustainability discourses which, once internalized by waste collectors, may lead to politically passive and non-combative attitudes" (Sousa et al., 2019, p. 242).

Another example of an oral history study that could be framed as militant is that of Rampazo and Ichikawa (2013), who analyze the identity (re)construction of the riverine population displaced from its territories due to the construction of a hydroelectric plant. The experience of social subjects concerning a historical event, as seen earlier, is one of oral history's dear themes, both regarding the riverine population, who are social subjects that are generally disregarded in the official history, and the historical event itself, which is the construction of a reservoir and its effects on the local community. From the authors' point of view, the role of organizations in the reconstruction of these identities constitutes a good example of a reorientationist approach to history in organizational studies, prioritizing "the narrative approach to history, in line with the recent broader interest in interpretive or discursive orientations as opposed to the scientific framing of organizational studies" (Usdiken & Kieser, 2004, p. 325). The study's type of analysis, as in Sousa et al. (2019), fits well with interpretive theories of oral history literature, highlighting how life narratives invoke or conform to broader public discourses. Greater engagement with oral history literature could have brought up aspects related to individual memory in its connection to the social, not only showing how memory conforms to dominant social and cultural frameworks but also showing the critical reflexivity of individuals regarding acceptance or rejection of these frameworks (Green, 2004).

Cabana and Ichikawa's (2017) study emphasizes everyday life, which allows for the analysis of agency, unlike previous articles. The authors do not frame their research as one of oral history, but instead acknowledge using the method for part of the interviews conducted with market traders "to retrieve their memories and their stories at the Maringá Producers' Fair" (p. 293). The authors adopt Michel de Certeau's everyday life perspective, focusing on "small practices that are articulated in the moments of time that build the day-to-day" (p. 286). Daily practices would be liable to change and difficult to capture in studies that use documentary sources alone. Perhaps due to the lack of engagement with the historical perspective and with the oral history literature, issues such as the use of market traders' memories as an element of cohesion or social dispute were not addressed, preferring a greater focus on the formation of the fair's identity in everyday life.

Xavier, Barros, Cruz, and Carrieri's (2012) study, which could have been categorized in the life histories group for its focus on the meaning of work for peddlers and traveling salesmen from Minas Gerais, was instead grouped in the third category for explicitly stating that the story prioritized by the authors "does not have fantastic narratives as a backdrop nor is it legitimized by

possible roles of the narrator or source, but rather is the story told based on the everyday life of those who do not have prominent roles in the narratives” (p. 41). Despite the authors’ claim to have resorted “to the theoretical-methodological contribution of oral history as a source of recollection of the interviewees’ activities, without intending to assume a historian role” (Xavier et al., 2012), there is little discussion about the theoretical-methodological contribution, preferring to refer instead to New History and its view of plural history, “so that macro-history is replaced by the history of everyday life or, as Burke (1997) points out, the ‘history from below’, in a socially or culturally constituted reality” (pp. 41- 42). In fact, New History was a significant milestone in the historical discipline by allowing an expansion of the scope of history, bringing to the fore a different story: that of working classes, of minorities, and of other marginalized groups (Ferreira, 2002). However, its emphasis on collective structures and behaviors, with longitudinal and quantitative studies, did not at the time allow oral testimonies as historical sources (Motta, 2000). In this sense, individuals were still considered an object of the study of history, as opposed to historical subjects, as advocated by approaches with greater human agency, such as micro-history, everyday life, and oral history (Brewer, 2010). Perhaps greater engagement with oral historiography could bring greater historiographic reflexivity (Decker et al., 2021), engaging more explicitly with (oral) history as a source of theorizing and researching the past.

The papers in the following group, that of organizational history as a supplement, use oral history as a supplement for better understanding the organization, as in the case of Souza (2010), who used oral history to analyze the socio-cultural and economic relations behind the representations and practices of domestic work in the Association of Artisans of Viçosa municipality. Alternatively, Zanini et al. (2013) used quantitative and qualitative methods to understand informal coordination in the management of high-performance teams. Like in Souza’s (2010) research, oral history was used to reconstruct the institution’s history, while in-depth interviews focused on understanding the company’s internal management.

The study by Fernandes, Oliva, and Kubo (2020) was categorized in the “no history” group for its lack of methodological information that would allow an understanding of the use of oral history. This paper confirms the comment by Sacramento et al. (2017) regarding the omission of several methodological aspects of many studies, making it difficult to better analyze them. Even with little information about the method, it is possible to notice the use of oral history as in-depth interviews, with an emphasis on surveying the participants’ opinions regarding the necessary individual characteristics for the activities of an independent board member.

Broadly speaking, the 16 articles analyzed share the fact that the discussion about oral history is restricted to the methodology section, with little or no reference to oral historiography or even to the problematics of memory in the analysis or discussion section and in the conclusions. This reinforces our argument that there is little engagement of these articles regarding the discussions that oral history brought to history and Decker et al.’s (2021) point regarding the lack of historiographical reflexivity to historical organizational studies. However, we should note that most of the studies analyzed were not framed as oral history by the authors. Therefore, the lack of debate on the connection between historical research and organizational studies is understandable.

The next section addresses the distinctive marks of oral history, relating them to existing research in organizational studies or research possibilities that bring together history and management.

What makes oral history different

As seen, oral history differs from other approaches by (a) engaging, from the beginning, with the commitment to social transformation and to the democratization of history; (b) understanding memory both as a source for the past and as a way of building individuals' identities and of revealing the meaning of their historical experience, as a form of history-telling; (c) acknowledging that the co-construction of testimonies between the researcher and interviewee is the result of a human encounter; and, finally, (d) allowing the sharing of oral sources with other researchers through the recording, treatment, and storage of the interviews, as detailed below.

Social transformation

The previous section provided examples of management research that would fit the militant tradition of oral history, concerned with history's democratization. If those papers framed their research as oral history and engaged with oral historiography, perhaps we could envision how individuals confirm, reject, or modify organizational, cultural, and social frameworks – consciously or unconsciously – and how their own critical reflexivity paves the way for resistance movements and power struggles. Areas of knowledge such as everyday life, as brought by Cabana and Ichikawa (2017) – but from an oral historiography perspective – could place the historical individual not as an object of organizational history but as a subject.

Research along these lines could also fit into what Durepos, Shaffner, and Taylor (2021) called critical organizational history, “a theoretically informed, historicized approach to understanding how and why we come to be where we are in contemporary organized societies.” For the authors, critical organizational history could meet one of the principles of the historic turn of “rejection of scientism, acceptance of more heterogeneous forms of history and reflexive accounts of the social construction of historicized narratives” (pp. 15-16). In particular, some characteristics proposed by the authors as essential to critical organizational research are already at the heart of oral history, such as the progressive agenda and ideology; the researcher's reflexivity on research production as a social practice carried out by a subject with a certain background and ideology, and the denaturalization of studied situations and phenomena, something that oral historians usually do when bringing a counter-history and when analyzing the way that individuals conform to dominant social frameworks.

The article by Joaquim and Carrieri (2018) is a good example of critical organizational research, especially because of its concern with the social devolution of research, a political act for not restricting research to academic debates. It is important to note that social transformation is a two-way street: the research not only had an impact on the community, which received a video with the reconstruction of its history, but also on the researcher (Joaquim & Carrieri). In fact, for research to be transformative, the researcher must be the first to be transformed: “people will not talk to you unless you talk to them, will not reveal themselves unless you reveal yourself. You teach nothing unless you are also learning, and you learn nothing if you don't listen” (Portelli, 1997, p. 52).

Another possibility for social transformation is to take a story beyond the official one, this time constituted of the testimonies of different layers of society or of an organization, from a more realist perspective. Keulen and Kroeze (2012a) and Gomes and Santana (2010), for example, suggest an organizational history that includes interviews with employees of all levels. The former present

a method that includes checking the facts collected in interviews and confronting them with the interviewees, creating a narrative that would then be presented to the members of the organization, and, therefore, letting them learn from each other and from the past. Interviews and debates would help understand “how interviewees and researchers describe themselves, higher management, and the organization as a whole” (Keulen & Kreuze, p. 21). The benefit of the method would come from comparing the organization’s official view with that of its employees from different hierarchies, composing a large inclusive narrative.

Individuals’ lived experience and history-telling

More than filling in document gaps, oral history’s peculiarity “would come from an attitude to history that favors the recovery of the lived as conceived by those who lived it” (Alberti, 2004, p. 16). This focus on the individual narrows the distance between history itself – as we know it in books, monuments, museums – and personal experience: “what is our place in history, and what is the place of history in our lives?” (Portelli, 1997, p. ix). It is no wonder why the biographical emphasis on the interview is essential; it reveals where and how individuals “create meaning, what they deem important, their feelings and attitudes (both explicit and implicit)” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2005, p. 151).

Besides Rampazo and Ichikawa’s (2013) aforementioned study, another study that addresses the lived experience of individuals in relation to historical events is that of Maclean, Harvey, and Stringfellow (2017), who analyze, through narrative and metaphor, the subjective experience of individuals in the transition from East Germany to a unified Germany, with emphasis on the identity-building work of these individuals for their social integration in a Germany where the hegemonic vision is that of individual freedom.

Regarding individuals’ meaning creation, Kirby (2008) highlights oral history’s several similarities to phenomenology, since the latter is also interested in “the structures of consciousness, both of what we perceive and how we perceive it,” and in the reception and elaboration of the external world by the individual (p. 22). On the other hand, phenomenology assumes that it is impossible to see the world objectively; what shapes the world, culture, and history are “our perceptions of things and events, experienced, interpreted, and then communicated to others” (p. 23).

In this sense, oral history differs from a phenomenological approach by not focusing only on the individual and the meaning attributed to external reality. After all, the method’s origin lies in history. For the historian, subjectivity in historical research still conveys a certain level of discomfort since the search for many is still for historical truth. However, it is acknowledged that there may be a provisional version of the truth that is open to discussion. In oral history, despite factual history no longer being at the heart of the study, as what matters lies in the sphere of subjectivity, it is necessary to identify deviations, errors, and silences in the narratives. In this way, oral history is located between a totally phenomenological and a totally realist approach to the past.

This epistemological concern about the nature of the past and the researcher’s ability to access it is shared by historical organization scholars. More than simply bringing historical methods to management, some scholars have pointed out the need to discuss what is possible to apprehend and understand the past. Mills, Weatherbee, and Durepos (2014) called this discussion the

epistemic phase in the historic turn. According to the authors, the historic turn goes through three phases, namely: (a) the factual one, in which history is seen as a representation of historical facts – and factual data has much to add to organizational theories; (b) the contextual one, in which the historical context is highlighted to understand organizations and their performance in time and space; and (c) the methodological one, in which the emphasis is on the critical analysis of the writing of history, and this would be the “the outcome of genres of writing and philosophical means of adjudicating historical knowledge” (Mills et al., 2014, p. 228). In this sense, the historic turn would present two epistemic views, namely, the realist one – phases (a) and (b) – in which it is acknowledged that the past can be accessed in some way through traces such as documents, and the relativist one – phase (c) – where the past is nothing more than storytelling done politically in the present.

For the authors, the historic turn’s next phase would be the epistemic one, a compromise between the realist and the relativist position, taking both the factual evidence about the past and the nature of the representations seriously, occupying “the space between positivist knowledge and the subjectivities that produce them” (Mills et al., 2014, p. 229). The authors suggest a theoretical position called relational, located in the space between a scientific position with a historical truth, and a postmodernist position, with its plurality of stories and versions.

Oral history would also occupy a middle ground between these two traditions, as argued by Portelli (1997):

The fact that we are no longer dealing only with hard facts but also with the soft facts of subjectivity, memory, and storytelling ought not to lead us, however, into the postmodern euphoria of dissolving the materiality and referentiality of the external world into dizzying possibilities of immaterial discourse. Just as we work with the interaction between the social and the personal, we also work with the interaction between narrative, imagination, and subjectivity on the one hand, and plausibly ascertained facts on the other. We cannot recognize imagination unless we try to know the facts (...). As oral historians, however, we tend to take seriously both the unreliable oral narratives and the plausible archival record, and look for meaning in both, and in the space in between. (p. 64)

According to Portelli (1997), the thematic focus of oral history favors both the narrative form of the interview, with its emphasis on the social mediating structures of language and the dialogical production of the testimony, as well as the search for the link “between biography and history, between individual experience and the transformations in society,” with one foot in objective reality. Portelli (1997) refers to this genre of oral history as history-telling, which is somewhat different from storytelling because of its broader scope involving historical events and of its dialogical formation. As history-telling, oral history would look at both the form of what is said – a story built for a specific audience, using specific cultural constructs – and the content, revealing its discursive and documentary characteristics. Oral history is “between subject-oriented life story and theme-oriented testimony. (...) its role is precisely to connect life to times, uniqueness to representativeness, as well as orality to writing” (p. 6).

One example of history-telling is Portelli’s (1997) analysis of the Civitella Val di Chiana massacre, which took place in Tuscany in June 1944. In this episode, much of the city's male

population was executed out of revenge for the murder of two German soldiers by representatives of the Resistance (partisans) who lived on the outskirts of the city. In the paper, Portelli (1997) gathers his comments made during the 1994 international conference “In Memory: For a European Memory of Nazi Crimes after the End of the Cold War” (Arezzo, June 22-24, 1994), where he participated as a debater. The conference represented an attempt by left-wing scholars to repair the belittled memory of Civitella, and the central point of the paper is a discussion of the shared memory of the event: the official memory – which celebrates the massacre as an episode of the Resistance and compares the victims to martyrs of Liberty – versus the survivors’ memory, linked to personal and collective losses, denying not only any connection with the Resistance but blaming partisans for causing, with an irresponsible attack, German retaliation. “Now it is all blamed on the Germans... But us, we blame the partisans because if they hadn’t done what they did it wouldn’t have happened. They killed for retaliation” (M.C., woman, interviewed in 1993) (p. 141). Thus, there is an inversion of guilt for the massacre: in the survivors’ view, the partisans were responsible, and not the Germans.

For the author, what was at issue was not the confrontation of an official – ideological – versus a communal – pure and spontaneous – memory. For him, there would be multiple fragmented and internally divided memories, all ideologically and culturally mediated, and not just the official one. Besides, memory changes over time: in the testimonies collected in 1945 and 1946, the theme of the Resistance’s guilt only emerges occasionally, with the testimonies of resentment against the Germans prevailing. In 1993 or 1994, when new testimonies were collected, unlike the testimonies collected almost half a century before, resentment against the Resistance dominated. For the author, time and history could explain this vision change. Perhaps there was a reluctance to criticize partisans in the immediate post-war period when the Resistance became prestigious. Perhaps the resentment of the community increased when partisans committed subsequent abuses “to punish people who were respected by the community and had not been more Fascist than the rest.” Perhaps even the wave of partisans’ trials that subsequently occurred with the rise of the right in the 1990s may have created a common sense that served as a “narrative and ideological apparatus that had not yet taken shape at the time of the earlier testimony” (Portelli, 1997, p 145). However, Portelli (1997) notes that in a town near Civitella, a similar massacre took place in retaliation by the Germans, with the difference being that the population blamed the Germans and not the partisans, suggesting that Civitella’s resentment against partisans was localized.

According to Portelli (1997), despite the historical assessment that the blame should, in fact, be attributed to the Germans, for anthropologists there would be a greater concern “with the community’s representations, rather than with the truth of facts or the trend of values” (p. 143) and, in this sense, the representation of the massacre by the community pointed to the Resistance as being responsible for it. For Portelli (1997), however, it would only be through the joint analysis between the facts of the historian and the representations of the anthropologist that it would be possible to distinguish what is fact and what is representation:

Representations work on facts and claim to be facts; facts are recognized and organized according to representations; facts and representations both converge in the subjectivity of human beings and are dressed in their language. Creating this interaction is the task of oral history, which is charged as history with reconstructing facts, but also learns, in its

practice of dialogical field work and critical confrontation with the otherness of narrators, to understand representations. (p. 146)

Thus, when analyzing the town's pre-war conditions, the author observes a divide between the urban population (landowners, artisans, professionals) and the surrounding rural population:

This town was much envied by nearby towns (...) because it was a well-to-do place" (V.L.); "We were castle-born! We didn't get along with the peasants ... We tended to be city folks! We thought we were a little better than them," says M.C. More crudely, S.M. speaks of "hatred" between Civitella and the county-seat, Badia al Pino. He adds that, when the road was opened between Civitella and the hamlet of Cornia, "a mass of workers began to come into our town, and this mass of workers was truly a mass of shit. [Edoardo] Succhielli [the partisan chief] lives there. (Portelli, 1997, p. 148)

Portelli (1997) attributes the survivors' resentment towards the partisans and not towards the Germans to the pre-existing tensions between Civitella's urban population and the nearby village's peasants; due to the "sense of an invasion of the town's space by the lower classes of the countryside." This invasion would have endured in the post-war period, "when the "young Communists" of the countryside came to boss around people in town (Duilio Fattori, CR: 448) in part, perhaps, to make up for past humiliations" (p. 148). Thus, Portelli (1997) analyzes a spatial displacement in the memory of these survivors, presenting the Resistance as the invaders and not the Germans. There is also a temporal shift, since the survivors' narratives on the events start not with the beginning of the war or with the Germans' arrival, but with the first reaction of the partisans.

This example of a study on memory by Portelli (1997) shows how the meaning of individuals' experience brought by memory can only be understood in its entirety through the triangulation with "hard facts," that is, in a middle ground of objective, realist research and interpretive or even social constructivist research, between facts and representations. Oral history could then fill the gap identified by Mills et al. (2014) in historical organizational studies located between a realist and a postmodernist approach, raising history-telling as a way of showing the narrative construction of individuals regarding historical events or major organizational changes.

Context of production and co-construction of narratives

When considering testimonies as storytelling or narratives, several oral historians have brought insights from narrative inquiry to analyze the testimonies. The first insight is the understanding that the construction of the past – memory – is done in the present, in the encounter between the deponent and the researcher. Therefore, the testimony is subject to power inequalities in the relationship between two individuals. In this sense, narratives engage in a "political job," since "individuals use the narrative form to remember, argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, and even mislead an audience" (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). This does not mean that testimonies do not give narrators authenticity; but it reminds us that testimonies should be interpreted and analyzed with

the acknowledgement of their situatedness. Testimonies are also targeted at a specific audience, whether this is the researcher or a possible audience that will read the interviews, with the power relations between the audience and the narrator featuring as a backdrop. The researcher is thus an active presence in the text.

The second insight was to approach the narrative, despite its individual character, as being full of themes and plots that are part of a culture: “what is remembered, when, and why, is molded by the culture in which they live, the language at their disposal, and the conventions and genre appropriate to the occasion” (Chamberlain, 2006, p. 399). As a result, narratives are subject to interpretation, as in Portelli’s (1997) thoughts on Civitella:

Precisely because the experiences are unspeakable, and yet must be spoken, the speakers are sustained by the mediating structures of language, narrative, social environment, religion, politics. The resulting narratives - not the pain they describe, but the words and ideologies through which they represent it - not only can but must be critically understood. (Portelli, p. 144)

As an implication, the authority over a narrative’s meaning is dispersed and interwoven with other voices, in the Bakhtinian sense of polyphony where every text includes many voices besides the author’s and the words carry meanings from previous uses (Riessman, 2008). Therefore, the meaning would be in the dialogue between the narrator and the listener, between the researcher and the transcription, between the text and the reader. The researcher’s task would be to interpret these narratives in the light of the ideologies and of the social discourses naturalized by the narrator, showing how broader social structures permeate individual identity and consciousness – as in the research by Sousa et al. (2019) and Rampazo and Ichikawa (2013) – and thus performed for (and with) an audience, in this case, the oral historian (Riessman, p.116).

At the same time, as argued in Portelli’s history-telling (1997), oral history has a foot in realism and objectivity, in the classic profession of the historian, as there remains an attempt to reconstruct the past and to amplify excluded and marginalized voices. This means that interpretations are also made in the light of documents and historical archives.

It should be noted that oral history’s dualism does not occur without disputes between epistemological traditions and without conflicts within the field of oral history itself. Oral history’s political engagement and transformative emancipatory dimension – in both realist and interpretative approaches – sometimes presuppose bringing individuals’ experience with their face value, leaving the narrator him/herself as an interpreter of his/her story, with little intervention by the researcher. This is a dilemma that oral historians still face, as shown in the discussions by Shopes (2014) and Sheftel and Zembrzycki (2016).

Production and sharing of oral sources

Finally, despite lying at the origin of the method, a less discussed aspect of oral history is the recording and construction of a public archive of oral history. For some, this is an essential (and distinctive) feature of the method, especially as it emerged within the historical discipline, known

for the use of public archives and documents, but also due to indicating its sources so that others may access them:

An interview becomes oral history only when it has been recorded, processed in some way, made available in an archive, library, or other repository, or reproduced in relatively verbatim form for publication. Availability for general research, re-interpretation, and verification define oral history. (Ritchie, 2014, p. 8)

Despite the individual possession of sources being common in areas such as sociology, anthropology, and management itself, it goes against the conception of official sources that are characteristic of historical research. Despite not being an obligation in oral history, it is possible to archive interview transcripts for secondary uses by other researchers. This procedure may even change narrative direction when the individual understands his/her testimony will be saved and filed for posterity. Despite not being common in management due to the costs of adequate recording and archive storage, this is indeed oral history's hallmark. One example is Gomes and Santana's (2010) experience at UESB, as discussed. Life history interviews that students conducted with entrepreneurs and public managers in the region allowed for the creation of a large collection of local entrepreneurs' testimonies, available for public use.

We should remember, however, that oral historians such as Shopes (2014) would not disqualify an oral history work that is not publicly archived: "I am suggesting that we not approach interviews with a check list of criteria that define what counts as oral history and what doesn't, thereby failing to engage with otherwise credible work that falls outside the archival ambit" (p. 262).

Likewise, the distinctive characteristics of oral history presented here are not part of a checklist that defines what oral history is from what it is not. As previously argued, there are a variety of approaches that use the method, from different epistemological traditions, in and outside of academia, as Amado (2000) points out:

We have worked in universities and outside them. There are people who consider oral history as a technique; there are those who understand it as a methodology, and those who see it as a discipline. There are those who are only interested in the information that the interviews reveal; there are those who are interested in their representations; in the symbolic field, there are those who are interested in both dimensions ... The "inventory of differences," as Marieta de Moraes Ferreira called it, would be almost inexhaustible. (p. 111)

However, to live up to its historiography, we chose to highlight the characteristics that reflect in some way oral history's long intellectual trajectory, which makes it quite peculiar compared to history's traditional method and to other qualitative and biographical approaches. Moreover, we argue that these features can bring to the historic turn in administration a new step in relation to what is understood of the past.

Final considerations

In this article, we sought to present some of oral history's contributions to the understanding of the past in organizational studies. We advocate for a use of oral history that not only differentiates it from qualitative strategies and other methods of organizational research, such as in-depth interviews, case studies, and life history itself, but that also firmly engages with oral historiography. Seeing oral history as between the method and discipline or as a theoretical-methodological approach may allow for reorientationist research that carries out a merger between historical and organizational research that is better positioned to understand both the past and organizational theories. In this way, we believe that oral history allows for several paths for management to actually incorporate the historic turn.

Among the many ways of studying the organizational past, oral history has been the least used by organizational theorists. Therefore, there is great potential for oral history to contribute to organizational research, especially in what Decker et al. (2021) called retrospective organizational history, bringing both marginalized groups' testimonies about the past and the meaning that they attribute to historical events. According to the authors, "the retrospective organizational history challenges existing notions of how the organizational past can be researched by employing retrospective methods commonly associated with memory, but in conjunction with history" (Decker et al., 2021, p. 17-18).

In addition to highlighting the potential of history-telling as a means of understanding the past, we would like to highlight the relationship between history and memory as one of the main contributions that oral history can bring to management and, more specifically, to organizational studies. Not an instrumental memory directed at decision-making processes, management information, or organizational learning, as studies in organizational memory tend to be, but a social and collective memory that brings the main debates in the fields of history and sociology to organizational studies (Rowlinson, Booth, Clark, Delahaye, & Procter, 2010). In this sense, instead of searching for historical truth, the study of collective – and collected – memory focuses on how we remember both as members of mnemonic communities and as practitioners in constant interactional dynamics (Olick & Robbins, 1998). Thus, as members of a collectivity and/or of an organization, what we remember, or forget, can provide clues about shared meanings, myths, and value systems through history-telling.

Another possible contribution would be the problematization, through oral history, of the instrumental appropriation of memory by companies as a way of building organizational identity. The recent increase in the number of business history and memory projects raises questions about the strategic use of memory as the truth. But whose truth? As Costa and Saraiva (2011) argue: "Discussing companies' appropriation of memory means retrieving the historical perspective and questioning the choice of organizational managers regarding what to remember – and what to forget" (p. 1764). The very project of building organizational memory and its operationalization seem to us to be an interesting object of study: not what emerges as a result, but what was silenced, what was hidden, and how the process of dispute for the chosen version occurred. This process has a lot to say about the symbols, ideas, and meanings in dispute – and negotiated daily – in a society. As an offshoot, oral history may contribute to the field by providing the memories of subordinate, silenced, marginalized social (and organizational) groups. Through oral history, we may visualize the daily life, customs, and values of groups traditionally excluded from official history.

On the other hand, oral history is associated with the individual's return as a participant in history, possessing agency despite a limiting historical network. Unlike the more structural collective memory, referring to celebrations, public speeches, and narratives about the past of a collectivity (Olick & Robbins, 1998), oral history and biographical methods such as life history provide the possibility of understanding how individual memory connects to social memory, since the individual only remembers as part of a group, despite having singular experiences (Motta, 2000). For organizational analysis, biographical testimonies may serve as a historical source for capturing the "imaginary, the representations, the collective memory, the myths and mythologies" (Motta, 2000, p.8) that exist within organizations.

Therefore, one important contribution to the historic turn in organizational studies and which represents an interesting research avenue is that of narrative studies (Rowlinson et al., 2010). Keulen and Kreuze (2012b), for example, argue that the historic turn in organizational studies could occur through the new cultural history since it has "a focus on the study of symbols and symbolism, the invention of traditions and the revival of the narrative" (p. 175). Understanding managerial language through its narratives may reveal poorly explored aspects of organizations, as in situations of organizational change or in the construction and maintenance of organizational reputation and image. Thus, with narrative analysis, whether of excluded or privileged voices, organizational studies could take another step towards incorporating history in their epistemic-methodological practices.

Finally, a major contribution of oral history could be the promotion of the practice of compiling public collections of oral testimonies. In organizational studies, for example, there is no concern on the part of researchers (or research groups) about sharing their sources. The practices of oral history could change this situation, inspiring the creation of public sources, making hidden sources visible, and enriching the dialogue and shared work.

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