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NPGA, School of Management

Federal University of Bahia

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Ethnographing Historical Archives: Possible Ways to Research in Organization Studies

Luma Louise Sousa Lopes^a

Ana Silvia Rocha Ipiranga^a

^a Universidade Estadual do Ceará, Fortaleza, Brazil

Abstract

Our objective in this article is to discuss the contributions of archival ethnography as a method of historical research in management. We indicate that, while historical research is already relevant in the management research area, there is still a dilemma regarding the possibility of how to access the past and conduct research of this nature. In this context, ethnography associated with historical archives emerges as a legitimate source, loaded with voices and silences to be unveiled in the processes of reflection on time in the context of organizations. Thus, we discuss the characteristics and possibilities of the method of an archival ethnography, considering its multi-situated character in the proposed research strategy. Thus, we hope to foster the discussion about ethnographic immersion in historical archives and how this method can contribute to the several research areas in management and more specifically in Organization Studies.

Keywords: archival ethnography; historical research; organization studies.

Introduction

The relevance of history to management research is a recognized phenomenon, especially in Organization Studies (OS). In this sense, research of historical nature has followed many paths and, at the same time, faced several challenges and questions to its achievement (Rowlinson, Hassard & Decker, 2014). Among such challenges we have – in addition to the constitution of

polyphonic historical research, with the interlocution of diverse voices that compose the past (Mills, Suddaby, Foster & Durepos, 2016) – the methodological dilemma of how to access these voices, encompassing the pluralities of discourses and silences built during the reflection on the past, as well as the ways to understand and narrate it (Decker, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014). In this sense, much has been discussed about what history we have built based on sources such as archives. Considering that archives are an inherent point in historical research, different methods of accessing and understanding them must emerge as possibilities to reach and unveil various events and phenomena (Decker, 2014).

Archives are considered a social construction that encompass aspects of everyday life, reflect knowledge, legitimize acts or actors, and collaborate with the constitution of modern collective memory (Carter, 2006; Decker, 2013, 2014; Featherstone, 2006; Mills & Mills, 2012; Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Stoler, 2002, 2010). These materials are loaded with voices and silences that reveal polysemic processes and account for different connotations regarding distinct events, representative or not of the group to which they refer (Carter, 2006; Decker, 2013). These processes generate tension in the formation of a power arena established from the constitution of the archived (or silenced) material to the constructed narratives to which they can refer (Carter, 2006; Cook, 2012).

Archives act like metaphors, reflecting a set of possibilities and preserved meanings, in addition to favoring the interpretation of several meanings, referring to what it was like to “be there” (Decker, 2014; Foucault, 2008). However, studies that rely on the research of historical archives are sporadic (McKinlay, 2002, 2013; Schwarzkopf, 2012; Rowlinson et al., 2014). Thus, historical archives, as a source for organizational research, are still underused and considered to be poorly explained evidence, both because of lack of interest in archive construction and preservation, and because of the methodological challenges involved in their treatment (Decker, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014).

To discuss ways to deal with archives in historical research in management, works such as those written by Rowlinson et al. (2014) and Decker (2014) suggest methodological strategies for the historical study of organizations considering their archives. Decker (2014) in her paper entitled “Solid intentions: an archival ethnography of corporate architecture and organizational remembering”, presented archival ethnography as a methodological possibility for historical research in management. Originating from Anthropology and based on the notion of multi-sited ethnography (Marcus, 1995), archive ethnography deals with a process of immersion in historical materials archived in public and private institutions to elucidate a certain event anchored in the past. Thus, archival ethnography works as a methodological practice with an unexpected trajectory, capable of crossing multiple places and simultaneous times where events occurred and, thus, undo the distinction between subject and world (Czarniawska, 2004, 2014; Decker, 2014; Hamilakis, 2011; Marcus, 1995, 2011).

In Brazil, research in fields such as anthropology (e.g., Cunha, 2004, 2005), communication (e.g., Costa, 2010, 2011), and social sciences (Vieira, 2013) already uses archival ethnography as a legitimate investigation method. In management, Barros (2016), Barros, Carneiro and Wanderley (2019), Carneiro and Barros (2017), Coraiola (2012, 2013) and Wanderley, Barros, Costa and Carrieri (2016) indicated the archives relevance and issues such as interpretation, preservation, and access

to them. However, in Brazil, and specifically in organization studies (OS), the strategy of archival ethnography (Decker, 2013) is yet to be explored as a methodological possibility.

We thus aim to discuss the contributions of archival ethnography as a method in historical research in management, hoping to foster the debate about this new possibility of the methodological treatment of archives in the management context, a priori, and, consequently, to open the path to reflect on time in research on organizations, considering the potential of archival ethnography.

Initially, we structured this article rescuing the main aspects of historical research in management and the methodological dilemma that hangs over the reflection of time. Then, we present the idea of archives, discussing the new perspectives for its understanding and handling. In the next topic, we go into multi-sited ethnography as one archival ethnography basis, deepening the method characteristics and its contributions to OS.

Historical research in management

The call for integration between history and management grew in the last 20 years. In this sense, Burrell (1997), Clegg (2006) and Zald (1993, 2002) already indicated to the need to combine the historical perspective with OS. Before these, Barthes, Foucault, White, and Rorty also signaled in their writings the need to discuss time and history (Down, 2001).

The historic turn movement consolidated this plea (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004). This turning point was a reaction to the largely unhistorical character that management received during its development as an independent science, in the middle of the 20th century, remaining far from the possible links with History (Booth & Rowlinson, 2006; Kieser, 1994; Mills, Weatherbee, & Durepos, 2013; Üsdiken & Kieser, 2004; Zald, 1996).

The paths profusion followed by History combined with OS leads to a diversity of perspectives that can reflect the past (Mills et al., 2013; Weatherbee, Durepos, Mills, & Mills, 2012). Considering that history is formed both by events (the facts themselves) and the narratives we build about these events, what it is told may colonize the past (Down, 2001). Thus, there is no real or objective past, but a social construction, which signals history as a mutually constitutive social practice (Mills et al., 2013). Back to the past, its contexts, and processes, have become, at the same time, a necessity, and a challenge (Clark & Rowlinson, 2004). This fact highlights a series of gaps such as the return to the historiographic debate and historical interpretation theories that recognize the ambiguous character of the term history itself, which can refer to both the totality of past human actions and the narratives constructed (Rowlinson et al., 2014).

Facing the countless possibilities, since the historic turn, there is an epistemological debate represented by dualism between history and management, in addition to issues related to historical materials access and interpretation. Especially, the question of access has been a challenge for many researchers. To an extent that Booth and Rowlinson (2006), when suggesting a debate agenda, listed among the topics the necessity to broaden methods of comprehension and styles of historical writing, in addition to access to different sources and archives with a concern for the new ways of narrating the historical trajectories in organizations. This debate, beyond invigorating the approximation between history, historiography, and OS, also sheds light on the methodological

issue involved in historical research. From this agenda, Booth and Rowlinson (2006) yearn for the emergence of new theoretical and methodological approaches as a result of these proposals. In this context, methodological proposals launched by Rowlinson et al. (2014) and Decker (2014) reinforce the need and urgency of this discussion.

At the same time, the progress of the historic turn has been greater than initially imagined (Rowlinson, 2013), although, in certain areas of management, research does not yet have an engagement with history (Srinivas & Faria, 2015). In Brazil, several works recognize the potential and claims for the intersection between history and management (e.g. Barros & Carrieri, 2015, Costa, 2014, 2015; Costa, Barros & Martins, 2010; Souza & Costa, 2013; Vizeu, 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Wanderley et al., 2016).

Furthermore, other works draw on the historical perspective to discuss and to remount several events and practices in the context of the history of educational institutions (Alcadipani & Bertero, 2014; Barros, 2014, 2017; Barros, Alcadipani, & Bertero, 2018; Barros & Carrieri, 2015; Fernandes, Bezerra, & Ipiranga, 2015); the potential of history for professional career analysis (Closs & Rocha-de-Oliveira, 2015); the relationship of companies with the issue of the Brazilian dictatorship in memory spaces creations (Costa, Silva, & Monteiro, 2016; Trindade & Costa, 2017); museums (Costa, Mancebo, & Pessoa, 2016) and the intersection with human rights (Costa & Silva, 2018); how memory and history are appropriated by advertising discourse (Costa & Pessoa, 2016); the discussion on the ANTi-History approach (Ipiranga, Chaym, & Sousa, 2016a, 2016b; Quelha-de-Sá & Costa, 2018); the role of history in the construction of organizational memory (Perdigão, Barros, Carrieri, & Miranda, 2015), and in presenting the association with the construction of practices in organizing the city (Lopes & Ipiranga, 2017).

We observed that the use of complex methodologies associated with ethnography, articulated to capture historical events and practices that consider archives as protagonists in the process of production of knowledge based on reflection over time, are still scarce, in the field of Management and OS (Decker, 2013, 2014; McKinlay, 2002; Rowlinson et al., 2014; Schwarzkopf, 2012), especially when addressing to research developed in Brazil.

From archives to archival ethnography

Archives have long been regarded as simple repository, neutral and bare of interests, nourished by public or private groups (Carter, 2006; Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Stoler, 2002). The institutions responsible for taking care and storing these materials were seen as a deposit of old papers, which represented only the sealed result of bureaucratic work, or passive records of facts considered neutral (Cook, 2012; McKinlay, 2013; Spieker, 2008). The keepers, that is, the archivists, were compelled to adopt a posture considered as professional, which should be neutral, impartial, and objective (Schwartz & Cook, 2002).

Until the late 1990s, researchers who used archives in their investigations were rarely concerned with the form or context of the materials, but only with their content, where one could "We may readily mock fetishisms of the historian's craft, but there remains the shared conviction that access to what is "classified" and "confidential" is the coveted findings of sound and shrewd intellectual labours" (Stoler, 2002, p. 90).

Questions about the choice of what should be preserved, as well as the form of storage were not part of the researchers' issues repertoire. Although, indirectly, there were intentionalities inevitably involved in the collection's constitution (Cook, 2012; Stoler, 2002). However, this Cartesian-based view has undergone changes from a (re)emergence of the concept and role of the archive (Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Stoler, 2002).

A critical archive reframing, their formation, and understanding were put on the table. As result, the archives then came to be considered arenas of power, capable of providing a voice or silencing events or groups (Carter, 2006; Cook, 2012). Therefore, aspects such as the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion of material from the archives, as well as the archives' role in narratives and memories constitution have gained relevance. This movement marked the transition from a modern perspective, where archives were considered static objects, to a postmodernist point of view, where they are taken as a dynamic practice of life and active agents in the construction of memory (Certeau, 2011; Cook, 2012).

These changes in archives comprehension denote them as a social construction about time and memory conceptions able to preserve or silence information about certain events (Carneiro & Barros, 2017; Schwartz & Cook, 2002). Therefore, we established an archive perspective as an epistemological process, and not as an object or a simple source of passive data but by going further and understanding them as a metaphor resulting from the established power networks (Stoler, 2010). Then, archives appear as active subjects in the process of decoding, reflecting, and comprehension about time (Spieker, 2008). That said, we have archives (institutions and documents) as a locus of innovation about new questions of present construction based on what we have about the past (McKinlay, 2013).

Archives are also a critical dimension regarding the establishment of social frameworks and models because they can denounce the way power relations are structured (Schwartz & Cook, 2002). Therefore, a relevant aspect to be observed is the process of choosing what to keep and what to preserve, which occurs in a socially constructed and naturalized framework, which determines the significance of what becomes an archive (Schwartz & Cook, 2002). In other words, the stored materials are the result of several practices, in addition to what one wants to keep (Cook, 2012; Stoler, 2010). This process of choosing what must be sheltered generates controversy, especially when what is archived may not be a real description of what happened, or at least, not exclusively that (McKinlay, 2013).

Every archive is a human practice that can reflect moods, feelings, and circumstances experienced by the actors and, in some way, they can affect the content and form of what is filed (Barros, 2016). Thus, during the archiving process, we can outline a way to protect a narrative or enhance an actor's position, for example, then, archives assume the connotation of a dispute, negotiation, contestation, and legitimation arena (Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Stoler, 2002, 2010). Therefore, it is evident that archives can reflect several aspects of daily life, through the various voices that it gives rise to, collaborating for the construction of a collective memory (Decker, 2013; Featherstone, 2006; Mills & Mills, 2012; Schwartz & Cook, 2002; Stoler, 2002, 2010).

However, the presences contained in the archives imply the existence of its opposite: absences, silences, and deviations (Carter, 2006; Decker, 2013). Archives are also capable of expressing silences and deviations built over time and that reflect motives as silent as these

materials themselves (Carter, 2006; Decker, 2013, 2014). Thus, archives can reveal unmade choices and potential options that have not been realized, imagined communities, emphasizing non-events, and history in the subjunctive (Anderson, 1991; Stoler, 2010). Thus, the voice of what is sidelined can be heard if we examine documents that reflect, for example, the interaction between citizen and state, people, and organizations, etc. (Carter, 2006). This presence and absence dynamics reinforce the need to understand archives as spaces of power dispute (Barros, 2016; Carter, 2006, Foucault, 2008; Schwartz & Cook, 2002).

Based on these considerations, we can reflect on archive's role and relevance for the construction of the historical research. However, research that prioritizes an attitude of immersion in the archives is still sporadic within the scope of management because researchers are more concerned with aspects such as the reconstruction of documents and the formation of their collections (McKinlay, 2002, 2013; Schwarzkopf, 2012). This aspect makes the archives – as a source for historical organization research – underutilized or even unexplained, thus pointing to a wide gap for debates, discussions, and development of studies (Decker, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014). This shortage also occurs because of factors such as the lack of commitment to the preservation of historical materials and methodological treatments suitable for the archives.

The frequent disinterest of organizations in their history makes investigative work with archives challenging, considering the (in)existence of preserved material, as well as the difficulties in accessing them when they exist, (Coraiola, 2012; Decker, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014). Regarding the reflections on the archive methodological treatment, these are usually scarce, as there is still a tendency of attachment to the discussion about access or how the materials were collected, subduing their content (Decker, 2013, 2014; Rowlinson et al., 2014). Thus, the method of archival ethnography emerges to expand the discussion on specific research strategies for dealing with historical archives in the OS context (Decker, 2014).

In Brazil, in the field of Management, the number of archive-based research is still low. Coraiola (2012) was one of the pioneers in bringing up the archived materials issue, discussing the archive existence and availability by analyzing the situation of Brazilian business archives. Coraiola concluded by indicating the need to develop mechanisms to assist in the gathering and organization of existing archives in order to expand the range of possibilities for reflecting on time, exploring the complexities of events.

However, we can find studies focused in methodological reflections on historical research, among them, discussions about historical documents (Carneiro & Barros, 2017) and archives (Barros, 2016; Barros et al., 2019; Wanderley & Costa, 2016) are objects of analysis debated to signal contributions, possibilities, and difficulties in operationalizing historical research. In these contexts, it is transversal the idea that historical research can go a long way in questioning the archived material – as well as the institutions that shelter them – by appropriate methodologies to build knowledge and reflect on time (Barros, 2016). We present the idea of file ethnography as a methodology that can contribute to the operationalization of historical research based on OS archives (Decker, 2013) to establish a possible path, considering the potentialities and challenges exposed.

The historical archival ethnography consists of an immersion in a field composed of archived material to understand the presences and absences, as well as unveiling subjects, actors, paths, and

paradoxical deviations, reconstructing the multiple layers of meanings of a certain historical context (Decker, 2013; Stoler, 2002, 2010). As a methodological approach, archival ethnography comes close to the notion of multi-sited ethnography, which is a methodological approach capable of crossing multiple places and simultaneous times where phenomena occur and, thus, undo the distinction between subject and world (Czarniawska, 2004, 2014; Decker, 2014; Hamilakis, 2011; Marcus, 1995, 1998, 2011).

Faced with the wide range of ethnographic approaches that can be undertaken in management and Organization Studies research, multi-sited ethnography allows the fragmented study of ethnographic fields both in time and space, enabling the constitution of an interrelationships network formed composed of multiple spatial and temporal fragments, accessed at different levels and forms (Marcus, 1995). This dynamic expands research possibilities hitherto established by the classical ethnographic approach, where there is a spatially and temporally delimited ethnographic field, accessed by the physical presence in the research (Geertz, 2011; Malinowski, 1976).

In this regard, the historical archives ethnography approach broadens the multi-sited notion, by deepening in a time-fragmented field through the analysis of historical archives. Thus, the notion of the ethnographic field is expanded, leading us to a different perspective regarding field constitution, techniques of data production specific to the approach, as well as the interlocution processes with the actors involved, the production of ethnographic narrative, and the exercise of the researcher's sensitivity (Table 1) (Decker, 2014; Frehse, 2005; Rowlinson et al., 2014).

In archival ethnography, the ethnographic field is composed of historical archives and their sources, accessed by the direct observation of archives, which can tell or make us imagine what it was like to be there (Anderson, 1991). In this aspect, it is possible to speak in an imagined field, not based on common sense or a particular opinion, in those resulting from an immersion process, by direct observing the archives and their sources.

This understanding distances archival ethnography from the classical ethnography approach, where we assume the existence of a unique, spatially, and temporally delimited field and the researcher has direct face-to-face contact with organizational actors, in a movement of immersion and detachment, to constitute a familiar stranger, observing closely and from within (Frehse, 2005; Geertz, 2011; Magnani, 2002).

On the other hand, the field perspective is close to the multi-sited approach, where the ethnographic field is fragmented in time and space. This dispersion is significant to encompass the organizational changes evidenced from the context of society (Marcus, 1995, 1998, 2011). This fragmented field is accessed by the researchers through systematic observations of the actors and not by the contexts studied. Thus, it is possible to move between different spaces and times, considering the actor's multiplicity. This aspect expands the research opportunities, as it allows us to 'be' in more contexts than in a classical approach. Within this motto, a dense contextualization that embraces a network of emerged phenomena and practices is expected.

Table 1

Approaches between classical, multi-sited, and archival ethnography

Dimensions/procedures	Classical ethnography	Multi-sited ethnography	Archival ethnography
Ethnographic field constitution	In-person immersion, by the researcher's participation on the field.	In-person or virtual immersion, by the researcher's participation in distributed fields, both in time and space.	Researcher's immersion in an archived field material; imagined field.
Ethnography data production techniques	Participant observation; interviews; field notes and researcher's reflexivity, among others.	Participant observation; interviews; field notes, and researcher's reflexivity, among others.	Direct observation; file constitution as field notes; researcher's reflexivity, among others.
Subjects/actors/practices	Dialogue with the subjects/actors/practices <i>in loco</i> , by the "familiar strangeness" position.	Dialogue with participants (actors, practices, artifacts) distributed in time and space	Dialogue with subjects/actors/practices constituted through archives; actors involved in the archive collection constitution, and preservation.
Descriptions/narratives	Dense description by participation, immersions, speeches, and subjects/actors reports.	Native's problematization, boundaries expanding from differences in narrative constructions.	Dense historical contextualization. Historical and mnemonics records, voices, silences, and deviations problematizations reconstructing multiple layers of meanings of a historical context.

Sources: Elaborated by the authors.

In this context, the archives are inscriptions that carry meanings of what already existed and make it possible, by researcher's immersion and dialogue with this material, to weave narratives and to reveal meanings, voices, silences, and deviations that, until then, have gone unnoticed. Here the researcher uses techniques of data production such as field diaries – which make the findings possible based on immersion and direct observation of archival documents and their sources, as well as the production of a researchers' own collection – inevitably carried out with the researcher's vision.

To do so, we must not only reflect critically on the elaboration of a text from documents but think about "how we choose to use them, on archives not as sites of knowledge retrieval but of knowledge production, as monuments of states as well as sites of state ethnography [...]" (Stoler, 2002, p. 90). In this sense, archival ethnography approximates both classical and multi-sited approach, which, regardless of the field constitution, use similar techniques of data production, to constitute a dense ethnographic narrative.

Considering that the field is the archival document, the expected dialogue process with those called by the classical ethnography as natives, actors participating in a certain context, it can be

thought along the lines of perspectivism (Castro, 2015), where the context is positioned as an interlocutor of social reality. Thus, there is no native to be described, but a process of building these actors and what they can tell us in terms of meanings and perspectives.

In the archival ethnography, the interlocution with the actors occurs indirectly when accessing the archival set. The research subjects are constructed as we go deeper into the dialogue with the documents. Not only by physical participation but through the immersion process, observation, and ethnographic imagination posture (Anderson, 1991; Clifford, 2014; Geertz, 2011;). As a result, archival ethnography has its own characteristics, although anchored in the multi-sited approach. At the same time, it distances itself from the classical perspective, where face-to-face and continuous interaction between researcher and social actors is recommended.

Regarding the techniques of data production, archives direct observation followed by an own collection establishment is a consistent procedure within the approach. Here, we cannot employ participant observation and interviews similarly to the classical approach. Those techniques are often used in a multi-sited perspective. In this sense, archival ethnography follows a specific parameter of analytical corpus composition, consistent with its temporal and spatial multi-sited character, although using techniques of data production familiar, such as observation.

The final product of an archival ethnography is a dense historical contextualization, which should reflect the voices, silences, and historical paths problematized with the archives. In this context, the researcher must seek to deepen the layers of meanings inherent to phenomena and practices related to a certain historical context.

Particularly, Decker (2014) based her archival ethnography on post-colonial theory, reinforcing the significance of explaining the presence, absence, and deviations of evidence that are identified in an archive. Thus, archival ethnography does not mean the same as visiting a library collection. It is necessary to consider the plurality of sources and documents (public or private). For example, some materials are not digitized and they can only be consulted by visiting the archive. In this sense, some care must be taken regarding the type of archive to be searched and to what extent the material and sources make it possible to conclude organizational life (Decker, 2013, 2014; Stoler, 2010).

Some points must be noted when engaging in an archival ethnography to cover the aforementioned possibilities. Firstly, we need to know how the document collection is structured to understand where the relevant material can be found (Decker, 2014). Generally, organizations give little importance to constitute a historical archive collection, capable of tracing its past, either for considering history irrelevant or due to the lack of financial resources for the establishment of such collections (Coraiola, 2012). Those organizations that still do it, let their existing power relations show through their archives, or even privilege – in an underlying way – some voices over others (McKinlay, 2013). In other words, some type of bias inevitably occurs in these stored documents.

Thus, it is necessary to reflect on what shapes the archive collection in practice terms that (possibly) legitimize it. This reflection process contributes to our comprehension to what extent the collection structure and its source location help us to reflect on the arrangement and intentions of the organization (Decker, 2013; Stoler, 2010). At this point, the archives are a metaphor, able of modeling knowledge, memory, and power relationships that should always remain open for discussion (Foucault, 2008; Schwartz & Cook, 2002). The choice and evaluation of an archive (either

an institution, a document, or a monument) is not only technical and logistical but is closely related to the kind of history that one wishes to unveil and write (Certeau, 2011; Schwartz & Cook, 2002).

Secondly, it is necessary to consider the possible explanations that a document can bring on another, considering that the references of an archive are generally extensive and complex, resembling a puzzle (Decker, 2014). Archives behave like networks that reflect, in addition to power structures, modes of action, and legitimation that make sense in each context. In this way, the understanding of an archived material is often presented in an interlaced way – requiring from researchers an accurate look at the comprehension of the polyphonic and contingent meaning of archives.

Thus, we must consider the material network of materials involved in this archival ethnographic immersion process, considering that the archives signal multiple times and space (Cunha, 2005). This plurality can be represented in events, practices, and social structures that have been reduced to narratives in a wider context than a historical chronology using classification criteria on what should or not be maintained. To deduce an event based on the archives necessarily implies a transformation process that makes the archives a territory where some truths can be sought and others, contested, diverted, or still silenced.

For this reason, in immersion processes – as in classical ethnography – this methodological strategy also requires the researcher to take note of any material that may be of interest in the future. This fact occurs because, assuming the existence of an underlying information network interconnected by archives, there are also several difficulties inherent to the survey of archival material. Because of these possible contingencies, the elaboration of field diary avoids the possibility of having to redo the survey in search of a lost thread, making the work exhausting and, in some cases, impossible, considering the time and access factor, inherent to any field research work.

Besides, archival ethnography also shares other characteristics with classical and multi-sited approaches, namely: it is not possible to be sure that you have observed or become aware of the entire process (Decker, 2014). The files can be in large amount, have restricted access, be structured in an unorganized way from the point of view of storage, or even, nowadays, be composed of non-digitized materials, which hampers the search work. In this sense, it is rash to say that we observed everything that was possible about a particular archival practice or event. Rather, it is prudent to recognize field limitations, as in any other scientific research work.

On the other hand, what differentiates archival ethnography from documentary research is, above all, the process of immersion in archives, like the immersions of known ethnographic approaches. (Decker, 2014; Stoler, 2002). Here, the native's role will be represented by the archived materials, which now assume the position of active research actor, especially in the process of knowledge generation (Stoler, 2002). Only based on this immersion, we will obtain a better historical context understanding and an appreciation of the past alterities, recognizing that the reality is composed of plots that are reassembled since the past. To carry out an archival ethnography is to be willing to dive into the speeches and silences offered by all archival material under evaluation.

There are no direct techniques for sampling or researching the relevant material (Decker, 2014). What will be considered important is, at first, closely related to the research objectives.

However, as aforementioned, the chance of coming across a material network to explain a given event is considerable. In this sense, it is important not to consider only texts as an archive, every material is valid (McKinlay, 2013). Photographs, videos, buildings, artifacts, monuments, event materials, old newspapers, among others, should also be considered. In the end, it is expected that the researcher has ethnographed the historical archives, that is, a materials collection related to the study and that will serve as a basis for the construction and reflection on field reports, complemented with the researcher's observations (Decker, 2014).

Several other areas have already recognized the potential of the historical archival ethnography for understanding the present. In anthropology, history, and communication, archival ethnography is already used as a valid research method. Cunha (2004), in anthropology, proposed the reflection on the logic that guides institutions concerning archive constitution, legitimacy, inclusion, and material transformation criteria. In this sense, the author conceives archives as a fundamental cultural construction for reality comprehension and capable of reifying historical characters.

Costa (2010), in communication science, dealt with the archival documents ethnography as a way of establishing a relationship between state and society. The author indicated that this ethnography approach allows constructing a bridge between past and present. Costa (2011) applied archival ethnography to analyze a play censorship process in São Paulo, in the 1950s. In the social sciences field, Vieira (2013) advocated the use of archival ethnography to understand the representation of cities in comics. To this end, the author moved between approaches such as archival and virtual ethnography, revealing the comics potential as a research object addressed with new methodological lenses.

In organization studies, we exemplify some more methodological points considered relevant to the study by Decker (2014), entitled "Solid intentions: an archival ethnography of corporate architecture and organizational remembering", using the archival ethnography approach. The author argues that the discussion about space in OS has not considered the collective memory and it is still studied in a managerial way. On the other hand, the author assumed that the architecture – represented by corporate buildings – is a significant component for organizational memory establishment.

Thus, the main objective of this research is discuss organizational memory with the lens of architecture when analyzing the process of attributing meaning to corporate buildings as well as the role of these spaces in memory practices in organizational life. In parallel, Decker (2014) also presented the possibility of using archival sources to understand how organizations assign meanings to their buildings in order to investigate changes in organizational practices.

Decker (2014) mentioned for the first time, within the OS scope, the possibility of archival ethnography as the main methodological strategy used in his investigation. Three collections of archives were compiled from three British multinationals (Unilever, Barclay Bank, and Standard Chartered Bank) in two West African countries (Ghana and Nigeria) during the decolonization period and the beginning of independence (1950-70), connoting the critical bias and post-colonialist research.

The procedures adopted by Decker (2014) provide clues about the advantages and difficulties of applying the archival ethnography methods. Initially, the author justified the archival

ethnography procedure by the fact that conventional methodologies could fail to reveal the architecture concept as artifacts that allude to both past and future and that can be scrutinized in a more complex way if we use archival sources and, consequently, their historical context. Thus, the archival ethnography opens the possibility for architecture investigation in their historical context, revealing multiple layers of meaning that can be reconstructed based on the archived materials.

Among the main aspects indicated by Decker (2014) for the archival ethnography operationalization in his investigation are the archive collections access organization and extension, as well as any existing casualties. Regarding **access**, three archives collections were researched, two private (Unilever and Barclays) and a public one (Standard Chartered Bank, housed in the London Metropolitan Archives). The access was negotiated, but some restrictions were established by the sources, such as the materials copyright access (authorization from the organizations or persons holding them), the time allowed for consultation (archives of the past 30 years could not be researched), and the approval of the articles before sent to journals, by the researched institutions. Nothing could be published without being screened by the organizations under study.

About the **collection structure**, the research was challenging because each set of archives followed its own organization criteria, which makes it difficult to identify where the relevant material can be located and increases considerably the research effort launching the researcher by chance, a casual identification process of relevant materials. Thus, a suggested way to deal with this casualty was the field note construction of any material that may seem relevant, although this can also be an arduous task, considering the file length and time for research.

Decker (2014) concluded that space does not always remain stabilized over time, but it is (re)interpreted by practices related to memory. In this context, archival ethnography revealed aspects not only associated with the organization's history but also enabled the discussion on how organizational memory practices have changed over time. Thus, "[...] it is precisely the shared understanding of a building that gives it meaning, which is communicated across space and time through collective memory and history. Without it, we cannot understand the meaning of the architecture that surrounds us." (Decker, 2014, p. 23). Here, the archival ethnography brings its potential and contribution by enabling the critically understanding of the shifts in organizational practices.

The contributions and possible paths of archival ethnography in management

The archival ethnography contribution to research in OS rests on the possibility of tracing the historical path related to an organizational phenomenon or practice. Also, delimiting a historical trajectory by the immersion process in historical archives may enlighten those who were endowed with voices during the practice of storing historical documents. At the same time, this immersion process allows us to (re)assemble the silences stored along this historical path.

Furthermore, the archival ethnography favors the dialogue with historical organizational actors, with the immersion in archival collections. In this sense, it is possible to take another look, critically and reflectively, considering the differences evidenced by dialogue process with the historical actors highlighted in the archives.

These tensions open paths to elucidate dynamics that remain hitherto obscure because of a lack of historical past knowledge. Thus, through archival ethnography, we can access different layers of historical meanings that were temporally constructed by underlying practices and discourses.

This methodological strategy strengthens and ratifies archives as a valid corpus construction source in management historical research. With archival ethnography, we can reduce the gaps established in the archives use, expanding their potential beyond issues related to access. This approach can also meet the desires of research agendas in management and OS areas permeated by historical issues, articulated in different ways, such as the practices and spaces organization. Also, it is useful in research whose discussions highlight the memory and its role in the (re)constitution and (re)meaning of organizational processes.

Concluding discussion

We aimed to discuss archival ethnography as a possibility for historical research in management, especially in the field of Organization Studies. We briefly presented a discussion about historical research articulation already published in management, highlighting the need and challenges of reflecting on time. In this sense, we focused on the characteristics and possibilities of studies from the archives, although these remain a minority in research. Finally, we presented the contributory potential of archival ethnography to research in management, especially when we consider that archives are now an active subject, capable of providing voice to discourses and silences underlying what is kept, thus expanding the access to past possibilities, considering not only the current stories told about it, but also what was not said or manifested.

In this way, the main archival ethnography contributions to OS rest on the ability to retrace historical paths related to organizational phenomena and practices and, then, access voices and silences that underlie them. By dialogue with historical actors emerging from the ethnographic field archives, we can critically reflect on the layers of meaning that emerge from the historical past. Thus, archival ethnography, as a methodological approach, contributes to enlighten tensions historically constructed and that may be related to different phenomena and organizational practices today and/or in the future.

Archival ethnography is one of the possible paths for research agendas whose nature is essentially historical and indicates to the need to deal with archival documents. Besides, we emphasize that this ethnographical approach presents possibilities of an association with other methodologies – which can overcome some limitations inherent to other research techniques, such as, for example, document analysis. The archival ethnography also opens doors for the unusual articulation of methodologies in an auxiliary way in historical studies, such as, for example, empathic understanding (Strati, 2007).

These contributions and possibilities can enrich historical research in management and OS scope as well as in other fields. However, it is necessary to deepen the debate on interrelationships with other methods, as well as the limitations that archival ethnography can overcome in other management areas. Finally, we are aware that this manuscript did not cover all debate dimensions on archival ethnography. Thus, we hope to encourage further discussions regarding methodological approaches to the use of archives in management research, articulating with other discussions and relevant topics.

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Authorship

Luma Louise Sousa Lopes

Ph.D. in administration by Universidade Estadual do Ceará (UECE). Professor of Administration at the UECE.

E-mail: lumalouise@gmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2961-4041>

Ana Silvia Rocha Ipiranga

Ph.D. in Labor and Organization Psychology by the Università Alma Mater Studiorum di Bologna, with postdoctoral research in administration by the Brazilian School of Public and Business Management at Fundação Getúlio Vargas. Professor at the Universidade Estadual do Ceará.

E-mail: silvia.ipiranga@uece.br

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8095-6800>

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Authors' contributions

First author: conceptualization (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), funding acquisition (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (equal), resources (equal), supervision (equal), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing-original draft (equal), writing-review & editing (equal).

Second author: conceptualization (equal), data curation (equal), formal analysis (equal), funding acquisition (equal), investigation (equal), methodology (equal), project administration (equal), resources (equal), supervision (equal), validation (equal), visualization (equal), writing-original draft (equal), writing-review & editing (equal).

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