A critique on the "where-what" perspective for organizational memory research

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Abstract. The following issues regarding to organization memory were mainly discussed in extant literature: 1. What is organization memory – organizations as knowledge bases. 2. Where is the memory stored? This article offers a compact commentary for these two questions, revisiting from a where-what perspective – that we should consider the nature of the context where known memory is embedded then we could really know the nature of what that knowledge piece is. Implications for research were elaborated.

Keywords. Organization memory, Knowledge bases, Known memory.

JEL. D80, L22, L23.

1. An introduction to

Since Walsh & Ungson ([1991](#)), the issues regarding organizational memory has been put in the central of organizational research and practices. Despite the propensity of follower studies, the term of organizational memory per se, and it related research and applications, have also attract many critical inquiries from scholars and practitioners.

A very first and central question that people (i.e., scholar and practitioners) is to know what organization memory really is (Stein & Zwass, 1995). In many organization studies, the analog method is taken as the entry-level strategy to regard organization as an organic body, the relationship between organizational learning and individual learning, and more (Jacqueline van der *et al.,* 1999). This is an effective strategy to exteriorize the concept beyond expression. The essence of researching and practicing organizational memory may lie in the action modes of organizations metaphorically being thought as a person who store and retrieve information and knowledge pieces in their cognitive "library", shared and/or distributed. The organization memory has been roughly regarded as an library for experience and knowledge (Kransdorff, 1998), and such memory library has sub-libraries for storing different levels and different types of knowledge from different sources (Argote, 1999). The experience and the knowledge stored in the organization memory are not only historical, but may also be predictive (Kransdorff, 1998), because the organization memory cannot only provide the records and evidences for the organization or the members in the past, but also function as a dependent frame of reference and an empirical mode (Paoli & Prencipe, 2003) for the collective action or decision of the organization members.

A second question is where organizational memory is stored? According to Argote ([1999](#)), the influence of the memory on learning is mainly presented in the aspects of the sufficiency of the individual knowledge and experience, the design and correction of organization technology, the structure and the regular activities, etc., so the memory is embedded into individuals, technologies, structures and regular activities. This requires organizations to build indexing schema for

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efficiently locate, identify, and make good use of structured knowledge contents dispersedly embedded in different persons (Akgün *et. al.,* 2005; Moreland *et. al.,* 1996; Zhang *et al.,* 2007). The organization memory is partially stored in the most basic knowledge carrier to provide the evidence for the special or key knowledge and skills probably brought away after employee turnover (resignation). Compared with knowledge and experience, technology is related to the transfer from one place to another place in the organization. However, according to the opinion that people engage in social knowledge activities rather than individual knowledge activities, the internal structure of the organization and the regular activities are the field domain for recording the exchange behavior memory of the members. Seemingly, the memory library opinion emphasizes the knowledge and experience learning of individuals and groups, and the learning behavior can be regarded as the mechanism for internalizing the organization memory and influencing cognition, action and decision (Moorman & Miner, 1998) cog. In such case, Kranskoff (1998) observed some strategies and methods for organization memory storage (more properly speaking, it is organization memory retention), such as knowledge expert system applicable to knowledge exteriorization, mentorship applicable to implicit knowledge sharing, four major experience learning rules (intuition, accidental learning, review and prediction), etc. Among these methods, we should be able to find that each method is mapping to the organization knowledge memory storage rule proposed by Argote (1999). For example, the individual knowledge transfer is imperceptibly presented in mentorship, and the experience learning rule may be mainly presented in the regular activity processes of the organization, etc.

As mentioned above, many scholars tend to take the analog method as the conceptualization strategy for the abstract concept. However, such strategy also contains certain potential risks in the research. Pure analog that tends to crystalize the concept of what organizational memory is may fall short in reflecting the real meaning of specific memory piece, because of lacking in retrieval efforts for contextual evidences that may help human beings' perceptual "memorizing." Some people may ask (Bartlett, 1961, see [3]): if an organization is regarded as a memorial biological system, can an organization really memorize? What would be the overall structure of the memorized knowledge? (Tsai, 2016; Tsai *et. al.,* 2014) Or, the organization only provides an environment for memory? Such debate may be relieved by explicating the abovementioned point – organizations are contextual environments that help persons acting in it really memorize as an identical collective, by shared construction of the where-what elements of a memory piece.

At least one group of scholars believes that such opinion is practical and the knowledge is viewed from the annotation of social science (for example, Karl Weick and other supporters), and the memory itself does not have appearance, and more accurately, its appearance is related to the inter-subjective interpretations affected by the contextual clues they read in the environment of memory. For such saying, it is undoubtedly emphasized that the core and the significance of organization memory lie in the organizing (as a verb) of the memory rather than the organization (as a noun). In such case, contexts for knowledge occurrence, transfer, interpretation, and internalization play an important role in preventing memorizer from falling into a vacuum of knowledge and meaning construction. Differentiated context-memorizer interactions may lead to individual cognition difference, and knowledge organizing method differences, regardless of individual knowledge or social knowledge (Sparrow, 1999).

That being said, we wish to make clear that the two seemingly conflicting schools mentioned at the very beginning are actually not conflicting, but they only need to be integrated by the where-what perspective proposed here. The opinion of regarding organization as memory library has its corresponding theoretical basis, and may be at most evaluated to have incomplete metaphor, but how many famous management theories can be completely analogized during analogy? It is only an analog method. Substantially, no matter the organization memory or the experience

and knowledge constituting the organization memory belongs to individuals or groups, it really has context specificity, so practically the formation of the organization memory should be a sense-making process shared among the members. Obviously, the necessity for observing the organization knowledge activity from the aspect of *collective* cognition should be highlighted again. However, the organization itself can really give play to the influence function thereof, and we can at least confirm that organization capability is stronger than individual capability for achieving such collective sense-making before memory construction. For example, Grant (1996) regarded organization as a large knowledge integration system to make the organization play a function role suitable for the individuals and even the groups in the aspect of the construction efficiency of the memory shared in the organization. Generally speaking, part of the experience and knowledge shared in the organization should exist in special cases due to the extreme implication thereof, and are only retained in the event or the context concerned or among the cognitions of deep members; the other part may be embedded and retained through some specific knowledge sharing, practices and learning mechanisms, organization structures and technologies and regular activities, because the implication and the context thereof cannot be obviously distinguished. Probably, such opinion may be criticized by the scholars who are not willing for extreme uniformity or extreme independence. However, for trans-positional consideration, it can be regarded as an attempt for deconstructing and reconstructing organization memory from the perspective and principle of closeness to (organization) reality.

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