

Historical Perspective: Using the Past to Study the Present¹

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Historical perspective refers to understanding a subject in light of its earliest phases and subsequent evolution. This perspective differs from history because its object is to sharpen one's vision of the present, not the past. When historical perspective is overlooked in social research, researchers may draw misleading conclusions. Historical perspective expands research horizons by encouraging study of the relative stability of phenomena, providing alternative explanations for phenomena, and aiding problem formulation and research design.

As pastor X steps out of bed he slips a neat disguise on.
That halo round his priestly head is really his horizon.
Hein, 1966, p. 14.

Like the pastor in Piet Hein's grook, researchers often are misled by "halos." Understanding any phenomenon depends on the ability to perceive limiting horizons, which like the priest's disguise, often blend in readily with the everyday world. In social research, *devaluing history* is one such perceptual limitation.

This does not mean that historical study is unappreciated (see, for example, Gergen, 1973; Kerlinger, 1979; Wren, 1979). Few people would disagree that history is a necessary component of good research. The requisite literature review preceding all studies acknowledges that progress in social science is based on the past. In addition, social scientists work explicitly to formulate "transhistorical" knowledge, knowledge that is generalizable across time (Laslett, 1980). Yet, although such historical perspective is neither new nor unstated, it frequently is unused. This paper calls attention to this anomaly by examining the contribution of historical perspective to theory and method.

Definition and Context

Historical perspective is the study of a subject in light of its earliest phases and subsequent evolution. Historical perspective differs from history in that the

object of historical perspective is to sharpen one's vision of the present, not the past. Using written documents and artifacts to study attitudes during the Depression is historical research, whereas using historical information about the Depression to explain differences in attitudes today is historical perspective. History provides the raw materials for historical perspective.

Although it seems logical to study any subject in light of its past, historical perspective as a research tool often is overlooked. Why? One reason is the dominant notion of progress. Nisbet (1980) states that the idea of progress, inexorable change over time from lower to higher states of knowledge and well-being, has been deeply ingrained in the culture of the Western world from the time of the Greeks to the present. As a result, people tend to look toward the future rather than to the past.

U.S. national history, for example, is steeped in stories illustrating the value placed on "progress." Early settlers adopted an ideology of divine mission—to endure and conquer the harsh New World—as much from the reality of the situation as from a need to rationalize their emigration and to promote the virtues of their adopted land to those who stayed behind. "Later politicians, statesmen, and publicists . . . continued to think of the history of America in terms of conquest of the continent and ultimately of the diffusion of its ideology throughout the world" (Handlin, 1979, p. 54). The image of a young man on horseback, riding into the sunset and facing

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whatever the future will bring (Maule, 1945) remains compelling. Horatio Alger and the Lone Ranger are heroes of this tradition. And in the real world, test pilots, astronauts, and computer engineers are idealized for pushing their lives past endurance in pursuit of progress (Kidder, 1981; Wolfe, 1979). In this future-oriented American vision, "history," as Henry Ford once said, "is more or less bunk" (Bartlett, 1968, p. 714).

This vision is deliberately overstated to make a point: progress is a strong cultural value, and it is antithetical to the use of historical perspective. The statement "social research has come a long way" presupposes that the present is both different from and better than the past. One cannot both dismiss the past as primitive and use it as a key to understanding the present. Thus, most social scientists tend to use the past only to measure historic progress, rather than to bring contemporary events into clearer focus.

How does historical perspective focus research studies on the present? It provokes the major question: What elements in the findings or theory are transhistorical? Answering this question is one test of "grand" theory—separating that which is truly universal in human behavior from that which is not. However, given that much of social science is not universal, a second "midrange" question emerges: Within what time period are the findings and theory generalizable?

"Grand" Generalization

Although many aspects of human behavior change slowly and cannot be seen from "up close," the changes are obvious when viewed over a sufficient span of time. The assumptions underlying the adult life stage literature and the factors contributing to Japanese business success provide two examples.

An extensive literature exists suggesting that all people have similar midlife experiences (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977). People in midlife are presumed to face feelings of job entrapment, changes in family relationships as children leave home, knowledge of the limitations of their ultimate career success, and a critical awareness of physical aging and death (Jaques, 1965; Kay, 1974; Osherson, 1980; Robbins, 1978). These experiences seem commonsensical; yet the historical record suggests that this life stage is not historically generalizable.

Advances in medical technology over the past 300 years have dramatically affected the experiences of

birth and death. During the colonial era, birth rates were high. The seventeenth and eighteenth century diaries of Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewall indicate that Mather had 15 children and Sewall had 14 children born at regular intervals between the time Sewall was 25 and 50 years old (Lawrence, 1979). The assumed midlife "empty nest syndrome" may not have afflicted early Americans because there usually were no gaps between generations (Demos, 1977).

In addition to producing the "empty nest," medical technology has altered perceptions of death. Death rates in childbirth were high in colonial times. Only 2 of Mather's children survived him, and 9 of Sewall's 14 children died during his life. The two diarists exhibit a fascination with death, and apparently this interest was not uncommon at the time (Vinovskis, 1978). Their lifelong familiarity with death contrasts with contemporary experience, in which the dying are removed from homes to hospitals. Today, many people reach their middle years before suffering the loss of family or friends. Physical aging and death must be faced suddenly instead of experienced as part of everyday life. It seems likely that the "critical awareness of physical aging and death" judged to be an important component of midlife today was not experienced the same way 200 years ago. Indeed, Demos (1978) suggests that it was passage from midlife to old age that occasioned the equivalent crisis for colonial New England adults.

Perceptions of death and life clearly have undergone major changes over time (Aries, 1981). These examples show that theories of midlife may place undue weight on characteristics that appear tied to a historical time period instead of on immutable human characteristics (Lawrence, 1980). It is unknown whether "midlife" is a universal human phenomenon or a twentieth century creation.

While highlighting problems relating to individual behavior, historical perspective also is appropriate for organizational and cultural phenomena. The characteristics of Japanese businesses, in which there has been much recent interest, provide an example. The American press seems to believe that nobody does it better than the Japanese ("How Japan Does It," 1981; Kraar, 1975). More efficient and more productive than many of their Western counterparts, the Japanese now are technologically competitive and severely testing Western feelings of superiority in the areas of "progress" and "hard work."

Japanese success frequently is attributed to East-West cultural differences (Abegglen, 1958; Ouchi, 1981). Distinct characteristics are assumed to be long standing and widely shared within each culture, but not between the cultures. Thus, it has been noted with surprise that Japanese management styles can be transplanted successfully to this country (Ouchi & Jaeger, 1978). The use of historical perspective shows that there may be more than meets the cultural eye to understanding why Japanese firms are so productive.

One frequently discussed factor is the relationship between Japanese managers and workers. Japanese workers are said to expect lifetime employment, seniority-based compensation, and a paternalistic or family-oriented attitude from their employers. Japanese managers are expected to know the names of their employees, to labor beside them for some portion of the day, and to be a resource to employees having personal problems. Managers remain with the same company throughout their lives, increasing their usefulness and contribution to the company. These characteristics have led to using a family analogy to describe Japanese firms.

Recent work by Fruin (1978, 1980) suggests that these assumed cultural characteristics do not hold up under the scrutiny of history. According to Fruin's examination of the personnel records of the Kikkoman Shoyu Company since its incorporation in 1918, considerable variation exists in the actual practice of lifetime employment, seniority-based compensation, and the family-firm ideology.

Briefly outlined, Fruin's studies on lifetime employment suggest that the length of time groups of employees stay with the company varies directly with their educational level, their average age on entering the company, and economic conditions at the time of entry. Employees entering the company during periods of economic upswing tend to be younger and less educated. These groups of employees receive the most in-house training and have the least transferable skills, so it is not surprising that they also are the groups that come closest to lifetime employment. Between 1918 and 1948, only 16.1 percent of all employees entering the firm with 8 years of education were likely to leave the firm within 10 years. In contrast, 52 percent of all employees entering the firm during the same period with 16 years of education were likely to leave the firm within 10 years.

Economics, World War II, and an increasingly Westernized industrial community had a tremendous

impact on Japanese employment practices. General labor became scarce after the war, partly as a result of the intensification of knowledge-based industry, standardization of the educational system, and adoption of the American ideal of "equal treatment for equally trained employees" (Fruin, 1978, p. 294). Under these conditions, the group for whom lifetime employment was most likely changed completely. Those having more education stayed longer than those having less. For employees entering the firm between 1949 and 1976, 44 percent of those with 8 years of education were likely to leave the firm within 10 years as opposed to only 6.3 percent of those with 16 years of education.

Although Fruin's work is a case study, he suggests that the employee and industry characteristics of Kikkoman are representative of Japanese industry. Even if Kikkoman is not typical, the results are evidence of an important contradiction. Contrary to popular belief that Japanese employment practices are homogeneous and rooted in a long history, employment practices in one major firm have varied a great deal. Although culture has had a strong influence on worker-employer relationships, these relationships have been affected even more directly by economic and demographic factors. Thus, compared with the United States, effective Japanese management practices may derive more from cultural similarities than from cultural differences. The attribution of Japanese productivity solely to differing personnel practices reflecting long-standing East-West cultural differences may, at best, be a simplistic explanation warranting further study. Using historical perspective puts this complexity into higher relief.

"Midrange" Generalization

The foregoing examples show that the historical record does not have to be examined in depth before the "halo" of history is exposed. This does not mean that without historical perspective all research is compromised. It does, however, underscore the importance of answering the second question raised by historical perspective: Within what time period are the results and theory generalizable? Usually, the time boundaries of a contemporary study are defined by default as the length of time during which the study is conducted. If asked, most researchers probably would say that their results apply in a larger time frame. It is reasonable to assume, for instance, that the description of an organization's culture is valid

beyond the specific time during which the data were collected. But how far in the past is the same description valid? One cannot know the future, but by examining the past one can get some idea of whether one is watching a mountain stream or a glacier.

The study of adult lives is one area in which historical perspective has been used to observe slow moving phenomena. In the mid-1960s Schaie (1965) and Baltes (1968) introduced a 3-factor model for use in the description and explanation of true changes in adult development. These papers led to a continuing discussion and exploration of how the effects of the three factors—age, cohort, and period—can be untangled (Buss, 1974; Glenn, 1977; Palmore, 1978; Schaie & Baltes, 1975). Age effects are those attributable to the individual's chronological age, cohort effects are those explained by the similarities among individuals born during the same time, and period effects are those attributable to events in the historical period during which the observations are made. This type of analysis was developed to examine complicated behavioral questions. How can one decide, for example, whether an observation made of a group of 40-year-olds is the result of their age, the fact that they were all born during the same year and have experienced the same social influences during their lives (cohort), or the characteristics of the historical time during which the observations are made (period)? If age, cohort, and period effects are not taken into account, erroneous conclusions may be drawn.

Schaie and Parham (1974) describe changes in attitudes toward social responsibility. Attitudes were measured using a 44-item version of the Social Responsibility Scale (Gough, 1955). Subjects indicated their level of agreement on items such as: (1) A person who does not vote is not a good citizen; (2) If I get too much change in a store I always give it back; and (3) It is all right to get around the law if you don't actually break it. The data were collected from a random sample of individuals between the ages of 21 and 70 at three different times: 1956, 1963, and 1970 (population $N=18,000$; sample $N=2,151$). In addition, repeated measurement data were collected from 161 subjects during the same three years. Their results indicate that without multiple time and cohort comparisons the study would have concluded that attitudes toward social responsibility are stable over the adult life span. Instead, through a research design based on historical perspective, they found that attitudes toward social responsibility exhibit several

changes. First, concern for social responsibility drops over the three measurement periods. Second, although overall concern declines, younger men in later measurement periods had higher concern for social responsibility than did younger men in earlier measurement periods. Finally, older men in later measurement periods had lower concern for social responsibility than did older men in the earlier measurement periods. Schaie and Parham speculate that these differences may be the result of social and historical events: "Perhaps there is a greater opportunity for more political and social involvement recently on the part of the younger male. In the case of older men, perhaps they are relied upon by society to a lesser extent and, due to changes in retirement laws, for instance, disengage at an earlier age" (1974, p. 491).

In a variety of ways, this study is an apt use of historical perspective. First, the study was designed on the assumption that one cannot generalize findings about change over the adult life span using only cross-sectional data. Second, by comparing responses of groups across time, the study examines the stability of attitudes toward social responsibility. Finally, historical perspective was used to interpret the findings. The discovery that attitudes of similar age groups appear to change over time was explained by discussing the differential impact of social and historical conditions on each birth cohort.

What is still missing from this study is an understanding of how the time units selected for study are relevant to the findings. Longitudinal data were collected at more or less arbitrary times, and the cohorts were selected on the basis of convenience rather than any theoretical belief that these particular age groups were meaningfully different. Schaie and Parham conclude that people in different generations respond differently on the social responsibility scale, but generations are defined a priori by 7-year age cohorts. One does not know whether each 7-year period defines an age cohort whose members have similar social and historical experiences, and thus similar attitudes towards social responsibility, or whether significant differences in attitudes occur within cohorts. All the examples presented to this point focus on using historical perspective to test transhistorical generalizability. However, concern for universal historical truths must be matched by interest in local historical understanding. The midrange generalizability of most research should be acknowledged and defined.

The Future of Historical Perspective

The historical perspective provided by the age, cohort, and period methodology, combined with a concern for defining meaningful units of time, can help generate new research questions as well as look at old questions in new ways. For example, in career research it would be profitable to study organizational occupations longitudinally. One is accustomed to thinking of managerial careers as having a fairly clear set of characteristics. However, recent work suggests that organizations have life cycles with distinctive characteristics at different stages (Kimberly, Miles, & Associates, 1980). It is possible that the organizational career of "manager" adjusts to the life stage of the organization. Thus, if managers always are studied in middle-aged organizations, it may be that the career characteristics taken for granted are really the result of the age of the organizations studied and not the career itself. Using longitudinal research to study managerial careers over the life of an organization would help answer that question.

A cross-sectional approach also could be used to separate career from organizational life cycle characteristics. The characteristics of a single occupation might be compared in organizations of different ages. For example, assuming that law enforcement is one of the first municipal occupations in any new community, one could compare the career of police officer in a newly incorporated rural town with the same career in an older, established rural town to determine which career characteristics are independent of the organization's stage of development.

It also is possible that observed career characteristics result from the historical period during which the data are collected. Women flight attendants, for example, experienced a dramatic change in the meaning of their work following new Affirmative Action and Equal Employment Opportunity regulations (Lessor, 1984). What was once a temporary job,

because of mandatory retirement with marriage or pregnancy, is now a career. One question suggested by this approach is how economic conditions influence companies' perceptions of the technological obsolescence of their engineers. When the aerospace industry lost large military contracts in the 1960s, the demand for engineers was low. Companies could pick and choose their employees and did not have to question the technical skills of those who remained. In contrast, today's high demand for technical skills must make companies wonder whether they still have the best people on the job—the grass always looks greener on the other side of the fence. Perceptions of obsolescence may have more to do with changes in demand than with changes in the actual competence of the work force.

These are just a few examples of questions suggested by historical perspective. The analysis made possible by thinking of research design and problem formulation in terms of longitudinal, cohort, and period effects would be particularly useful for anchoring research findings more clearly to their individual and social origins.

To conclude, historical perspective is a simple but crucial tool in understanding the present context of social research. It pushes thinking about alternative explanations for phenomena, helps identify more and less stable concepts, and expands research horizons by suggesting new ways of studying old questions and controlling for longitudinal, cohort, and period effects. Considerable research has been done on factors within the individual, within the occupation, and within the organization, but the influence of larger scale social and historical factors on human behavior is not well understood. The use of historical perspective is necessary to frame theory and research within their time-related boundaries. Devaluing history will cease to be a "halo" limiting research horizons when historical perspective is included as an everyday consideration in methodological thinking.

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