

Autobiographies in Organizational Research: Using Leaders' Life Stories in a Triangulated Research Design

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Abstract

Obtaining deep-level insights into the thoughts, actions, and emotions of organizational leaders can pose significant challenges to organizational scholars. Fortunately, a promising but largely untapped resource to provide such insights exists—autobiographies. We begin by providing an overview of autobiographies as a data source, including their benefits and limitations. We then discuss where autobiographies could contribute to theory development in organizational research, highlighting the areas of strategic leadership and entrepreneurship, identity, and sensemaking. To provide direction on how to incorporate these texts into a research design, we provide several research ideas and guidelines about how autobiographies could be used in a triangulated research design. We illustrate their use in a recent study conducted among craft entrepreneurs to confirm existing findings and document a series of planned studies using autobiographies to explore new findings. Together, the study, although focusing on autobiographies, offers a broader framework to advance the use of narrative forms in organizational scholarship.

Keywords

autobiography, narratives, qualitative methods, triangulation, leadership, entrepreneurship, sense-making, identity

One of the most fundamental approaches to data gathering in organizational research involves listening to the stories people tell about their lives (Pentland, 1999; Soin & Scheytt, 2006). Autobiographies provide a detailed account of the important people, events, and experiences that have shaped one's life (Gibbs, 2014). Through them, individuals can convey a wide range of information to others, including notions of who they are, how they see the world, why they made decisions, and what actions they believe led to their success. Although several important narrative forms exist,

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autobiographies offer unique insights into how individuals perceive their social world and context (Altier, Horgan, & Thoroughgood, 2012), provide views into an author's subjectivity (Reveley, 2010), and showcase how one constructs his or her culture and identity (Bruner, 1987). Together, autobiographies provide a distinct combination of *breadth*—by discussing a significant portion of an individual's entire life—and *depth*—by revealing intimate details from that individual's perspective—that afford scholars unique research opportunities simply not available from another single source (Smith & Watson, 2010).

Although management scholars have noted the possibilities autobiographies hold (Ford et al., 2003; Jacobs, 2007; Sims, 1993) and researchers have advocated for them to be used to study topics of identity (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011; Haynes, 2006), entrepreneurship (Reveley, 2010), and sense-making (Humphreys, Ucbasaran, & Lockett, 2012), empirical studies involving autobiographies in the organizational literature remain underutilized (Dawson & Hjorth, 2012). This is especially surprising considering the array of autobiographies available. From presidents and CEOs to entrepreneurs and inventors, autobiographies abound and chronicle the lives of some of history's most influential world leaders in business and policy (Ligon, Harris, & Hunter, 2012). Further, the drop in digital publishing costs and access has afforded local or regional leaders to share their experiences. Yet, despite their vast potential, autobiographies remain a largely untapped resource for organizational research (Rustin, 2000).

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate how and why autobiographies can, and should, be leveraged as a data source in organizational research. As our research is motivated by an interest in understanding the innermost thoughts, feelings, and relationships of leaders and managerial elites, we focus in this article on autobiographies. However, we posit that the methodological procedures we describe could also be applied to the study of other narrative forms, such as biographies, diaries, and memoirs.¹

To accomplish this study's objective, we begin by discussing what autobiographies can teach us that goes beyond what we can learn from other, more frequently used data sources. We highlight the content autobiographies provide and the benefits and drawbacks they possess. We then describe various literatures for which autobiographies can provide meaningful data. Following this content-focused discussion, the article reveals several promising methodological procedures to incorporate autobiographies in order to achieve triangulation (Denzin, 1978; Jick, 1979; Seale, 1999). In line with Jick (1979), we posit that autobiographies can be integrated into a triangulated research design that can range on a continuum from simple (or confirmatory) to complex (or exploratory). We describe five different approaches along this continuum to incorporate autobiographies into a research study, and we provide detailed guidelines of how to do so.

We provide three contributions to the research methods literature. First, we contribute to the what and why of autobiographies. We advance our knowledge by narrowing the content and format into general themes and thus synthesizing what autobiographies can offer as well as why they should be used. Second, we contribute to the where of autobiographies by tying the content of autobiographies directly to different literature streams and providing examples where autobiographies can potentially contribute, including the areas of strategic leadership, entrepreneurship, identity, and sensemaking. Third, we contribute to the how of autobiographies. Although many studies have called for the use of autobiographies and other narrative forms, our study offers clear guidance on how to incorporate them into a research design. Together, by addressing the what, why, where, and how of autobiographies, we offer a way forward for advancing the use of autobiographies in organizational research.

Autobiographies and Other Narrative Forms

Like biographies, personal journals, and diaries, autobiographies represent a form of narrative, or a story of one's experiences. We define autobiographies as published texts, written from a first-person

perspective, that provide the history of one's life. Autobiographies highlight critical events and social actors in one's life, and although chronological, are written years after many of the described events occurred (Holroyd, 2002). Additionally, autobiographies often document people whose lives are of historical note; thus, they generally reflect "extreme cases" of highly successful leaders (Patton, 2005).

Although some narrative accounts can provide depth through detailed firsthand insights (e.g., diaries, CEO letters to shareholders) and other narrative accounts can provide breadth by portraying one's entire life (e.g., biographies), autobiographies stand apart from other narrative forms because they offer both. They provide (a) an individual's life history, from birth to death (or at least later in one's career), and in so doing, tend to offer greater breadth than other data sources and (b) a firsthand account of the events that have transpired, thus offering considerable depth into one's life. This does not imply that autobiographies are better than other narrative data sources. Instead, each narrative form has its own set of distinct benefits and drawbacks, as Table 1 illustrates. Table 1 demonstrates that autobiographies, like any data source, possess tradeoffs that are discussed further in the following.

Use of Autobiographies Across Various Disciplines

Although autobiographies do not represent longitudinal data, they do provide a unique temporal perspective (Shoup, 2012). By providing a timeline of individuals' lives, autobiographies lay out a story that explains how life events unfolded over time. Cabillas (2014), in analyzing the autobiography of French writer Nathalie Sarraute, proposes that the autobiography provides a temporal frame that captures the dynamic actions and reactions stemming from critical narrative events. The process of writing about these narrative events, she argues, does not simply involve retrieving stories from the past but developing emerging realities that are influenced by the dynamics between the time of the event and the time of writing (Cabillas, 2014, p. 314). Within the criminology literature, Presser (2009) advocates the use of autobiographic accounts, or "narrative criminology," because of their vast potential to explain why crime occurs. Rather than documenting crime as an isolated event, the autobiographical approach documents what has happened (or is happening) in one's social world and as such provides indicators of criminal behaviors and the set of experiences that contributed to the crime in question (Presser, 2009, p. 182).

Although most longitudinal research provides a separation of time by measuring the independent variable at one time and the dependent variable at a later point in time, autobiographies capture the dynamic nature of variables by describing the critical experiences and relationships that occurred during and between those points in time that impacted the variables of interest (Ployhart & Vandenberg, 2010). Accordingly, business scholars have leveraged autobiographies to identify common events that served as catalysts to propel individuals into top leadership roles or that pushed their ventures toward success (cf. Gronn & Ribbins, 1996). Therefore, autobiographies represent a particularly valuable resource to address temporally oriented theories and research questions where matters of social context are critical.

However, these temporal insights come with a potential shortcoming—recall bias, or the tendency to inaccurately recall events or experiences from the past (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Although some individuals have written autobiographies by drawing on diary sources and chronicling life experiences *in situ* (e.g., Twain, 1906), most authors write autobiographies at a single point in time (Smith & Watson, 2010). At times, this forces the author to review, reflect, and recall events that might have occurred years or decades before. As such, the accuracy of such statements might be rightly called into question.

Fortunately, authors often leverage primary data sources in reconstructing the history of life events, which can help improve the accuracy of prior events and thus limit the concern of recall bias.

Table 1. Benefits and Drawbacks of Different Narrative Forms in Qualitative Research.

Narrative Type	Benefits	Drawbacks
Autobiographies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Provide breadth by broadly covering aspects of one's life story + Provide depth by revealing a rare glimpse into the thoughts and relationships of leaders + Subjective yet often vetted for accuracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Can be self-serving and sensational to promote one's self or sell books (social desirability bias) – Requires that author remember events (recall bias) – Authors often focus on internal rather than external success factors (correspondence/attribution bias)
Biographies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Can offer critical perspective of an individual's life + Potentially multiple viewpoints about focal person + Biographies written during different time periods allow for historical comparison and perspective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Does not necessarily contain first-person insights – Biographies often written because of a fascination (or disdain) for the focal individual, which can distort truth – Anyone can write a biography
Diaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Minimize the issue of recall bias + Provide sensitive information that an individual might not share through other means + "Unfiltered" account of events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Rarely made available to the public – Informally written and often haphazardly kept – Researcher may have to sift through vast amounts of trivial daily occurrences to find important events
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Often conveys the "highlights" of one's life story + Allows researcher to probe deeper into areas of interest + Opportunity to observe nonverbal behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Difficult to access thought leaders/managerial elites – Time limitations often prevent a detailed and thorough account of one's life story (time and cost-sensitive) – More limited self-reflection than autobiographies – Time- and cost-intensive, which limits sample size
Letters to shareholders / annual reports	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Provide important information about the well-being and future of the organization + Convey CEO's most valued strategic initiatives + Contain an accurate account of yearly events 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Focus generally on the company, not the leader – Tend to emphasize only positive aspects of the leader/company – Available only from large, public companies

Additionally, today's authors can rely on an increasing number of digital resources to avoid inaccuracies in creating life histories, and correspondingly, readers have greater access to information to hold authors accountable to the validity of their stories. However, whether this access to information has led to more reliable autobiographies is questionable, and despite these online resources, authors are still challenged with digging into the mechanisms and interrelationships that underlay leaders' early life decisions. Thus, although autobiographies afford unique temporal insights, scholars should be particularly attentive to and cautious with their potentially retrospective nature.

In addition to addressing temporal questions, autobiographies also offer valuable insights into the complex thoughts and relationships of individuals by providing authors a forum to disclose information about themselves that previously may have been unavailable to the public. From an outside perspective (e.g., biographies, third-person narratives), writers can speculate as to who was most influential in one's personal development and why important life or business decisions were made,

but likely no one knows the answers to these questions of who and why more fully than the individual himself or herself. As such, these intimate details can provide a rare glimpse into the unknown stories or well-guarded secrets of individuals' lives.

Scholars have recognized these rare benefits of autobiographies and consequently called for leveraging them to study deeply embedded factors influencing individuals and organizations, such as race and ethnicity (Cox, 1990) and emotions (Sturdy, 2003). Cox (1990) noted the lack of race and ethnicity in management research and argued that "racioethnic research is inherently biographical and autobiographical . . . requir[ing] more in-depth data collection to promote theory construction" (p. 11). Sturdy (2003) noted that autobiographies offer one approach to study emotions in organizational life, and he argued that this approach provides insights into individuals' rational-emotional interplay.

However, these deep-seated insights also come with a potential shortcoming—social desirability bias, or the tendency to answer questions (or write) in a manner that will be viewed favorably by others (Paulhus, 1991). Autobiographies can intentionally or unintentionally be written with an agenda or purpose in mind. For example, authors can embellish stories in order to increasingly capture readers' interest, or they can intentionally filter or exclude stories that show themselves in an unfavorable light. More frequently, autobiographies are overcoming these potential biases by incorporating various perspectives of the individual. For example, organizational leaders have recently encouraged friends, family, and partners to contribute to their work by providing a genuine account of what they think of the individual, including highlighting the leader's shortcomings, blunders, and less favored qualities (e.g., Koch, Wagner, & Clemens, 2011). Still, although autobiographies unveil closely held thoughts and relationships, scholars should be aware of their potentially socially desirable characteristics.

Finally, autobiographies can provide that unusual glimpse into the lives of the best and brightest minds of commerce and industry. In doing so, many autobiographies focus on the "problem of success" (Reveley, 2010, p. 289), or the journey of how influential individuals achieved noteworthy accomplishments. As such, autobiographies have been used by historical sociologists to explain how pioneers achieved economic success in 19th-century North Dakota (Hansen, 1999), political scientists to understand the actions of political elites (Etheredge, 1978), and organizational scholars to test a model of leadership effectiveness among U.S. presidents (House, Spangler, & Woycke, 1991). Westley and Mintzberg (1989) also applied autobiographical methods to the study of leadership by analyzing the autobiographies of five leaders—Edwin Land, Steve Jobs, René Lévesque, Lee Iacocca, and Jan Carlzon. Through techniques of textual analysis, the authors compared the similarities and differences across the autobiographies to reveal five styles of leadership and develop a unifying process model of visionary leadership.

However, relying on this information to inform one's own behavior or actions in an organization has a potentially critical limitation—correspondence bias, or the tendency to draw inferences about a person's unique and enduring dispositions from behaviors that can be entirely explained by the situations in which they occur (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). Put simply, correspondence bias, like attribution bias, involves attributing success to internal characteristics rather than external factors. Autobiographies tend to attribute success to the individual's actions and personality rather than the individual's context. This could lead to an under-emphasis on the importance of context or chance and ultimately, false attributions for success.

Taken together, although autobiographies present a number of challenges to scholars and should be used carefully, autobiographies also present a panoramic view of the past, present, and future, highlighting the key actors and events along the way. Many scholars have recognized the holistic perspective and deep personal reflections autobiographies offer and as a result have taken advantage of autobiographies in order to better understand a wide range of phenomenon, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Prior Academic Research Using Autobiographies: Ideas for Incorporation Into Organizational Research Designs.

Discipline	Authors	Type	Use of Autobiographies
Accounting	Haynes (2006)	Empirical	Using three autobiographical narratives, explores how the stories we tell about ourselves are part of a reflexive process of identity construction
Business history/ entrepreneurship	Reveley (2010)	Empirical	Through the autobiography of colonial entrepreneur Jules Joubert, illustrates the importance of autobiography to business research and explains how identity, reputation, and self-image are shaped through such accounts
Cognitive psychology	Bruner (1987)	Conceptual	Argues the self-telling of narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, organize memory, and purpose-build the very "events" of a life
Cognitive psychology	Tang and Schmeichel (2014)	Empirical	Leveraged responses of autobiographical memories to assess functions of control and emotional responses
Criminology	Presser (2009)	Conceptual	Examines how narratives can be reconceptualized to better understand criminals and their criminal behavior
Cultural psychology	Cabillas (2014)	Empirical	Analyze <i>Childhood</i> , the autobiography of N. Sarraute, to explore how memory mobilizes different narrative versions and can provoke tensions related to individual and sociocultural factors
Economics	Buchanan and Tollison (1986)	Conceptual	Suggest the level of truth in an autobiography is partly based on the factually observable life of a person
Entrepreneurship	Bouchikhi (1993)	Empirical	With evidence from six entrepreneur narratives, argues the outcome of the entrepreneurial process is emergent from a complex interaction between the entrepreneur, the environment, chance events, and prior performance
Entrepreneurship	R. Smith (2005)	Empirical	Through 10 biographies and autobiographies, examines the fabled stories of entrepreneurs and how they can be "decoded" to understand entrepreneurs
Family business	Dawson and Hjorth (2012)	Empirical	Use autobiographies to address the succession process in family business
Historical sociology	Hansen (1999)	Empirical	Through the biography of Lillian Wineman, sheds light on the production and exchange of Dakota beadwork, ethnic settlement in North Dakota, and trade between Whites and Indians on the northern Great Plains
History	Popkin (1999)	Conceptual	Explores the relationship between history and autobiography
History	Crane (1997)	Conceptual	Posits that it is not necessary to separate the genres of history and autobiography
Leadership/ management	House, Spangler, and Woycke (1991)	Empirical	Use autobiographies to test a model of whether a president's personality and charisma influence his leadership effectiveness

(continued)

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Discipline	Authors	Type	Use of Autobiographies
Leadership/ management	Westley and Mintzberg (1989)	Empirical	Incorporating autobiographies of five leaders, consider their life experiences and how they relate to various types of visionary leadership
Management	Ford et al. (2003)	Empirical	Examines the autobiographies of 52 laureates to identify those experiences, events, and people that led to practice-relevant management research
Management	Peterson, Smith, Martorana, and Owens (2003)	Empirical	Leverage autobiographies as a supplementary data source to explore how CEO personality relates to top management team (TMT) group dynamics and firm performance
Nursing	Hagemaster (1992)	Conceptual	Encourages nurses to use life history information to understand an individual's current attitudes and behaviors
Organizational behavior	Armitage and Thornton (2012)	Conceptual	Discusses how narrative exchanges in the form of autobiographical accounts can offer "secret data" about values and ethics in organizational life
Political science	Etheredge (1978)	Empirical	Analyzed autobiographies to assess whether personality characteristics of American leaders crucially impacted foreign policy decisions
Security	Altier, Horgan, and Thoroughgood (2012)	Conceptual	Explores how terrorist autobiographies can be used to uncover the attitudes, motivations, and intentions of individuals engaged in violent extremism
Social psychology	Tileagă (2011)	Empirical	Reveals how biographical details are produced and how they relate to memory and identity
Sociology	Oakely (2010)	Empirical	Discusses the issues of method, ethics, and reflexivity encountered during the biographical research and writing on prominent social scientist Barbara Wootton
Sociology	Rustin (2000)	Conceptual	Advocates for a greater use of biographies within the social sciences by highlighting how they help us understand the process of human experience
Sociology	Riessman (1993)	Conceptual	Explores how narratives can lead to discoveries in many scholarly fields
Sociology	Ribbens (1993)	Empirical	Through an exercise in autobiographical writing, explores how subjectivity is socially constructed and argues against viewing autobiographies as fact or fiction

However, numerous opportunities to leverage autobiographies to advance organizational scholarship still exist. In the following sections, we provide detailed explanations regarding where and how autobiographies can provide answers to important research questions recently posed by organizational scholars.

Where Autobiographies Fit in Organizational Scholarship

Given their array of content and breadth of focal individuals, autobiographies are uniquely suited as a primary data source for many research questions. Autobiographies can also serve as an important confirmatory data source, especially when unanticipated findings emerge during the data collection

process or more knowledge about a particular leader (or set of leaders) is warranted. Although they have a wide range of potential, a few areas seem particularly promising for the application of autobiographies, including the strategic leadership, entrepreneurial decision making, identity, and sensemaking literatures. Table 3 lists several research areas and questions, which are drawn directly from the literature and discussed in the following.

Strategic Leadership and Entrepreneurship

Given that autobiographies are generally written about leaders and that most prominent leaders have written an autobiography (or arranged an authorized biography²), it is perhaps not surprising that autobiographies' use among organizational researchers, while still limited, has been most prominent within the strategic leadership literature (e.g., Ganz, 2000; House et al., 1991; Peterson, Smith, Martorana, & Owens, 2003). In this vein, scholars have looked across autobiographies to examine the personalities (Peterson et al., 2003), behaviors (Bouchikhi, 1993), personal background (Ganz, 2000), or leadership style and traits (Hermann, 2005) of leaders and entrepreneurs. The research questions of these studies typically center around a highly similar research question: What are the common factors (i.e., personality, behaviors, traits) that persist among successful leaders? Although these are certainly important questions worthy of academic pursuit, they do not fully leverage a core strength of autobiographies—the variation within them.

For example, consider personality, a concept considered relatively stable over time (Costa & McCrae, 1988). Because personality is considered relatively stable, the results from a survey instrument implemented at a single point in time or from analyzing autobiographies should not fundamentally differ. Thus, the nuance and complexity that autobiographies offer is stripped away by exploring a factor (e.g., personality) that is not expected to change throughout the course of one's life.

To take better advantage of autobiographies, scholars can not only look across by comparing leaders' thoughts and actions to those of other leaders but also within them—at the variations that occur within one's life. This approach would allow for a greater focus on context-specific questions of leadership rather than questions about the overlapping qualities of leaders. As an example, many organizational founders have stepped away from (e.g., Howard Schultz of Starbucks: see Schultz, 2012) or been forced out of (e.g., Steve Jobs of Apple: see Isaacson, 2011) their leadership role in an organization, only to have their organizations flounder before making a successful return to the leadership helm. Similarly, other leaders, such as Michael Dell of Dell and Charles Schwab of Charles Schwab Corporation, and their return experiences have been well documented through autobiographies. These texts allow insight into the sequencing of events and what led to a successful (or unsuccessful) return to leadership. In fact, many leaders cite their experiences away from their founding firm as critical to their leadership development and successful organizational turnarounds. Unlike other sources, autobiographies can provide that rare glimpse into what happened between major organizational events, such as growth-downturn-turnaround.

Similarly, autobiographies hold great promise for entrepreneurship scholars hoping to better understand contextual questions of how and when opportunities are found or created (Short, Ketchen, Shook, & Ireland, 2010). Although recent research demonstrates the importance of context to the evaluation and selection of opportunities, much of this work is done through cross-sectional surveys or experimental methods (e.g., Mathias & Williams, 2015; Wood, Williams, & Drover, 2015). However, given that opportunity decisions are temporally embedded (Navis & Glynn, 2010) and autobiographies detail the social and temporal context in which opportunities are acted (or not acted) upon, autobiographies could further our understanding of how context influences the evaluation and selection of opportunities. For example, does the achievement of financial success (e.g., sale of a company, IPO) change the concept of "opportunity" to entrepreneurs? Perhaps early

Table 3. Organizational and Management Research Questions Which Emerge From Calls to Use Autobiographies in Prior Research.

Research Topic	Calls From the Literature	Research Questions
Strategic leadership and development	"Researchers need to focus on conceptualizing process theories related to the development of leaders and leadership over time and testing these models using relevant methodologies If leadership is a process and not a position, and leadership development is a longitudinal process involving possibly the entire lifespan, then we need to put forward comprehensive process models and test them appropriately" (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014, p. 79).	What influence does youth have on leadership capabilities and the success of technology start-ups? How do leadership skills and styles of contemporary leaders differ from those of earlier generations?
Social entrepreneurship	"Future research should investigate the unique traits and motives of strategic leaders of social enterprises or their role and behaviours to support social entrepreneurship within established organizations" (Simsek, Jansen, Minichilli, & Escriba-Esteve, 2015, p. 471).	How do social entrepreneurs work with others to achieve collective goals? How do they leverage social movements to their advantage?
Opportunities and entrepreneurship	"In his autobiography, Mark Twain lamented, 'I was seldom able to see an opportunity until it had ceased to be one.' Inherent in this quote is the idea that thoughtful, or fortunate, timing is crucial to identifying opportunities. The essential characteristics of opportunities can be fully understood only after the passage of some length of time As such, the ability to understand the role of time has implications for entrepreneurs as well as related stakeholders" (Short, Ketchen, Shook, & Ireland, 2010, pp. 55-56).	How do entrepreneurs develop the ability to say "no" to opportunities? How does passing on an opportunity (which becomes either successful or unsuccessful) impact future opportunity-related decisions?
Top management team decision making, affect, and identity	"Leaders construct their identities over time and in context, and they do so by drawing on their biographical past, present and future" (Koning & Waistell, 2012, p. 75). "Just as identity has a psychological importance to managers, so, too, could identity impact the affect of top managers, which could then further alter how economically rational their actions and reactions would be. Further study [is needed]" (Livengood & Reger, 2010, p. 61).	How are multiple viewpoints taken into consideration when making organizational decisions? Do leaders rely on different individuals to make decisions at different life stages? What role does identity alignment play in this process?

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Table 3. (continued)

Research Topic	Calls From the Literature	Research Questions
Social identity	"In-depth biographical or longitudinal research projects would be useful in clarifying the causal relationships and feedback loops among the aforementioned [identity] concepts. For instance, future research could study how a founder's identity initially develops, how social identity influences the specific kinds of knowledge to which one is exposed, and how such exposure may reinforce or challenge one's self-concept" (Fauchart & Gruber, 2011, p. 953).	Do leaders assume different role and/or social identities over time? If so, how and why do these identities change? To what extent do individuals conform to the identities that are expected of them as leaders?
Imprinting and reflexivity	"Entrepreneurs are greatly influenced by those complex, and often recursive, combinations of events, people, activities, and experiences that occur throughout life. This notion of reflexivity might explain why certain sources of imprint wax or wane in importance over time, and we encourage future research to explore this further" (Mathias, Williams, & Smith, 2015, p. 25).	How do leaders imprint their firms, and does this imprinting process add organizational value? Is imprinting recursive in that firms also imprint their leaders?
Imprinting and firm performance	"The interplay between leaders' critical experiences in the past and the context in which they operate in the present could provide new explanations for the success and failure of both leaders and their organizations For example, is a mismatch between a leader's imprinted experiences and the current environment necessarily detrimental for an organization, or could it be an enabling condition?" (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013, p. 233)	To what extent do leaders draw from prior experiences in rationalizing decisions? Why do some leaders thrive in austere environments? How do leaders of large organizations successfully "pivot" their companies?
Temporality and sensemaking	"Those promoting a more holistic temporal perspective on sensemaking argue that a focus only on its retrospective aspects neglects the historical arc or temporal embeddedness of sensemaking . . . a more detailed examination of its [sensemaking's] temporality, whether or when sensemaking starts and stops, and how sense is made and remade will greatly enrich our theorizing" (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, pp. 96-97).	How do effective leaders envision and articulate a future that might only exist in their imagination? What impact does potential legacy play in leaders' future-oriented actions? What factors trigger sensemaking processes?

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Research Topic	Calls From the Literature	Research Questions
Sensemaking, entrepreneurial exit, and failure	“Future research could explore if entrepreneurs’ narratives reflect other emotional states during business failure We recommend additional attention on the practice of limiting negative emotions to stimulate greater positive thinking, especially if negative emotions can potentially aid in sensemaking. Furthermore, we advise revisiting the meaning of ‘bouncing back’ from adversity and suggest considering a more holistic impression of ‘recovery’ to consider how and what constitutes an individual’s sensemaking of his or her failure experiences” (Byrne & Shepherd, 2013, pp. 396-397).	What is the sequence of events for founders who leave and then return to their ventures? Are there common events or practices that lead to a successful return?

in one’s career “opportunities” are evaluated primarily on their perceived financial merits, whereas, the experience of success and the passing of time might lead to a reconceptualization of opportunities that more heavily weights social impact than financial impact.

Identity

Although many forms of identity exist, understanding “who people are” is fundamental to the identity literature. Autobiographies detail the most salient people, events, and experiences in an individual’s life history and in doing so, provide insight into identity. In fact, social psychologists posit that the writing of an autobiography is, in essence, an “identity project” and have leveraged them to understand memory and identity formation (cf. Tileagă, 2011). Likewise, communication scholars suggest that the autobiography is the “reconstruction of self” that gives shape and meaning to human life and accordingly have employed autobiographies to understand how language is used to construct and convey one’s identity (cf. Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001). Within the accounting discipline, researchers have applied autobiographies to the study of the accounting profession and the identity of accountants and called for autobiographies to be used as a methodological practice that links epistemology and ontology with methodology (Haynes, 2006).

Given their nature and content, autobiographies also offer a number of potential research opportunities for management and organization scholars addressing questions in the identity literature at multiple levels of analysis. As they concern the lives of individuals, autobiographies have an evident potential to contribute to individual- or group-level identity theories, such as social and role identity. However, autobiographies also hold promise for meso-level identity theories, such as theory that bridges individual and organizational identity, as well as macro-level identity theories, such as collective identity.

At an individual level, autobiographies can advance role identity theory by leveraging one of their core strengths—explaining changes over time. Role identity theory posits that individuals assume many roles that inform their behavior and shape who they are (Stets & Burke, 2000). Prior work in role identity theory largely relies on empirical research that examines individuals at a single point in time (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Such work, although important, misses the dynamic

nature of role identity. Individuals balance multiple work and non-work role identities that are not static but can shift dramatically over time (Mathias & Williams, 2015). For example, the centrality, or relative importance, of a work role identity—for example, entrepreneur—may wane with the introduction of a new non-work role identity—for example, parent or elderly caregiver. Likewise, some within-work role identities may also change significantly over time. For example, motivating employees and assuming a leadership role identity may not be critical during the nascent stages of an organization, but it might grow in importance with the addition of employees. In other words, different stages of the organization might render some roles more or less important, and accordingly, some individuals may be better suited for assuming role identities at different stages of the organizational process. Autobiographies could go beyond static studies of role identity by highlighting whether the role identities of leaders change over time and if so, how and why they change.

At a meso level, autobiographies can help disentangle questions that bridge individual and organizational identity. Along this line of inquiry, many scholars have examined how identity is formed through the process of imprinting (see Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Imprinting describes a process in which during particularly sensitive periods of one's life, an individual develops characteristics that reflect prominent features of his or her environment that persist over time (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). By detailing these sensitive periods, such as formative years, early career experiences, or times of significant economic change, autobiographies represent one of the few data sources that not only illustrate when the imprinting process begins but also follow through one's life to demonstrate the persistent effects imprinting has. Additionally, imprinting research, particularly concerning entrepreneurs and leaders, focuses extensively on how these individuals imprint their ventures (Boeker, 1989; Mathias, Williams, & Smith, 2015), yet autobiographies could also potentially clarify how organizations imprint their respective leaders by highlighting the ways in which early venture conditions impact one's life.

Narrative texts are also particularly well suited for the study of organizational identity (Short & Palmer, 2008). Over time, organizations might experience identity drift—that is, the increasing misalignment between traditional organizational identity claims and new, yet unacknowledged changes of who and what an organization has become (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011). The misalignment between past and present understandings of the organization, or temporal identity discrepancy (Corley, 2004), might create a disconnect among employees, their customers, and perhaps even their leaders that drives them away from the organization. For example, in his autobiography *Onward*, Howard Schultz (2012) admits that, to the detriment of the company, Starbucks's identity shifted away from a focus on quality to a focus on growth: "Obsessed with growth, we took our eye off operations and became distracted from the core of our business. The damage was slow, incremental, and quiet, like a single loose thread that unravels a sweater inch by inch" (p. 136). Although other narrative texts—mission statements, shareholder letters, or third-person biographies—might capture a snapshot of organizational identity at a moment in time, autobiographies, from an insider's perspective, offer a panorama of the "unraveling thread" of organizational identity and identity drift.

At a macro level, scholars can draw on multiple autobiographies to understand the emergence and legitimization of collective identity, or an identity that is shared across organizations (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). In part, collective identities are born through visionary leaders whose organizations help develop new industries or market categories (Navis & Glynn, 2010). Through them, certain central, distinct, and enduring attributes surface that are shared among organizations, forming a collective identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Because leaders who were influential in the establishment of industries and market categories often write autobiographies, an opportunity exists to extend our understanding of collective identity. Specifically, autobiographies can be used to address calls to explore how different industry groups use rhetoric to establish a collective identity (cf. Short, Ketchen, Palmer, & Hult, 2007; Zachary, McKenny, Short,

Davis, & Wu, 2011). To this end, research could focus on autobiographies of leaders in a specific industry to explain how and why certain collective identities emerged through use of communication and rhetorical devices. Such an approach could also shed light on which organizations leaders identify with—namely, view as having a shared identity with their firm—and which organizations they perceive as distinctly different.

Sensemaking

At their core, autobiographies are an act of sensemaking. The writing of an autobiography is an opportunity for an author to reflect on his or her life's occurrences, make sense of them, and organize them for others in a logical, coherent, and interesting way (Greene, 1987). An important debate in the sensemaking literature concerns the role of temporality in the sensemaking process, or *when* sensemaking takes place (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Even though they are generally written *after* an individual has accomplished something worthy of historical note, autobiographies offer the potential for nuanced insights to the areas of temporality and sensemaking.

For example, in his first autobiography, *Pour Your Heart Into It* (Schultz & Jones Yang, 1997), Howard Schultz details his experiences of growing the Starbucks brand across the globe and turning his passion for coffee into a large and incredibly profitable organization. However, as aforementioned, in his second autobiography, *Onward*, Howard Schultz (2012) laments how his company's blind pursuit of growth led Starbucks away from its core values. With changes in the economic environment and the passing of time, Howard Schultz made sense of Starbucks's pursuit of growth quite differently—moving from an aggressive and relentless approach to growth to a more restrained and conscientious approach.

Similarly, the passing of time has the potential to greatly impact how both authors and readers make sense of the world around them. The fact that many autobiographies, even those concerning the same individual, are written at different periods of time—such as while in a leadership role or late into retirement—provides a distinct advantage of autobiographies over other data sources because it allows scholars to explore how time influences one's interpretation of people and events. These time lapses also give authors a chance to assess the significance of their impact on their organizations and industries as well as their contributions to the history of enterprise. The staying power of the innovations developed by the leader, the performance of the company after the leader's departure, or the influence of the individual's way of thinking on others each reveal meaning about an individual and his ideas and decisions, which helps inform how society makes sense of its historical organizational leaders. This could allow researchers to sort out which qualities and actions of leaders were timely and which were timeless and accordingly, reveal the ongoing and iterative nature of sensemaking.

Autobiographies could help address recent debates in the sensemaking literature regarding context and triggers for sensemaking (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013; Matlis & Christianson, 2014). For example, scholars often examine how unexpected events or organizational crises can greatly shape how leaders make sense of events in organizations. However, autobiographies generally include accounts of people's past, present, and future, allowing for a holistic perspective on sensemaking. In so doing, autobiographies not only capture those issues, events, or situations that challenge one's understanding of the world and trigger sensemaking, but they also capture what follows. As sensemaking reflects a process in which individuals work to understand novel, unexpected, or confusing events (Matlis & Christianson, 2014), researchers could leverage autobiographies to examine how leaders process these events over time. Such efforts could further our understanding of the unique phases of sensemaking and how leaders "move on" after major events, such as overcoming failed organizational ventures or traumatic life experiences.

In sum, autobiographies hold great promise as important data for organizational scholarship. Although we have noted their potential contributions to the strategic leadership, decision-making, identity, imprinting, and sensemaking literatures, we acknowledge their vast potential and encourage future work beyond these areas. In the following section, we move forward from the why and where of autobiographies to discuss some examples of how they can be incorporated into a triangulated research design.

Research Designs With Autobiographies

To illustrate the potential application of autobiographies in organizational research, we adopt the framework of triangulation. Although the term *triangulation* has often been used to refer to a validation or convergent methodology (see Jick, 1979), we refer to triangulation as the “combination of methodologies in the study of the same phenomenon” (Denzin, 1978, p. 291). The process of triangulation involves obtaining multiple viewpoints on a topic (Seale, 1999). Triangulated data can be used to confirm findings, achieve reliability, or enhance validity; alternatively, it can be used to explore new insights and provide a complete, holistic, and contextual portrayal of the subjects in question (Jick, 1979). Therefore, autobiographies can serve as a valuable data source along this triangulation continuum.

In line with this perspective, we describe five different research designs that incorporate autobiographies by applying them to a recent study of craft entrepreneurs, or individuals focused on craftsmanship and quality. Each of these designs is labeled according to its analysis approach—pattern matching, synthetic analysis, alternative templates, interpretive text analysis emphasizing expansion analysis, and interpretive text analysis emphasizing collocation—and ranges on a continuum of triangulation design, or from simple (confirmatory) to complex (exploratory). We utilized pattern matching in this research, but we extend the use of autobiographies by identifying planned research extensions from this initial study. Table 4 provides the organizing framework for each of the triangulated designs incorporating autobiographies, which we discuss in the following.

Pattern Matching

Research Question. The research question as well as the existing knowledge of a topic greatly influence which approach should be used to incorporate autobiographies. For example, we were interested in better understanding venture growth, identity, and entrepreneurship. From a series of previously conducted interviews with entrepreneurs, we discovered some particularly unique identity processes of a select group of entrepreneurs, which we began referring to as craft entrepreneurs. Unlike other entrepreneurs, craft entrepreneurs did not change their role identities in their ventures over time. Perhaps most surprisingly, the craft entrepreneurs in our sample were growing their ventures at extraordinary rates despite, in many instances, intentions not to grow their ventures. Given the counterintuitiveness of our findings and our relatively small sample size, we wanted to further enhance the reliability of our initial results and assess whether our findings held among a separate sample of entrepreneurs. In this instance, we integrated autobiographies into our study as a secondary or confirmatory data source by pattern matching.

Pattern matching is a technique in which the themes or findings from an initial study are overlaid with those in a secondary set of data (Langley, 1999; Yin, 1994). In our case, our transcribed interviews with entrepreneurs represented our primary source of data while the autobiographies represented the secondary source. After the initial interviews, certain themes emerged from the data—such as identity authenticity, quality focus, negative attitudes toward venture growth—that set craft entrepreneurs apart from other entrepreneurs. Thus, we wanted to leverage autobiographies to address our research question (What influenced craft entrepreneurs’ attitudes about

Table 4. Using Autobiographies in Organizational Research: Five Research Designs Using the Craft Entrepreneur Context.

Simple Triangulation (Confirmatory) <-----> Complex Triangulation (Exploratory)				
	Pattern Matching Triangulating Interview Findings With New Cases (Interviews and Autobiographies)	Synthetic Analysis Identify Which Themes Are Particular To Craft Entrepreneurs (Interviews and Autobiographies)	Alternate Templates Looking for Other Explanations (Could Be Autobiographies Only)	Interpretive Text Analysis: Emphasis on Collocation and Comparison Comparative Exploration of Growth (Autobiographies Only)
Research Question	What influenced craft entrepreneurs' attitudes about organizational growth?	What differences exist between craft entrepreneurs and other, non-craft entrepreneurs?	What other potential explanations exist for why craft entrepreneurs' ventures grow?	How do craft entrepreneurs make sense of their venture's growth?
Selection process	Select a set of autobiographies (7 in our study) of entrepreneurs in similar industries (to interviews) and who experts classify as "craft"	Select a set (7 to 10) of autobiographies of entrepreneurs who experts classify as "non-craft" but from similar sectors as interviewees and compare to original sample of 7 craft	Select the same set of craft entrepreneur autobiographies (as initial study)	Matched pair sample Select a set of contemporary craft entrepreneur autobiographies and a similar number of autobiographies written decades earlier in similar industry or sector Book choices vetted by experts.
Analysis approach	Hak and Dul (2009); Yin (1994)	Crabtree and Miller (1999); Eisenhardt (1989); King (2004)	Allison (1971); Langley (1999)	Gephart (1993); Sonpar and Golden-Biddle (2008)
Analysis actions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify themes from interviews (or from existing theory) 2. Create codebook with these themes (with an openness to new themes) 3. Load digital copy of autobiography into CAQDAS program and code for themes (using the phrase, sentence, or paragraph as unit of analysis) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify themes from interviews (or from existing theory) 2. Using template analysis approach, create codebook with previously identified themes (with an openness to emergence of new themes) 3. Read through digital copy of autobiography and code for themes (using the phrase, sentence, or paragraph as unit of analysis) 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Begin codebook with initial themes from literature or existing interview data 2. Read autobiographies searching for other explanations 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Keyword search for growth (and synonyms) within autobiographies 2. KWIC: Retrieve every occurrence of the keywords with enough context (lines of text around word) to allow understanding of how the keyword is being used 3. Analyze text around the word growth to identify themes

(continued)

Table 4. (continued)

Simple Triangulation (Confirmatory) <-----> Complex Triangulation (Exploratory)	
Pattern Matching Triangulating Interview Findings With New Cases (Interviews and Autobiographies)	Synthetic Analysis Identify Which Themes Are Particular To Craft Entrepreneurs (Interviews and Autobiographies)
<p>Create an "other" category to identify new insights from autobiographies</p> <p>4. Use and make explicit heuristics that constitute a pattern for categories</p> <p>If 7 autobiographies are used, we might determine if patterns are found (7 of 7), not found (1 of 7), or are marginally supported (3 or 4 of 7)</p> <p>5. Create quote table with themes from autobiographies and display side-by-side with preexisting themes</p> <p>New categories identified through quotes</p>	<p>4. Compare presence of themes across each set of autobiographies; do they vary by craft/non-craft? Reliability check by extracting 15% of codes for each theme and having outsider to project connect codebook to extracts iterative process until agreement reached</p> <p>5. Create quote table with themes from autobiographies that are different and unique to craft entrepreneurs</p> <p>4. Identify explanations that resonate across more than 50% of the set of autobiographies used</p> <p>5. Display table of quotes with alternate explanations from autobiographies side-by-side with initial explanations/theories</p>
	<p>Interpretive Text Analysis: Emphasis on Expansion Analysis</p> <p>Richer Exploration of Sensemaking and Growth (Autobiographies Only)</p> <p>Interpretive Text Analysis: Emphasis on Collocation and Comparison Comparative Exploration of Growth (Autobiographies Only)</p>
	<p>Sort text segments by identified themes</p> <p>4. Expansion analysis: Write an interpretation of the data segments to delve deeply into how contextual features and theoretical concepts link to craft entrepreneurs</p> <p>4. Compare words that appear around (i.e., a specified distance around, e.g., the number of words before and after) the growth keyword between the two groups</p> <p>Identify a word frequency cut off (e.g., Gephart, 1993, used three times a word appeared)</p> <p>5. Display evidence of key themes of craft entrepreneurs' sensemaking related to growth</p> <p>5. Calculate Z-scores to compare word frequencies across two groups</p> <p>Analyze words that differ across the two groups and draw out implications</p>

^aAlthough these actions are presented in a linear fashion, we recognize and expect recursive paths through these actions in executing the research approach.

organizational growth?) and assess whether these same patterns also held among an independent sample of craft entrepreneurs.

Selection Process. We knew we must be particularly conscientious about our selection of autobiographies. Therefore, we engaged in purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is a theoretically driven sampling procedure in which the selection criteria is based around a specific variable of interest (e.g., craft orientation) that is incorporated into the study, often for comparison purposes (Patton, 2005; Short, Ketchen, & Palmer, 2002). Since our area of interest and our primary data collection efforts involved interviews with entrepreneurs, we selected entrepreneurs with a craft orientation who had written autobiographies.

We selected autobiographies because we wanted first-person insights into what work role identities these individuals most valued and whether they had evolved over time. We also selected autobiographies of entrepreneurs whose industries matched those of the entrepreneurs in our primary data collection efforts. For example, we interviewed two individuals who owned coffee shops and roasting operations as well as three individuals in the craft beer industry, and correspondingly, our autobiographies also encompassed the coffee and beer industries.

Ultimately, we selected seven autobiographies of entrepreneurs in craft businesses—that is, business strategies centered around craftsmanship and quality. The entrepreneurs and their respective books included: Howard Schultz of Starbucks in *Pour Your Heart Into It* (Schultz & Jones Yang, 1997) and *Onward* (Schultz, 2012), Sam Calagione of Dogfish Head Brewery in *Brewing Up a Business* (Calagione, 2011), Ken Grossman of Sierra Nevada Brewing Company in *Beyond the Pale* (Grossman, 2013), Yvon Chouinard of Patagonia in *Let My People Go Surfing* (Chouinard, 2006), Greg Koch and Steve Wagner of Craft Stone Brewing Co. in *The Craft of Stone Brewing Co.* (Koch, Wagner, & Clemens, 2011), and Steve Hindy and Tom Potter of Brooklyn Brewery in *Beer School* (Hindy & Potter, 2011). After our sample selection, we then employed the analysis techniques of pattern matching.

Analysis Actions. Through pattern matching, we examined whether the themes and patterns (from the interviews) held when we examined the autobiographies of other entrepreneurs. Put differently, the analysis of autobiographies was done in a hypothetico-deductive fashion by “testing” whether the theory from the interviews held when examined through autobiographies (Langley, 1999). Although pattern matching is frequently mentioned in qualitative studies, scholars less frequently apply the method by providing details about the variables and explicitly discussing what patterns were (or were not) matched (Bitektine, 2008).

To “test” whether the same set of variables and the same set of relationships existed among a different sample of entrepreneurs, we examined the patterns within autobiographies. Because the books were in digital form, we used content analytic techniques and computer software (i.e., Provalis’ QDA Miner) to code the autobiographies. Because of time and resource constraints and the fact that a single autobiography could be several hundred pages in length, we did not code the autobiographies in their entirety. Instead, we focused on coding their discussion of our general relationships of interest—identity and venture growth—to examine our research question regarding what impacted craft entrepreneurs’ attitudes about growth. For example, the book *The Craft of Stone Brewing Co.* (Koch et al., 2011) has an entire section devoted to the different beer styles and recipes of Stone Brewing—these chapters were obviously less relevant to our areas of interest. Likewise, autobiographies likely contain chapters with little bearing on a particular research question, and thus, we encourage researchers to first read the autobiography and then analyze and code the chapters that pertain to the topics of interest.

Similar to our analysis method for the interviews, we coded phrases and paragraphs for each of the identified variables in the autobiographies (with an openness to new themes/variables), seeking

to understand the identity-related processes of entrepreneurs and how they related to venture growth (see Hak & Dul, 2009). For example, craft entrepreneurs consistently mentioned statements in their autobiographies about “staying true to themselves” or “not compromising who they were.” We noted that these statements reflected the notion of identity authenticity—a theme (code) we had also identified through our interviews. After coding the autobiographies, we extracted a subsample of our coded text and employed an independent coder and had them match our themes (e.g., identity authenticity) to the extracts (i.e., autobiography text).

In a highly iterative fashion, we then compared the patterns we observed in our autobiographies with those we discovered through the interview process, and we developed heuristics, or cutoff guidelines, for each of the themes. For example, we found that identity authenticity was a consistent theme in all seven of the autobiographies, which gave us greater confidence in our findings. If the theme had persisted in only three to five autobiographies, we might have suggested that it had moderate support, and if found in fewer than three, we might have suggested it lacked support, which would have likely led us to rethink our original propositions. Therefore, researchers can use heuristics—or rule guidelines—with autobiographies to assess if themes exist (e.g., found in seven of seven autobiographies), do not exist (one out of seven), or are on the margin (four out of seven).

Ultimately, we found the same surprising identity actions—refusing to give up quality-oriented roles, remaining authentic to who they were, possessing negative growth attitudes, focusing on artistry rather than business, and venture growth—among all the entrepreneurs in the autobiographies as we did in the interviews. We then displayed these themes by creating a table that showed side-by-side comparisons of quotes from our preexisting data source (i.e., interviews) and our new data source (i.e., autobiographies). Together, these matching patterns provided us with increased assurance in the validity of our initial findings.

Synthetic Analysis

To extend our research on craft entrepreneurs, we have designed several future studies, which we are in the process of conducting. The next four research designs address specific research questions of interest to us. We use the craft entrepreneur topic to illustrate these research designs, but obviously these approaches can be used in any theoretical domain in need of theory development and elaboration (Sonpar & Golden-Biddle, 2008).

Research Question. Beyond our interest in the similarities among craft entrepreneurs, we plan to address the following research question: What differences exist between craft entrepreneurs and other, non-craft entrepreneurs? In this instance, we will employ a synthetic strategy (e.g., Eisenhardt, 1989), which is a variance-based methodology that involves intentionally selecting cases that exhibit different themes or processes and how they may relate to specific outcomes (Langley, 1999). Because synthetic analysis involves “transforming ‘stories’ composed of ‘events’ to ‘variables’ that synthesize their critical components” (Langley, 1999, p. 704), synthetic analysis of autobiographies is particularly well suited for this research question as people’s life stories and the events therein can be broken down into their most basic elements, which can then be compared to those of other groups of individuals.

Selection Process. From our interview data, we have identified important differences in the characteristics and growth processes of craft and non-craft entrepreneurs. However, to further clarify and potentially expand on our understanding of these differences, we plan to select 7 to 10 autobiographies of entrepreneurs who experts (i.e., academics, seasoned entrepreneurs) classify as non-craft entrepreneurs. We then plan to compare these autobiographies to our interview themes and the aforementioned set of craft entrepreneur autobiographies. The analysis process will begin with a code

book that identifies previous interview and theoretical findings, which is open to modification as the new non-craft autobiographies are read and coded.

Analysis Actions. Template analysis is a group of techniques for thematically organizing and analyzing data (King, 2004). Template analysis can be applied to each of the three confirmatory triangulation designs—pattern matching, synthetic analysis, alternate templates—we describe. It involves taking an existing structure of themes (i.e., template) and examining how they relate to one another, and then adding or modifying the template as the researcher reads and interprets the text (King, 2004). For example, based on the interviews, we started with an understanding that negative growth attitudes positively related to growth among craft entrepreneurs. However, our autobiographies might reveal that this process is recursive, such that negative growth attitudes develop from actual growth experiences. Accordingly, we will then modify our initial theoretical template (i.e., codebook) based on new information from the autobiographies and then compare the autobiographical data of craft entrepreneurs to non-craft entrepreneurs. Of course, we will leverage several coders to ensure similar patterns and/or modifications to the initial template are supported by the autobiographical data. In sum, when research questions center around understanding differences in individuals or processes and this research builds on previously identified themes, synthetic analysis with autobiographies is appropriate.

Alternate Templates

Research Question. In addition to examining whether the patterns hold, we also want to leverage the autobiographies to explore whether alternate explanations for the growth of craft entrepreneurs' ventures exist. Specifically, through our interviews, we found that craft entrepreneurs' focus on quality greatly impacted their venture's growth, but we are also interested in a research question that addresses whether any other potential explanations exist for why craft entrepreneurs' ventures grow. The alternate templates strategy is a deductive theory testing approach in which several interpretations of the same events are applied to examine whether alternative theories adequately explain the phenomenon of interest (Langley, 1999). Essentially, the alternate templates strategy seeks to "falsify" theory by finding alternative theoretical explanations (Bitektine, 2008; Popper, 1968). As such, the alternate templates strategy uniquely fits this research question.

Selection and Analysis Actions. We plan to use the same 7 to 10 autobiographies mentioned previously, perhaps supplemented by more autobiographies of craft entrepreneurs to attain theoretical saturation. Based on our interviews, we found that entrepreneurs' identity-related actions were strongly associated with their ventures' growth—thus, we developed an initial theoretical model illustrating this process. However, the craft autobiographies provide a unique opportunity to explore alternate templates because they included content not available through the interviews, which were conducted at a single point in time. Specifically, our focus in the interviews had been on the individual. Although the autobiography is essentially a story about an individual, other elements beyond the individual, such as environmental conditions and context, are embedded within each story and could play a major role in the growth of craft entrepreneurs' ventures. As such, we will search for other story lines in the autobiographies that could adequately explain the growth of these firms.

Through a preliminary reading and analysis of the autobiographies, we documented alternative explanations as to why entrepreneurs thought their ventures had experienced growth. In addition to the identity perspective revealed through the interviews, we have tentatively identified that craft entrepreneurs also attributed their success to a number of recent social movements—buy local campaigns, conscious consumerism, and the maker movement. These social movements have received significant attention and grown dramatically in recent years, and we found each

of the three aforementioned movements corresponded with the aims and values of craft entrepreneurs (Bajarin, 2014; Lyon, 2014). In other words, these social movements, which were not initially apparent from the interviews, seem to play a critical role in the growth of craft entrepreneurs' ventures.

In sum, the exploration of alternate templates within autobiographies led us to a new discovery and new theory (social movement theory) that helped explain why craft entrepreneurs' ventures grew. It did not "falsify" our identity theory explanations, but by incorporating social movement theory, we complemented our findings and developed a more complete and robust theoretical model of venture growth.

Interpretive Text Analysis With Expansion Analysis

The following two more exploratory research designs build on interpretive text analysis to elaborate and develop theory (Gephart, 1993, 1997; Sonpar & Golden-Biddle, 2008).

Research Question. As our interest grows in understanding craft entrepreneurship, many new research questions have emerged. For example, we are interested in the sensemaking processes of craft entrepreneurs as it relates to their ventures' growth. Specifically, how do craft entrepreneurs make sense of their ventures' growth? This question was not addressed with our initial interviews, and there is little guidance from existing theory on what we might expect. Thus, we will adopt an interpretive textual analysis approach with a specific focus on key-word-in-context (KWIC) and expansion analysis. Unlike quantitative textual analysis that leverages codes (variables) from qualitative data to test existing theories using inferential statistics, interpretive textual analysis seeks to explore individuals' meanings and interpretations (Gephart, 1997). As such, it is especially fitting for the study of sensemaking (e.g., Gephart, 1993).

Selection and Analysis Actions. We will select a set of autobiographies from craft entrepreneurs based on theoretical sampling to direct "attention to theoretically meaningful groups and important segments of data including keywords which represent theoretical features of interest" (Gephart, 1997, p. 585). However, rather than beginning with a codebook of existing themes and categories, we will specifically probe for keywords related to our research question, which centers on *growth* (i.e., variants on this word; synonyms) with the help of computer-supported text analysis. We will begin by searching for words related to growth, capturing the text around the keywords (KWIC). From these extracted text segments about growth from the autobiographies, we will look for themes with a keen eye to issues of identity and quality, but we will be open to other emergent themes. After organizing the text segments into thematic tables, we will then write interpretations of the data related to how these entrepreneurs made sense of growth in a process referred to as expansion analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Gephart, 1993, 1997; Sonpar & Golden-Biddle, 2008). Specifically, we will develop an understanding about how craft entrepreneurs talk about and understand growth. To illustrate, we might find that early and rapid growth leads craft entrepreneurs to forfeit product quality and under-deliver to their customers, which greatly compromises their identity, but we might discover that slow growth is consistent with their identity. We then can offer evidence of these emergent sensemaking processes for craft entrepreneurs in textual tables (see Gephart, 1993).

Together, interpretive text analysis is well suited when relatively little is known about a given phenomenon and the phenomenon is not easily understood through more quantitatively oriented approaches. With this approach, existing data are not necessary for the application of autobiographies; instead, autobiographies can be employed as the primary data source (with other data sources to follow, if needed).

Interpretive Text Analysis With Collocation and Comparison

Research Question. To understand the temporal boundaries of sensemaking for craft entrepreneurs (Sonpar & Golden-Biddle, 2008), we are interested in exploring and comparing how craft entrepreneurs of different eras understand growth. In other words, does their sensemaking about growth differ? Given the explorative nature of this question, we will adopt an interpretive textual analysis approach with a specific focus on collocation and comparison.

Selection and Analysis Actions. We will begin by selecting autobiographies through a theoretical and matched-pair sampling. We intend to use the seven original autobiographies of craft entrepreneurs and then select seven autobiographies written decades earlier by entrepreneurs in similar industries or sectors who also had a focus on quality and craftsmanship. These choices will be augmented by input from experts.

The analysis will then proceed in much the same way as the previous interpretive text analysis approach except that in order to compare and contrast between the two sets of entrepreneurs, we will undertake an additional step—examination of word frequencies around the *growth* keyword, or collocated words (see Gephart, 1997). First, we will undertake a KWIC retrieval using *growth* keywords, given our research focus. Then, we will select text segments and identify themes. The themes will be organized and compared between contemporary and older craft entrepreneurs for emerging insights. We will then isolate a “mini-text” (Gephart, 1997, p. 594) to compare collocation of word frequencies around the growth keywords. The decision about how much text to capture around the keyword is not fully clarified and is dependent on the amount of text and frequency of the text segments related to the keywords. Gephart (1997) selected five words on either side of his selected keywords. We will vary the number of words around our keywords to determine if collocation results change.

Next, we will develop a frequency of words around the keyword (collocates), eliminating common words (e.g., *the*, *and*) and focusing on words with significant frequencies. We will then establish a collocate frequency cutoff; for example, Gephart (1997) used collocates that appeared three or more times with the keywords. Given our use of multiple autobiographies, we may use a higher frequency cutoff, but we will vary the collocate frequency cutoff values to determine if they affect our results. Finally, we will construct Z-scores to identify which collocates vary between the two eras of entrepreneurs. The use of statistics helps to highlight linkages, the strength of relationships, and indications of differing sensemaking processes about growth by the two groups of entrepreneurs. This collocation analysis should surface “insights into the tacit logics of these two groups” (Gephart, 1997, p. 619). We might find that previous generations considered “craft entrepreneurs” as artisans and craftspeople and not as legitimate business people or entrepreneurs, defined more by lifestyle than developing a sustainable business. On the other hand, we expect that current generations of craft entrepreneurs view themselves as legitimate business owners. Thus, the collocation analysis approach is appropriate to find hidden meaning in topics and identify how this meaning varies by different groups (Gephart, 1997).

Discussion and Conclusion

In this article, we illustrate how autobiographies confer a depth and breadth of understanding about individuals’ lives that few other data sources offer. We explain what autobiographies are, why they should be used, where they can be integrated into the literature, and how they can be applied. By doing so, researchers will be able to add autobiographies to their methodological tool kit as either primary or secondary data sources, thereby providing new opportunities to enhance future research designs.

Recent editors advocating for qualitative research in the *Academy of Management Journal* “encourage the use of nontraditional data sources” and are “open to insights drawn from more diverse sources, such as narratives” (Bansal & Corley, 2011, p. 235). Accordingly, autobiographies, which represent a nontraditional and underutilized data source, provide an opportunity for scholars aspiring to publish in the top management journals. They represent a potentially valuable data resource not only to the aforementioned topics of leadership, identity, and sensemaking but also to the study of emotions, culture, and organizational change over time. When research questions need deep-level insights into the thoughts of an individual or the notion of time is particularly critical to the study, autobiographies hold great promise.

Despite these opportunities, autobiographies, like any methodology, possess a number of limitations and potential biases, such as success bias, recall bias, social desirability bias, and correspondence bias. Thus, we encourage researchers to build them into a triangulated research design. To limit recall bias, researchers could pair autobiographies with designs conducted in situ, such as experiments or participant observation. To curb social desirability bias, researchers could match an autobiography of an individual with biographies written from critical perspectives. To reduce correspondence bias, scholars could examine texts that focus on general factors of an environment, such as trade association data or industry publications.

Despite their limitations, autobiographies can work alone or in conjunction with other data sources to form a robust, triangulated research design. Triangulation through autobiographies not only provides a new perspective to the study of leaders and organizational phenomenon but also allows for the emergence of new and deeper insights. Although we acknowledge that autobiographies might offer convergent findings and increased confidence in results, we also hope that the integration of autobiographies into research designs leads to surprising or unexpected findings that do not easily reconcile with data from other sources. Such discrepancies could provide opportunities for enriching theoretical explanations—insights that would not be gained from assuming a single perspective. Although we outlined five different ways to incorporate autobiographies to achieve triangulation, we encourage researchers to also think beyond these approaches. By tailoring their use for purposes such as scaling, reliability, validation, or exploration, scholars can leverage autobiographies in order to overcome the limitations inherent in any single method design.

Although we focused this article on the study of autobiographies, other narrative forms are also underrepresented in the literature and contain unique perspectives and offer distinct benefits that autobiographies lack. Thus, we encourage scholars to incorporate narratives in general as data sources and in doing so, apply and build on our methodological guidance for autobiographies.

Understanding the thoughts, motives, decisions, and actions of leaders remains a critical area of inquiry for organizational scholars. Autobiographies offer researchers a valuable methodological alternative to address a wide range of pressing issues in the field. Whether the goal is to enhance reliability from an initial study or explore new areas to provide a holistic, contextual portrayal of the phenomenon of interest, autobiographies can be incorporated into a research design in myriad ways. We found that autobiographies provided much richer data than expected and extended the knowledge we gained from first-person interviews of craft entrepreneurs. In fact, they offered new theoretical explanations that we would have likely missed otherwise. Our research agenda will continue to use and build on insights from the valuable autobiographical data source. We hope our work encourages scholars to do the same by taking advantage of the numerous benefits autobiographies offer.

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Notes

1. Memoirs contain many similarities to autobiographies and perhaps could be used synonymously with each other. Some have argued that the difference between them is that autobiographies typically encompass one's entire life, whereas memoirs focus more narrowly on a specific theme or event (Holroyd, 2002). Yet, addressing this distinction, Mary Kerr (author of *The Art of Memoir*) stated that the difference is that, "Memoir is a French word, so it sounds fancier" (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/01/living/mary-karr-art-of-memoir-feat/>). Therefore, we treat these two types of narratives as similar and overlapping but only use the word *autobiography* throughout this article.
2. Although we use the term *autobiographies*, authorized biographies are written with the help and cooperation of the person whom the book is about (e.g., Isaacson, 2011, on Steve Jobs; Sampson, 2000, on Mandela), and thus, most of our discussion and methodology of autobiographies applies equally to authorized biographies.

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