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How theorising can enhance historical accounting research

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ABSTRACT

Historical accounting research is sometimes criticised for lack of relevance to contemporary accounting issues. One approach that researchers have adopted to demonstrate relevance is the use of theory and theorisation. This paper studies three frameworks for theorisation developed initially in the organisation studies literature: Ann Langley's "seven types of sensemaking", Sue Llewellyn's "five levels of theorising", and Mairi Maclean, Charles Harvey and Stewart Clegg's "four conceptions of history in organisation studies". These all emphasise the different forms that theorising can take in historical studies, from narrative reasoning, where much of the theory is "behind the scenes", to highly structured and general theories that may be drawn on and refined in specific historical studies. The paper suggests that theorisation can enhance historical accounting research by stimulating research ideas, identifying important variables, factors and relationships, suggesting existing concepts helpful for identifying relevant evidence, allowing for creativity in developing new concepts and refining existing ones; and ensuring a coherent narrative that is true to the evidence and sensitive to context.

Keywords: accounting history; theory; theorising; sensemaking; levels of theory; narrative.

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1. Introduction

"Nowadays, accounting is often perceived as a discipline focused on contemporary issues as if the past really is a foreign place, and the phenomena there, including accounting, have no bearing on explaining or shaping the present" (McBride & Verma, 2021: 2). This may suggest that historical accounting research faces challenges in being accepted as an important contribution to our modern understanding of accounting. Accounting historians have used various approaches to convince the wider academic community that their work is indeed relevant. One of these approaches is an increased use of theory and theorising in historical accounting studies. This matches the growth in theorising in qualitative accounting studies more generally, where many researchers draw on diverse theories, particularly social theories (Jack, 2017). Although the present paper concentrates on the use of theory and theorising in historical accounting research, the conclusions drawn are relevant to any mode of accounting research that seeks to understand accounting practices and ideas within an interpretive and critical framework (see for example Parker & Northcott, 2016; de Villiers et al., 2019).

As Carnegie et al. (2020: 1) note: "Historical accounting research has had an upward trajectory in terms of theorising accounting's past within the past 35 years or so." The time period stated in this quotation suggests that theory was beginning to become significant for historical accounting research in the mid-1980s. This would link the growth of theory-informed accounting history (at least that written in the English language) to the emergence of contributions such as the Foucault-informed studies of value-added reporting in the United Kingdom by Burchell et al. (1985), the relationship between education and management by Hoskin and Macve (1986, 1988), and the emergence of standard costing by Miller and O'Leary (1987), the application of labour process theory to study how accounting was used to control businesses by Armstrong (1985, 1987) and Neimark and Tinker (1986), and the use of political economy ideas (influenced by Marx and others) by Tinker (1980). These and other historical studies of accounting were reactions against the characterisation by Hopwood (1985) of previous historical accounting research as, in the main, "partial, uncritical, atheoretical and intellectually isolated" (p. 366). They were forerunners of what was subsequently to be named "New Accounting History" (Miller et al., 1991; see also Bertalan & Napier, 2016).

Over the years since the emergence of New Accounting History, the extent to which theoretical thinking has permeated historical accounting research has indeed grown along with the literature of accounting history. Recently, Ferri et al. (2021) examined 1300 articles appearing in six accounting journals over the period 1996

to 2015. They found that writers not only use a range of different theories but also apply and develop theories differently. They emphasise the distinction between the process of *theorising*, where theories are developed, and the application of theory to provide explanation and understanding of historical phenomena. Ferri et al. (2021) use the "Five Levels of Theorising" identified and explained by Llewellyn (2003): this framework was also applied by Carnegie et al. (2020) in examining historical studies of the roles of accounting in organisations.

But what is "theorising"? A dictionary definition of the verb "theorise" states that this means "to form a theory; to form opinions solely by theories; to speculate" (*The Chambers Dictionary*, 2014: 1619). The second and third definitions are interesting in that they reflect commonly expressed doubts of many traditional historians about theorising: that this involves writing history that lacks a "firm basis in the 'archive'" (Carnegie & Napier, 1996: 8), and is written to a "paradigm" (Fleischman & Tyson, 1997). The first definition depends on what is understood by the word "theory". Again turning to a dictionary definition, we find that "theory" may be defined as:

> An explanation or system of anything; an exposition of the abstract principles of a science or art; an idea or explanation that has not yet been proved, a conjecture; speculation as opposed to practice; an ideal, hypothetical or abstract situation; ideal, hypothetical or abstract reasoning. (*The Chambers Dictionary*, 2014: 1619)

This definition brings out the extent to which theory may be *a priori*, something that already exists and may be used to motivate and inform specific research projects, and may also be *a posteriori*, something that is developed and refined as an outcome of research. This process of development and refining is what we call "theorising". As Ferri et al. (2021: 486) observe: "The outcome of theorizing is the explanation of empirical phenomena via concepts and relationships between the concepts at higher levels of abstraction."

In this paper, I consider how theorising can contribute to enhancing historical accounting research. I do this through considering three frameworks for theorising that have been developed in the organisational literature, and through examining how they may be relevant to historical studies of accounting. The first framework is the "Seven Strategies for Sensemaking" proposed by Langley (1999), which was originally designed to analyse dynamic phenomena within organisations. The second framework is the "Five Levels of Theorising" of Llewellyn (2003), already referred to. The third framework is the "Four Conceptions of History in Organisation Studies" developed by Maclean et al. (2016), which can be used to suggest that theorising may take different forms during the writing up of a single research project.

2. Seven types of sensemaking

Langley (1999) faced the challenge of developing useful theories relating to "process data". Such data have many similarities to those examined by historians, and often arise in broader accounting research, particularly studies of accounting within organisations. As Langley (1999: 692) puts it:

> First, [process data] deal mainly with sequences of "events". [. . .] Second, they often involve multiple levels and units of analysis whose boundaries are ambiguous. Third, their temporal embeddedness often varies in terms of precision, duration, and relevance. Finally, despite the primary focus on events, process data tend to be eclectic, drawing in phenomena such as changing relationships, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations.

Langley develops seven "strategies for sensemaking" as approaches to developing theories designed to provide effective explanations and understandings of organisational processes.

The first strategy is *narrative*. This involves the construction of a "story" from the data. A story is more than a chronology, where various events are placed in a sequence. The narrative aims to set out evidence within a structure that, by itself, provides reasons, explanations and understandings for what the researcher concludes has taken place. Theory in the sense of higher-order abstraction may not be explicit in a narrative, but the researcher is likely to use reasoning about cause and effect and about the psychology of actors involved in the events being narrated to arrive at explanations of the events that are embedded in the narrative. As Napier (2001) has noted, literary studies of the writing of history have identified different styles of presenting a narrative of events that presuppose different ways in which events may be related to each other and through which the impact of human action can be understood. Langley (1999: 695) notes that almost all empirical research into process data will involve the setting out of a narrative, although this may not be the primary focus of analysis. The narrative strategy is likely to involve a small number of research sites, often just a single "case study".

The second strategy is *quantification*. If the narrative strategy is concentrates on a richly articulated story, quantification requires a significant degree of abstraction from raw data to assess the data systematically against either a predetermined categorisation of types or a taxonomy that emerges inductively from the data analysis. Quantification relies on a large number of "points of analysis", although these could be drawn from a single research site. Langley (1999: 698) notes that quantification may enhance generalisability but may sacrifice the rich context from which the original data emerge. Classifications and taxonomies may oversimplify the data to fit "parsimonious theoretical conceptualizations". Although Langley

does not specifically mention this, the process of quantitative theorisation may involve "data mining", where statistical relationships in the data are identified and developed into a "theoretical model" that becomes a basis for explanation of the phenomena being researched.

Langley's third strategy involves the use of *alternate templates*. Here, "templates" are abstract models of how events may occur, using different explanatory frameworks. For example, one template may attempt to make sense of behaviour by positing that actors are "rational economic agents", while a competing template may explain the same phenomena in terms of the constraints imposed by organisational structure, with no reference to individual agency. Langley (1999: 699) suggests that this strategy "is essentially deductive", where "predictions of the competing theories are formally 'tested' in a hypothetico-deductive fashion, with specific predictions being refuted to reject weaker theories". However, Langley acknowledges that the alternate templates strategy often uses different theories to reveal broader aspects of a situation that a single theory would not necessarily capture.

The fourth strategy for theorising identified by Langley is *grounded theory*, associated with the work of Glaser and Strauss (2017) and Strauss and Corbin (1990). Langley (1999: 700) suggests that this approach may be appropriate for analysing data from a single case, but "it demands a fairly large number of comparable incidents that are all richly described" with the intention of identifying a small number of "core categories" to integrate the various theoretical concepts deduced from the data into a "coherent whole". She suggests that the grounded theory approach has similarities to induction, where the researcher looks for patterns and regularities in the data and attempts to build a reasonably parsimonious model that "fits" the data. The key, though, is that this is a "bottom up" form of theorising, relying on empirical details (in the case of historical accounting research, this would be the archival material identified by the researcher). Because the theory is "grounded" in the data of a particular study, it may be difficult to apply the theory to a different situation without losing some of the richness of the theory – a grounded theory may help to provide a deep understanding of the specific example being researched, but it may be difficult to generalise the theory to other examples.

Langley's fifth strategy is *visual mapping*. Such an approach involves a graphical representation of the relationships among different events, which can present these events within a time dimension and show which events influence others. Different types of event, such as decisions, activities, and factors outside the control of the organisation, may be represented using different shapes. Langley (1999: 703) is not completely convinced that a visual map is more than an "intermediary step between the raw data and a more abstract conceptualization",

and she observes that it is difficult to present "factors such as power, conflict, and emotion". However, she concludes that presenting the ways in which a series of events may be inter-related may provide a useful stage in developing a more articulated theorisation.

The sixth strategy presented by Langley is *temporal bracketing*, which, she suggests, reflects the structuration theory of Giddens (1984). This approach looks for continuities and discontinuities within a specific research setting over a period of time. Within a particular "phase", a dynamic may be identified that makes sense of decisions taken by actors and their outcomes, but that may carry the seeds of a shock or discontinuity. A theorisation needs to model the "normal" dynamics within phases while also explaining how discontinuities arise and change the research setting:

> The decomposition of data into successive adjacent periods enables the explicit examination of how actions of one period lead to changes in the context that will affect action in subsequent periods. (Langley, 1999: 703).

Finally, Langley (1999: 704) refers to a *synthetic strategy* that attempts to develop a predictive theory from an analysis of multiple events or cases. Such a theory may present similarities with a contingency theory approach in that it seeks to identify a range of factors that can vary in different cases and predict phenomena for a specific case from the "explanatory variables" identified for that case. These factors need not be quantifiable, so developing a "synthetic variance model" differs from a quantification strategy. Synthesis implies the need for multiple events or cases, so would not be an appropriate strategy for theorisation for a specific research example, but if a synthetic model has been developed on other data, it can be "tested" by reference to a specific example.

Langley assesses the seven strategies in terms of three criteria proposed by Weick (1989) for assessing theories: accuracy, which is the extent to which the theorisation reflects the detail of the data; generality, which reflects the range of situations to which the theory may be applied; and simplicity, which addresses the number of components (variables and relationships) in a theory. Langley (1999: 707) suggests that narrative and grounded theory strategies are more likely to generate theories that are high on accuracy but low on generality and simplicity, while synthesis and quantification will tend to produce theories that are low on accuracy (as they abstract much of the underlying details) but high on simplicity and generality. However, she notes that strategies for theorising will depend on the intended function of the theory. If we want to "tell a good story" (Napier, 1989: 241) – one that is well grounded in the archival evidence, is enjoyable to read and

improves our understanding of the phenomena – then a narrative strategy would be indicated, or a grounded theory strategy if we want to develop an explicit data-driven "conceptual framework" that helps to make sense of our story at a more abstract level. Using visual mapping or alternate templates may provide ways of thinking about our historical phenomena by teasing out relations and sequences and by comparing different explanations of the phenomena. Temporal bracketing may be a useful way of breaking a complex sequence of events down into separate periods – a "periodisation" – though Langley (1999: 704) warns that "there is no *a priori* guarantee that discontinuities will naturally synchronize themselves to produce unequivocal periods." Finally, researchers with rich sets of historical data that can be quantified or otherwise classified by reference to a parsimonious set of "variables" can use quantification and synthesis strategies to develop theories that may have greater possibilities for generality and predictive value.

Finally, Langley (1999: 708) stresses that theorisation is not a mechanical process but requires inspiration that draws on empirical data, reflection, and prior knowledge of both theory and earlier research. She concludes by suggesting an iterative approach to theorising:

> [W]e should not have to be shy about mobilizing both inductive (data-driven) approaches and deductive (theory-driven) approaches iteratively or simultaneously as inspiration guides us. There is room not only for building on existing constructs to develop new relationships […] but for designing […] research that selectively takes concepts from different theoretical traditions and adapts them to the data at hand, or takes ideas from the data and attaches them to theoretical perspectives, enriching those theories as it goes along.

Theorising aims to produce theories, but are all theories basically the same in terms of structure and objectives? Langley (1999) examines different ways of generating a theory, and she is moving away from the notion that the paradigm of "theory" may be found in the natural sciences. Llewellyn (2003), who does not cite Langley's work, extends this criticism, and develops different "levels of theorising" to help explain the different forms that theory may take.

3. Five levels of theorising

Llewellyn (2003: 664) begins by criticising the tendency of organisational theorists to stress generality and predictive value as the hallmarks of a "good" theory, noting that a "focus on generic behaviours (and structures) and generalization excludes an interest in emergent, localized phenomena", and "ignores the 'contextualization'

of behaviours and structures that may be essential to understand them". On the other hand, "empirical data are always pre-theorized, the world is understood only through particular 'ways of seeing'. […] As a consequence, new theories bring new objects into view and the 'same' empirical object appears differently through different theoretical 'lens'" (Llewellyn, 2003: 666). Llewellyn observes that theorisation operates in different ways, and that the actors being studied also have their own (probably implicit) theories, for example about cause and effect relationships. She sets out five "levels of theorisation" – it is unfortunate that she uses the word "level" here, as this suggests an ordering or hierarchy that could be interpreted as suggesting that there are "higher-order" theorisations that are in some way superior to "lower-order" theorisations. Llewellyn is ambiguous as to whether she would accept such a hierarchy, but producing a "ranking" of different approaches to theorising would not be consistent with her overall objective of advocating for theorisations that "fit" the issue being researched.

The five levels of theorising are (1) metaphor theories; (2) differentiation theories; (3) concepts theories; (4) theorising settings; and (5) grand theorising. *Metaphor* theories seek to provide insightful "images" of micro-level phenomena that provide new and insightful "ways of seeing" phenomena, as readers of research translate the phenomena into something with which they are more familiar. The complex ways in which different organisations engage with their rivalry with other organisations could be explained as "competition", leaving different interpretations of the metaphor open to different readers. This example shows how terms that originally were metaphors, borrowed from different contexts, can become "naturalised" and no longer count as metaphors.

In a historical narrative, the language used by the researcher is likely to include metaphors. For example, Napier (1997) looked at how the relationship between a parent company and other companies in which the parent was the majority shareholder changed as the metaphor for the relationship moved from "allies" (creating an image of "equal friends and partners") to "subsidiaries" (with an image of power and direction). *Differentiation* theories "create meaning and significance through setting up contrasts and categories that order the world" (Llewellyn, 2003: 672). Llewellyn stresses dualisms/oppositions as ways of differentiating, although differentiation theories would also include taxonomies with multiple elements.

Metaphor and differentiation are seen by Llewellyn as precursors of *concepts*, which are likely to be more general and abstract than the images implied by metaphor and differentiation. Concepts "name" particular practices as examples of broader behaviour. For example, Napier (1998) used the concepts of "collectivity" and "business company" to differentiate forms of corporate

governance in explaining the changing role of external auditors in the UK and how this had an impact on auditor liability for negligent misstatements.

Concepts theories are likely to examine how individuals behave in the context of organisations or wider society – as Llewellyn (2003: 673) notes: "The conceptual is the 'highest' level of theorization that can still take the agent as its unit of analysis." Llewellyn sees concepts theories as ways of theorising about practices, particularly if the concepts being used bring out the contested nature of practices. Often, concepts reflect both subjective and objective aspects of experience. Llewellyn (2003: 674) gives the example of "accountability", which "can describe both a [subjective] feeling of responsibility to and for others and [an objective] structural aspect of organizations that sets up a system through which people are called to account."

Llewellyn's fourth level is *theorising contexts*. Llewellyn (2003: 675) notes the contribution of Hopwood (1983) to encouraging accounting researchers to study accounting not just as a technical practice but also as something that operates within organisations and society. Napier (2020: 34) has categorised research that studies "how accounting impacts on specific individuals and organisations, and more broadly on society" from a historical viewpoint as "socio-historical accounting research", and much of this research theorises at Llewellyn's fourth level. Research that studies how the roles of accounting systems in organisations emerge, are preserved and reproduced, and change over time, would involve theorising contexts. For example, Maali and Napier (2010) used the theory of organisational culture developed by Schein (2004) to examine the factors, including accounting methods, that underpinned the creation of an early Islamic bank. Although key individuals were important in the narrative, it was the broader external context within which the bank was established that the research sought to theorise, rather than the behaviour of such individuals.

The final level of theorising is *grand theorising*. Grand theories are:

> [M]eta-narratives […] formulated at a high level of generality [that] reflect ideas that have been arrived at by thinking through issues and relationships in an abstract way – rather than being derived from empirical research. […] At the extreme, such theorizing may aim for universal explanations that are beyond history and society. (Llewellyn, 2003: 676)

Llewellyn considers the work of Marx and Habermas as exemplars of grand theory, on the basis that they concentrate on understanding the broad structures of society (with specific organisations, let alone individuals, playing a smaller part in their analysis), and that they adopt a very high level of abstraction.

In their analysis of a selection of historical accounting studies relating to organisations, Carnegie et al. (2020) find that theorising concepts is the predominant mode of theorising, with concepts often being derived from metaphors and differentiation. They find very little use of theorising settings and even less use of grand theories. Ferri et al. (2021: 487) combined Llewellyn's first two levels (metaphor and differentiation) into a broader category of narrative theorising, involving "micro-levels of analysis (individuals, micro-actions and micro-processes). Level 3 (theorising concepts) was seen as a mid-range approach, while Levels 4 and 5 (theorising settings and grand theories) were seen as "the networking of concepts into more abstract theories at macro levels of analysis (focusing on structures, patterns and regularities)". They found that narrative was the most common approach in historical accounting studies, with the aim of "understanding rather than explaining a specific phenomenon" (Ferri et al., 2021: 495). Theorising in terms of concepts included studies of how financial and cost accounting concepts emerged and developed, as well as developing and refining analytical concepts used to understand and explain the behaviour of actors in the settings being researched. Consistent with the findings of Carnegie et al. (2020), Ferri et al. (2021) found less use of theorising settings and grand theories.

The frameworks of both Langley (1999) and Llewellyn (2003) have been available for about 20 years. A more recent attempt to provide a framework for thinking about different approaches to theorising within historical management research has been developed by Maclean et al. (2016), who have suggested four conceptions of history within organisation studies. These are considered in the next section.

4. Four conceptions of history in organisation studies

Maclean et al. (2016: 612) propose two dimensions within which they position their four conceptions of history. The first dimension is purpose: why is history used in studying organisations. Two potential purposes are identified: *exposition* of ideas, concepts and theories through the use of historical resources, and *interpretation* of present phenomena through identifying continuities and discontinuities with the past. The second dimension relates to what Maclean et al. (2016: 612) describe as the "mode of inquiry" of the research. They identify two modes of inquiry: a *social scientific* mode of inquiry, where the aim is to identify and theorise overall and general patterns, and a *narrative* mode of inquiry, where "the expression of theoretical ideas remains embedded within the story being told" (Maclean et al., 2016: 612). Combining the two purposes and the two modes of inquiry generates four conceptions of history in organisation studies.

The conception *history as evaluating* combines exposition with a social scientific mode of inquiry. Within this conception, the main role of history is to provide a range of settings in which pre-existing theory may be tested and refined: "history serves as a laboratory or testing ground to confront theory with reality in an incremental process of knowledge creation" (Maclean et al., 2016: 613). Some researchers wish to apply theories developed to understand and explain contemporary practices to historical situations to demonstrate the generality of the theories. Other researchers may wish to show that their theories can explain differences between historical and contemporary settings. This can be observed in the many historical accounting studies drawing on the notion of governmentality as promulgated by Foucault (1991). This theoretical construct is itself dynamic, as Foucault theorises that governmentality may take different forms in different settings across space and time. Accounting historians often examine how far the basic notion of governmentality needs to be developed and refined to provide an adequate explanation of how accounting and other means of control and discipline worked in practice in a specific setting.

The *history as explicating* conception combines the social scientific mode of inquiry with the purpose of interpretation. History is used to apply and develop theory to reveal the operation of transformative social processes (Maclean et al., 2016: 613). For example, a theory may posit causal mechanisms as explanations for change, but researchers may suspect that such explanations may not be robust across different temporal settings. Using history to explicate may start with an initial theory that is "skeletal" rather than highly developed (Laughlin, 1995). Such a skeletal framework may suggest potential concepts and their relationships. At the outset of the research, concepts are under-defined but direct the researcher to focus on specific aspects of the archive. Accounting historians will refine and clarify the skeletal concepts and relationships and may even identify new concepts and relationships that may augment the original skeletal theory.

The approach *history as conceptualising* combines a narrative mode of inquiry with an expository purpose, with history being used to generate new theoretical constructs (Maclean et al., 2016: 614). Even though the narrative sets out the specific circumstances of the historical events being investigated, the researcher may be able to identify within the specific narrative some new concept or relationship with a more general application. Maclean et al. (2016) suggest that grounded theory approaches for analysing historical material may be regarded as a form of history as conceptualising, and accounting historians increasingly report that, in considering archival material, they identify and code "themes" that are used to produce a "theory" in the form of a more generalised and abstract statement.

Finally, the conception *history as narrating* reflects a narrative mode of inquiry and a purpose of interpretation. The narration is valued not just for the specific story it tells but also for the insights that are given about the form and the origins of significant present-day phenomena. "Theory is largely offstage, with propositions and arguments emerging inductively from the accumulation, ordering, and analysis of historical evidence" (Maclean et al., 2016: 614).

The *history as evaluating* approach will usually begin with a richly articulated theoretical framework. The historical research aims to test the theory (in some cases, this will involve the formulation of explicit hypotheses or propositions derived from the theory) in new settings. A possibly outcome of testing will be that the theory undergoes a nuanced refinement. At the other extreme, *history as narrating* will focus on telling the "story", without necessarily aiming to develop broader propositions that could be relevant to wider settings. If each research setting is regarded as unique, then generalisation will not be an important aim of history as narrating. However, researchers are likely to use broader concepts "behind the scenes" to explain the actions of individuals and, to a lesser extent, organisations. An example of this would be the assumption that individuals are "economically rational" as a way of explaining their actions and choices.

Maclean et al. (2016) appear to present their conceptions of history as mutually exclusive, but their taxonomy provides insights into how theorising can be a dynamic process. Many accounting historians will start from an archive and want to establish clear understandings of the chronology of events (perhaps through constructing a timeline) and the significant actors and their relationships. At this stage, theory may play little if any part in the development of a historical understanding of past accounting events and practices. Having produced a "history as narrative" story of the past, accounting historians may then look to a general theoretical framework to provide deeper understanding, generating a "history as evaluating" story. However, the process of evaluating a general theory or applying a broad concept may reveal areas where the general idea does not fit neatly to the historical material. Researchers may then try to extract a simpler or more basic framework from the general theory, through "history as explicating". As the historical material is interpreted through the lens of this skeletal framework, theoretical developments and expansions may be prompted, leading to a "history as conceptualising" as the end-product of the historical analysis.

5. Theorising in accounting history research

The three frameworks studied in the previous sections provide insight into how there are many ways for theorising in historical accounting research. All three

frameworks acknowledge that presenting a narrative may involve an implicit theorisation, as the researcher identifies what issues are important for the research, selects the evidence to be used, marshals this evidence into a "good story", and prompts readers to draw out the appropriate insights from the research. The language used in the narrative may itself imply theoretical considerations in the choice of metaphors, contrasts and classifications. However, the frameworks all envisage more explicit theorisation, to produce a higher-level understanding of the phenomena and how they relate to other situations and settings.

Accounting historians, like any researchers, are likely to start a new project with some initial theoretical grounding. They may have used specific theoretical frameworks in other research and found them effective, or they may be encouraged by supervisors, colleagues and co-researchers to think about specific theories. Such theories may influence the choice of research location or archive and the historical material that will be selected and reviewed. Maclean et al. (2016) suggest that researchers need "pluralistic understanding", so that they are open to alternative "ways of seeing". This may be a challenge to researchers who have invested considerable mental resources in mastering a specific theory or theorist, but being willing to consider alternative understandings is important to prevent "writing to a paradigm" (Fleischman & Tyson, 1997). Different theoretical perspectives may illuminate different aspects of a specific research project, but in any case researchers should consider whether alternative theorisations may be as good as, if not superior to, the initial theoretical position adopted.

A skeletal initial theory will probably identify key concepts and how they are related, and the theory may stress specific factors as potential explanations of phenomena that are subject to research. Thus, the theory helps in designing the research project, identifying appropriate archives and the material to be prioritised in the collection of data and determining provisional research questions. In practice, the initial stimulus for research may come from the discovery of a rich and little-explored archive – this was certainly the case for my own research into the British shipping company P&O (Napier, 1990, 1991, 1997), where I was asked to advise a historian of the British Empire on interpreting the company's accounting records and realised that the archival material provided insights into various historical accounting debates. By today's standards, these studies are very under-theorised, but they take for granted that human agency is central to historical events, and that actors' motivations may be deduced from the evidence that survives of their actions, coupled with a working assumption that behaviour should appear to be reasonable to the actor even if it seems less rational to a modern observer.

Theorising at the outset of a research project therefore involves reflection on how far existing theoretical frameworks are likely to help in making sense of the

research findings. As the research project progresses, theorising will probably be an iterative process as the researcher reflects on newly examined archival material or other sources, and again Maclean et al. (2016) stress important principles for historical organisation studies. The first is *representational truth*. In setting out a narrative, the researcher implies logical relationships between actions and outcomes within the events that are being narrated, but telling the story inevitably involves selection and interpretation. Maclean et al. (2016: 617) suggest that the research should exhibit "a high degree of congruence among evidence, logic, and interpretation". This means that representational truth is not just a matter of "correspondence" between the narrative and the events being narrated, because the researcher's selection of events and putting them into a specific order goes beyond simple chronology to provide a substantive interpretation. The second principle is *context sensitivity*: being aware of the specific setting in which the phenomena being researched are located. General mechanisms and relationships suggested by a broad theoretical framework are likely to operate in specific ways within given contexts, and an aspect of theorisation may involve identifying boundary conditions or contingencies that need to be taken into account in applying a general theory to specific contexts. Given that one of the driving factors of the New Accounting History was to study accounting in the contexts in which it operates now and operated in the past (Hopwood, 1983), it is unlikely that accounting historians will ignore context, but context is sometimes seen as the enemy of generalisation, whereas it may actually enhance generalisation through allowing the researcher to develop a more nuanced theory.

One of the key roles of theorisation in historical accounting research is to make a bridge between the specific story and more general concerns. Even rich narrations can benefit from theorisation, which may often involve identifying a key concept of broader relevance. A good example of this is the study by Miley and Read (2016) of the use of accounting and other record systems in the Foundling Hospital, an institution established in London in the eighteenth century to look after children of the poor. A fascinating and rich narrative is "lifted" by the use of the concept of "stigma" as a central organising mechanism for the paper. The idea of stigma is associated with the work of Goffman (1974), although references to Goffman appear only in the early pages of the paper. Miley and Read confirmed to me that they began their study of the Foundling Hospital with a well-articulated understanding of Goffman's concept of stigma and its relevance to the specific research they were undertaking, and the importance of the theoretical concept to their analysis is obvious from the first sentence of the paper.

Miley and Read (2016) do not use the word "stigma" or related forms in the main body of their narrative, though it appears frequently in the introduction, discussion and conclusion sections. However, readers are alerted to the importance of the

concept and will be prompted to look out for evidence relating to stigma as they read the narrative. Some researchers dismiss this approach as a "theory sandwich", where the theory seems to disappear as the historical story is told. Different studies call for different presentational styles, but it may be useful to eschew a separation of narration and discussion and include more theoretical comments and framings in the narrative section. The discussion section could then focus on theory development: what has the present study added to our theoretical understanding? This could range from slightly nuanced interpretations of an already richly developed theory to new theoretical concepts and constructs. In whatever way the study uses theory and involves theorising, an explicit consideration of theory can help to locate a single study within a wider research dialogue, showing how the study contributes to more general concerns. This is not the same as "generalisation", where the aim is to develop a theoretical explanation or model that applies in a wide range of settings. This approach relates more to how the specific research study casts a light on broader concerns. Miley and Read (2016: 181) finish their paper by observing: "The example of the Foundling Hospital enhances our understanding of the role of accounting in overcoming stigma through the creation of an identity acceptable to society." Hence, their study contributes not just to accounting history but also to wider social issues, and shows, to audiences that may not be aware of it, the power and importance of accounting in organisations and society.

To sum up, theorising can help the accounting historian, and the accounting and management researcher more generally, by (1) providing an initial framework for stimulating research ideas and helping in research design; (2) identifying potentially important variables, factors and relationships that can be searched for within the archival or other evidential material; (3) suggesting existing concepts that can help in identifying evidence (both already existing and generated in the research process) that may be important for the story that the researcher wishes to tell; (4) allowing for creativity in developing new concepts as well as refining existing ones; and (5) ensuring a coherent narrative that is representationally true and sensitive to context. Thinking explicitly about theory helps researchers to reflect on what they may be taking for granted and is therefore likely to lead to exciting and insightful accounting research.

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