

# Decoding secrecy as multiple temporal processes: Co-constitution of concealment and revelation in archival stories

human relations

1–25

© The Author(s) 2021



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0018726721998743

[journals.sagepub.com/home/hum](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/hum)

**Ziyun Fan**   
Northumbria University, UK

**Yihan Liu**   
University of Liverpool, UK<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

How can we understand secrecy as temporal processes in organization? How can we address the inherent dynamics between concealment and revelation over time? In this article, we build on an inherent and yet overlooked character of secrecy as temporal, and explore temporalization processes of secrecy. We suggest that secrecy should be reconceptualized as processes of simultaneous concealment and revelation in multiple temporalities. Drawing on such temporal sensitivity, we apply a history-laden analysis of four examples of archival stories as ongoingly completing processes of secrecy. The analysis sheds light on the paradoxical dynamics of secrecy in three interconnected ways: first, writing archival stories offer opportunities to mask and attack the concealed. Therefore, second, archival stories as the site and process that sustain secrecy can become the site where secrecy is revealed. In this sense, as the third way, secrecy is ongoingly and fragmentally formed, producing multiple and subjective experiences of time. This article also contributes to the methodological potential for using archival stories in organizational studies.

## Keywords

archival stories, concealment, organizational history, secrecy, temporality

---

## Corresponding author:

Yihan Liu, University of Liverpool, Liverpool, L69 3BX, UK.

Email: [Yihan.Liu@liverpool.ac.uk](mailto:Yihan.Liu@liverpool.ac.uk)

## Introduction

Secrecy exists through the intertwining of different temporalities and has played a constitutive part in processes of wars, the formation, reproduction and overthrow of monarchies, and even the development of modern society itself. For as long as humans have written, they have communicated in code (Singh, 1999). Traces of the existence and applications of secrecy have been historically rich in forming and shaping everyday operations of organizations. This is well-illustrated through various forms of leaks and whistleblowing such as the Enron scandal and Paradise Papers, where secrecy is found to be a characteristic not merely of special organizations or certain organizational settings but rather is ‘woven into the fabric of all organizations in a multitude of ways’ (Costas and Grey, 2016: 1).

However, despite its ubiquity, secrecy has received inadequate attention as a topic of analytical investigation within organization studies (e.g. Anand and Rosen, 2008; Courpasson and Younes, 2018; Scott, 2015). In particular, studies touched upon secrecy are of a paradoxical nature: although there are multiple mentions of secrecy scattered throughout many different literatures across multiple disciplines, there is very little literature that actually focuses on the question of secrecy within organizations (Costas and Grey, 2016). It is our contention that secrecy deserves fuller recognition. More specifically, studies of organizational secrecy consistently denote the temporal sensitivity of secrecy (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2014a, 2016; Parker, 2016). Yet this significant characteristic has been brushed aside as self-evident, such that it remains insufficiently explored and understood.

This article contributes to the extant literature by developing the existing conceptualization of organizational secrecy through its inherently temporal feature. Specifically, we draw on the understanding that secrecy is constructed not just by ways of concealment, but also through the coexistence between revelation and concealment. We argue such coexistence as interlocking processes of simultaneous competition and constitution between concealment and revelation, which can be understood as emerging within and through multiple temporalities that condition ‘*how* [secrecy itself] is constituted, maintained, and change[d] over time’ (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010: 19). This extension of secrecy theorization aims to open up possibilities to explore secrecy as and through temporalization processes.

To pursue this aim, we draw on the idea of temporality as a social construction that participants not only perceive and conceive as being ‘in’ time but also actively construct their own time. Through such constructions, we discuss and foreground how interconnectivities within past–present–future dynamics are engendered and in turn engender multiple subjective experiences of time. Building on this understanding of time as interconnected temporal experiences, we use archival stories, namely writings of archives with elements of intentional concealment (i.e. the secrecy), rather than simply the missing of materials, as illustrative examples for our exploration of temporal processes. Specifically, we propose three interconnected ways to understand the multiple temporal co-constitution of concealment and revelation generated by and generating secrecy: first, writing archival stories selectively masks and legitimizes invisibility of the concealed, and yet the material existence of concealment symbolizes visibility of the concealed,

attracting future opportunities of attacks and penetration. Therefore, second, the site and process of concealment that sustain secrecy can become the site and process where secrecy is revealed. In this sense, third, secrecy is ongoingly formed but is never complete, producing multiple and nonlinear experiences of time. The temporal complexity gives rise to multiple accounts of possible realities experienced in multiple pasts, presents and futures.

The use of archival stories echoes with the increasing emphasis on incorporating history into organization studies (e.g. Decker et al., 2020; Üsdiken and Kieser, 2004), offering an alternative view to the ongoing debate from an informational perspective that considers secrecy as an imperative to protect valuable information and therefore as an impediment to the acquirement of knowledge (e.g. Dempsey, 2009; Grey, 2014). Through the fluid and temporal co-constitution of concealment and revelation, we argue that processes of secrecy itself can be a source to weaken such protection and therefore to acquire knowledge. By doing so, this article suggests an answer to Suddaby et al.'s (2011) question about where new theories of organizations are, by lifting the veil of pervasiveness and taken-for-grantedness and examining the everyday but underinvestigated facets, such as secrecy, of our organizational life.

The article is structured into four parts. First, to conceptualize secrecy as a temporal process, we historicize the developing concept of temporality and draw on Munn's conceptualization of temporality to develop our understanding of multiple temporalities. Second, we conceptualize secrecy through temporalizing the entanglements and co-constitution between concealment and revelation, shifting and extending the focus from secrecy as informational and social processes to secrecy as processes of a complex synergy of multiple temporalities. In part three, we explain why archival stories are applicable in our article and how the archival stories will be analysed within the broad framework of anti-positivist historiography. In part four, we draw on four illustrative examples of archival stories to reveal multiple temporalities in secrecy through the tensions between visibility and invisibility, the connections between them, and how such tensions and connections form and reform the multiplicity and uncertainty of realities. Finally, a concluding discussion draws out the main contributions and implications of this study for understanding secrecy and employing archives in organization studies.

## **Historicizing and problematizing temporality**

Temporality has been a classic topic in social sciences, and time is an inescapable dimension in our everyday practices and experience in organizations, constituting differing ways to conceptualize temporality (Biesenthal et al., 2015; Costas and Grey, 2014b; Hernes et al., 2013; Roberts, 2008). In a pioneering study, McTaggart (1908) classified two dominant yet contradictory pathways among studies of temporality in social sciences and organization studies: A- and B-series temporalities. This classification of temporality has been widely accepted and become the dominant view in philosophy of time (Callender, 2002; Ingthorsson, 1998; Prosser, 2000), as it provides the impetus for both opposing perspectives of temporality (Dyke, 2002). According to McTaggart (1908), A-series temporalities include those processes through which humans come to experience their world through time. B-series temporality is, by

contrast, realized through the objective and quantitative assumption of time. Employing McTaggart's distinction allows us to explain why differing and subjective temporal experiences could emerge, to critically challenge and problematize particular understanding of temporality, and to enable us to examine temporality closely as multiple and subjective experiences (Prosser, 2000).

The B-series approach largely dominates traditional understandings of time in social sciences, where it has tended to be theorized as a medium and oversimplified into 'single-stranded descriptions or typifications' (Munn, 1992: 94). In the field of organization studies, time and more particularly B-series temporality has also been an emerging trend for analytical investigation. However, the multiplicity of temporality experienced in organizational life cannot be sufficiently explained by quantitative and collective temporality, or B-series temporality (e.g. Dawson, 2014). This is apparent even in studies where temporal issues are the direct focus (e.g. Hopp and Greene, 2018; Roberts, 2008), and yet their multidimensional processes remain largely masked and unexamined. More specifically, B-series temporality fails to address intersubjectivity of temporality, as it prioritizes temporality as the symbol of an increasingly simplified relationship between individuals and external changes that narrows temporalities into a singular conception. For instance, Tabboni (2001) gives the example of the concept of 'winter' to explain this abstraction process whereby 'winter' has lost its original meaning of cold season to become a linguistic representation of the temporal period from December to April. Even in those countries where this temporal period is hot, the term 'winter' is still used to represent this temporality. The abstraction or generalization denotes the temporal trap that temporality is collective/universal.

In this article, we emphasize the necessary shift from B-series temporality to A-series temporality in organization studies, through which multiple temporalities can emerge and contextualize understandings of organizational secrecy in history. A-series temporality points to the potential to relativize and historicize time and encourages discussions of social interactions with temporalities, which can be culturally divergent (Sandbothe, 1999). This more critical understanding of temporality has emerged since the 1980s and has problematized the habitually unquestioned status of temporality, from which an intrinsic temporal ontology became a constitutive element of theoretical analysis (Hodges, 2008). In his review of the evolution process of temporality in social sciences, Hodges (2008) argues that Gell's *The Anthropology of Time* (1992) marked a major contribution to a synthesized understanding of temporality. Such understanding is influenced by Munn's phenomenological conceptualization of temporality that focuses on A-series temporality and brings forward the experience of time.

Drawing on such critical understanding, we employ Munn's conceptualization of temporality in this article, which indicates:

Temporality is a symbolic process continually being produced in everyday practices. People are in a sociocultural time of multiple dimensions (sequencing, timing, past-present-future relations etc.) that they are forming in their projects . . . particular temporal dimensions may be foci of attention or only tacitly known. Either way, these dimensions are lived or apprehended concretely via the various meaningful connectivities among persons, objects, and space continually being made in and through the everyday world. (Munn, 1992: 116)

This conceptualization highlights the concept of *intersubjectivity of temporality*, that is, the need to rely on the media that are already encoded in temporal meanings to understand temporality. Munn's main contribution, as Born (2015) argues, is her identification of temporalizing practices and the analysis of temporality as multiple. Munn insists that temporality 'is ontological as opposed to representational in the sense that people are in cultural time, not just conceiving or perceiving it' (Born, 2015: 365). Munn's (1992) work transforms the linear understanding of temporality: participants are not only 'in' time but also constantly constructing their own time. That is, temporality is reflectively constituted by human actions, and experiencing of time is grasped through everyday practices (Biesenthal et al., 2015). Drawing on this perspective, the potentiality of multiple temporalities in this article can be revealed through internalizing and reproducing past–present–future dynamics in experiencing and organizing secrecy.

Constituting the temporalization of past–present–future dynamics, perceptions and experience of the past involve actualizing it in the present, or in Munn's terminology 'temporalizing the past'. This process foregrounds the 'implications of the meaningful forms and concrete media of practices for apprehension of past' (Munn, 1992: 113–114). Such temporalization is engaged in everyday experience with the characters of the past constructing a 'background' for the present. Simultaneously, such temporalization is also future-oriented: people experience and make sense of the present by infusing it with certain thematically projected promises as 'what it could be but not yet to be'. Such potentiality as 'the future' in turn gives meaning to the position of the present. Thus, temporality becomes a constantly engaging process among past, present and future. In this sense, ways of attending to the past shape the apprehensions of future and the (re)constructions of past in the present. Such dynamics enable the reflection on the intersubjectivity of present experience as being constantly engaged by conditions of past and anticipations of future (e.g. Dawson, 2014).

Cunliffe et al. (2004) contribute to the ongoing debate of temporality as either subjectively or objectively experienced through introducing a novel concept, *narrative temporality*. This emerging conceptualization is developed through the underpinning assumption that meaning is dynamized and carried through temporality. More specifically, those meaning-making processes spontaneously occur through experiencing multiple and differing moments in temporality. Through interacting with such processes of experiencing, narratives emerge as stories in and of time and in turn constitute the meaningfulness or direction of the experience (Carr, 1991). Narratives in this sense are constructions and reconstructions of how things make sense in a temporal domain interweaving through many moments of time and space (Carr, 1991; Cunliffe et al., 2004). An example of such narratives is archival stories. What narrative temporality foregrounds is that the subjective experience of time is inevitably mediated by social, economic and cultural background. Therefore, how temporality is imagined, used and even communicated is largely influenced by situated contexts through which different ways of meaning-making towards temporality will be constructed (Cunliffe et al., 2004; Levine, 1997).

Narrative temporality provides a unique version of story in theorizing temporality as subjective and multiple experiences, which is particularly insightful in scrutinizing how temporality is experienced in history. Rantakari and Vaara (2017) justify the rationale

behind their emphasis on narrative by arguing that narratives in organization provide multiple versions of descriptions of sequences of events, and accordingly the temporal ordering of narratives provides a possible structure of how the past, present and future interact and connect. Therefore, how temporal experiences are narrated gives meanings to sensemaking of individuals and organizations (Boje, 2008; Feldman and Almquist, 2012; Pedersen, 2009; Vaara and Lamberg, 2016). As Carr (1991: 45) emphasizes, 'in the interest of discovering how the past (the historical past in particular) figures in our experience, we need to look at the overall temporal structure of experience . . . [and] the key to this structure is its narrative character'.

Similarly, Ricoeur (1984) stresses that human understanding of time is given sense by a narrative act, as manifested through the writing of this article and the writings of archives (i.e. archival stories). Such narrative acts are a way of organizing experiences through the spontaneity of and interconnectivities within multiple temporalities as 'time has no being since the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain' (Ricoeur, 1984: 7). This is consistent with our theorization of temporality as past–present–future dynamics based on Munn's temporalizing the past processes: the past and future exist in and through our experience of the present. Past experiences are recounted and future is anticipated to make sense of the present, which in turn constitutes a re-recognized past and possibly a re-imagined future. Temporality in this sense is not only experienced subjectively and introspectively, but also as an inherently social phenomenon (Reinecke and Ansari, 2017), and open to alternative interpretations.

Once we contextualize temporality as a tensely-bounded experience, we can argue that secrecy and its concealment and revelation can be studied as closely interwoven with multiple temporalities, being in the past, present and future. This approach addresses the underexamined and insufficiently understood positioning of secrecy in temporality, which will be illustrated in the next section. In our article, we provide a plausible lens to approach the constructions of secrecy in multiple temporalities by incorporating a historical perspective. We argue that we should turn to a historically-aware study that integrates multiple temporalities in the articulation and theorization processes. This approach echoes Decker et al.'s (2015) call for 'historical cognizance' and suggests that future research on history in organizations should go beyond the situation where history only serves as background data or the arena for the triangulation of data. Such historical awareness denotes that we should investigate the fundamental assumptions of history more carefully as a discipline in order to integrate history in organization studies. In this sense, it is meaningful to conceptualize secrecy as multiple temporalizing practices, which enables us to investigate possible and multiple ways of how time-secrecy is manifested. As 'temporality is a hinge that connects subjects to wider social horizons, and control over pasts and futures that are temporalized also influence action in the past' (Hodges, 2008: 416), it opens up the possibility of positioning secrecy in the contested power of, and derived from, time.

## **Conceptualizing secrecy as processes of multiple temporalities**

Secrecy lurks marginally in the shadows of the organization studies literature, 'almost as if it were itself a secret' (Costas and Grey, 2016: 2). Addressing this concern, a growing

number of studies within the field have drawn on the social scientific theorizations of secrecy, which primarily involve the classic work of Georg Simmel, Erving Goffman, Sissela Bok and Michael Taussig, and explored secrecy as both a form of organization and a part of organizational life (e.g. Costas and Grey, 2014a; Parker, 2016; Scott, 2013, 2015). A working definition of secrecy differentiates it from secrets: secrets refer to the content of information that is kept or is meant to be kept unknown to others. Although there are secret things, they do not conceal themselves (Derrida and Ferraris, 2011). Secrecy, as keeping a secret from someone, is to intentionally prevent information or evidence of it from reaching a particular person(s) and therefore could be comprehended as ‘the methods used to conceal . . . and the practices of concealment’ (Bok, 1982: 6). This definition denotes both the informational and social value as two intertwined aspects within, rather than two separate domains of, secrecy. This integrative approach, as argued by Costas and Grey (2014a), is consistent with Feldman and March’s (1981) insight that, besides its content, information gains (more of) its significance through its symbolic dynamics.

Building on this concept of secrecy that invites us to focus on the *processes* of concealment, some studies address the complexity embedded within the processes. Courpasson and Younes (2018) analyse how secrecy enhances, rather than impedes, pharmaceutical innovation by generating social solidarity and emotional ties as a secure environment amongst the scientists for an open exchange of ideas. Otto et al. (2019) discuss that provocative gestures are used for attention when secrecy as ‘a gap’ in organizational life (e.g. between formal announcements and reality) is noticed. Although these studies do not sufficiently discuss secrecy as a double-faceted process, they do imply that secrecy emerges ‘not as the opposite of communication but as a particular type of communication, subject to a particular kind of rules and practices’ (Fan et al., 2017: 562). Indeed, they point to a paradox of the organization of secrecy that secrets ought to be told. In this sense, what constructs secrecy is essentially the contradiction of secrecy.

Some studies explore such tensions more directly (e.g. Bean and Buikema, 2015; Wolfe and Blithe, 2015; Scott, 2013) and through the perspectives of sharing specifically. For example, Fauchart and von Hippel (2008) illustrate a dilemma faced by high-end French chefs where sharing recipes could lead to imitation that would potentially reduce the sharer’s competitiveness. This constituted the chefs’ strategic withholding through delaying the revelation of recipes. Concealment as a strategy is in this case constructed *in relation to* revelation – and more importantly and specifically, the timing and sequencing of revelation. Nelson (2016) investigates similar sharing/secrecy tensions of academic knowledge: although academic knowledge should be openly shared, such sharing is done strategically; for example, one of the illustrative quotes indicates that ‘[Stan Cohen, the coinventor] didn’t want to talk about it until it was in print or published’ (Nelson, 2016: 271). Ringel (2019) examines how the Pirate Party of Germany maintained transparency through sustaining revelation practices (e.g. sharing information on social media) and managing the emerging and needed concealment at different stages of an election campaign. Importantly, what these studies share in common is a temporal feature (e.g. strategic delay; electoral stages) involved in understanding the tensions between concealment and revelation. Yet this feature of secrecy has been inadequately addressed in respect to its roles and significance in differentiating *as well as* entangling knowing and not knowing *within* secrecy.

Consequently, we argue that a more fruitful approach to understanding secrecy should recognize two important characteristics of secrecy processes. First, conceptualizing secrecy solely with the dimension of concealment is insufficient, and should be extended to that concealment and revelation are coexistent and mutually constitutive in constructing secrecy. Extant literature has touched upon such coexistence in two main ways. First, there has been a focus on the dialectical tensions between concealment and revelation. Wolfe and Blithe (2015) explore such tensions in Nevada's legal brothels to reveal how the brothels organize image-management strategies. This study discusses the dialectical dynamics as the simultaneous, conflictual and constitutive relations between the need of revelation to promote businesses for the survival and development of these brothels and the need to conceal for the privacy and safety of employees. Although Wolfe and Blithe (2015) undoubtedly advance the understanding of the interlocking processes between concealment and revelation, they take for granted the multiple temporalities that make such dialectic possible. The second way departs from hidden organizations and illustrates the coexistence of concealment and revelation through public secrecy as 'generally known but cannot be articulated' (Taussig, 1999: 5). It is a deliberate act to avoid the *acknowledgement* of knowing something of which people are all aware (Costas and Grey, 2016; Otto et al., 2019). By enabling known secrets to appear invisible (Taussig, 1999), what is concealed is revelation, making revelation part of or even the content of, rather than being the opposite to, concealment. In this article, we bring together the understandings and emphasize the simultaneity of competition and constitution between concealment and revelation. We focus on knowledge with restricted and privileged knowing (e.g. not shared as public secrets), and argue that concealment and revelation are mutually constitutive as emerging and interlocking processes that are continuously intersecting, combating and cultivating each other.

Such interlocking processes imply that at different times, or even possibly at the same time, both revelation and concealment are happening. Hence, as the second important character of secrecy processes, temporality and history should be considered as partaking in the formation and conceptualization of secrecy, which have been largely overlooked. Bringing the two characters together, we propose to reconceptualize secrecy in and through multiple temporalities by positioning the making of secrecy in multiple dimensions (e.g. sequencing, timing etc.), specifically through past–present–future dynamics. Though in particular cases certain dimensions might be foregrounded, all temporal dimensions are experienced and apprehended through interactions among people, space and objects (Munn, 1992). Drawing on the intersubjectivity of time in Munn's temporalization, past and future are continually changing in time because they are perceived differently in a changing present (Gell, 1998). As a multiple temporalization, concealment and revelation of secrecy become closely nested through the ongoing (re) production of knowing and not knowing.

What was known in the past is continually reproduced in everyday practices of the present through 'retentions' of what happened in the past. For instance, local authorities in Attica discovered that it was impossible to reconcile a collective memory of the contested history of the Greek Civil War based on linear chronological events: secrets and personal stories constantly appear and disturb this linearity of temporality. Differing versions of knowing and not knowing emerged and were intermingled with diverse temporalities



(Gefou-Madianou, 2017). In this sense, temporalizing secrecy as entanglements, not only between knowing and not knowing, but also between their potentiality and actuality, shifts and extends our focus from secrecy as informational (e.g. the content of the personal stories) and social to secrecy as processes of a complex synergy among different temporalities (e.g. Born, 2015).

Such synergy could be experienced through the creation of opposite but relational dimensions of social identification around and within secrecy in multiple temporalities. Specifically, concealment generates a property as 'don't tell anyone, *but*', placing an emphasis on the formation of insiders, the exclusion of outsiders, and the creation of distinctions between the two identifications. Because of such distinctions, concealment and revelation do not just coexist in parallel. Instead, they mutually constitute each other in relation to the temporal contexts and the characteristics of relations embedded. The more concealed a secrecy process is, the more tempting the revelation would be. It is the ability to be able to disclose the 'inside' and the unknown that constitutes and sustains the power insiders have over outsiders. In this sense, the creation of 'inside' and 'outside' generates 'contradictory centrifugal and centripetal forces push and pull on secrets' (Jones, 2014: 54). While the aristocratic allures of concealment are accumulated in the formation process of secrecy, they are brought to a climax at the moment of dissipation as the extremely intensive sensation of power is actualized in the lust of revelation or confession (Simmel, 1950). In this way, being temporally produced, secrecy can constitute its revelation through the difficulty and challenge of drawing a clear line of its identification and membership. This can bring more uncertainty to secrecy as the exposure might release hidden forces that should have been left unknown to inappropriate others, such as the protection of organizational trade secrets (e.g. Hannah, 2005).

Secrecy, constructed by temporary concealment twisted together with ongoing formed revelation, organizes identification and differentiation of groups and relations. Such organizations can be characterized through its temporal tension and connection, as Simmel (1950: 331) illustrates that 'what at an earlier time was manifest, enters the protection of secrecy; and that, conversely, what once was secret, no longer needs [or has] such protection but reveals itself'. In this sense, although it is marginally discussed, multiple temporal processes play a fundamental role in understanding the organization of secrecy and secrecy in organizations.

## **Contextualizing secrecy through the lens of archival stories**

In order to contextualize how secrecy unfolds as multiple temporal co-constitution of concealment and revelation, we have chosen to explore how historical archives act as constructed sites of multiple temporalities in which past–present–future dynamics of secrecy formations can be embedded (e.g. Tamboukou, 2011). We argue that the multiple temporalities in and of secrecy imply that both concealment and revelation can happen at different times and at the same time, which is congruent with the multiple temporalities presented in archives. Through the lens of archival stories, our article focuses on the exploration of archival analyses as processes through which archivists construct historical materials. Archival stories and their construction are treated as the object of our study, since this specific type of historical narrative is a particularly powerful lens through which

to explore secrecy in organizations. As a case in point, in Grey's (2014: 107) research on organizational secrecy at Bletchley Park, historical methods and narratives are indicated as 'virtually the only way of studying this issue [in this case, secrecy]'. Decker et al. (2020) further stress that methodologically historical methods, especially historical narratives, are effective for studies of clandestine, secret or illegal activities. The making of secrecy can emerge from nuances embedded in spontaneous concealment and revelation through the analytical experience of archivists. In this way, by shifting the focus from archival data to archival experience as the unit of analysis, it becomes possible to uncover relationships between the underlying epistemologies informing the work of historians and the knowledge they produce from archives (Fellman and Popp, 2013).

### *Reflecting upon our choice of the archival stories*

Through observing the archival observations, we seek to illustrate how secrecy as a process is embedded in and manifested through archives and in turn how archives themselves can be considered as processes of secrecy. Hence, we emphasize how the nature and characteristics of archives enable archivists to both uncover and create secrecy through the making of their archival stories (i.e. writings of archives). We investigate four archival stories as our illustrative examples: readings of CDC Twin Study archival materials; an evaluation of archival data in destructions of the British Royal Family; an investigation of FBI's internal memos during the period of the FBI's COINTELPRO-Black Nationalist Hate Groups programme (1967–1971); and the reconstruction of Holodomor through analysing chronological gaps in Ukrainian archives. The illustrative examples are chosen for the four reasons given below.

First, the examples involve intentional concealment in the making of the stories, rather than simply the absence of materials. By employing such historical contextualization of concealment and revelation processes, we are able to position secrecy and its construction in wider social and temporal processes. By scrutinizing the knowledge production processes *within* archival analyses, the hidden parts of secrecy-making can become analytically observable. Second, the diversified forms and contexts covered in the examples indicate that secrecy making and remaking is an important and pervasive (or even mundane) phenomenon within archival stories in specific and historical studies in general, rather than only occurring in particular sets of archives. Third, the available materials of the examples enable us to explore different/multiple versions of narratives for what happened in the past in a way that is consistent with the critical and reflexive approach used in the article. This is consistent with our conceptualization of temporality as multiple 'now' moments (e.g. Barbour, 2000; McTaggart, 1993). This enables us to analyse the examples as being more than historical products: they are constantly becoming and yet remain as incomplete moments in history-making processes. Secrecy and its constructions are therefore perceived as moments in having been 'at one time a past, present, and future' (Dawson, 2014: 290). In this way, historical narratives, or archival stories in our article, enable us to reveal how secrecy is constantly constituted by and constitutes multiple temporalities. Fourth, the intriguing and stimulating nature of the examples might help with initiating/maintaining the potential interestingness of the article.

Our analysis of the examples draws on anti-positivist approaches to the study of history. Locating our analysis in tradition going back through New Historicism to E. H. Carr, R. G. Collingwood and Marx, we insist that far from being neutral reservoirs of objective history, archives are better understood as moments in an ongoing process of production through which historians produce history (Blackledge, 2019; Carr, 1961; Collingwood, 1946; Gallagher and Greenblatt, 2000; Ghosh et al., 2006; Hohendahl, 1992; Pieters, 2000). Whereas traditional historicism advocated the quasi-positivist belief in objectivity, our article benefits by borrowing from this anti-positivist tradition and its insight that archives constitute terrains of interpretation that allow the emergence of novel questions (Veaser, 2013).

Derived from the ‘contingency and contested nature of the category of literary’ (Colebrook, 1997: 2), archival stories are messily shaped by cultural and social events, and infinite possibilities of interpretations can emerge. By extending these insights we could have more flexibility and freedom into the queries related to politics and power. In the case of organizational secrecy, this orientation is particularly relevant, as anti-positivist historiography has the potential to approach historical evidence (i.e. archival evidence in our article) from a more processual and critical perspective.

### *Reflecting upon our interpretation of others’ archival stories*

Following the processual and critical perspective, we recognize that our situated perspective as social constructionists has influenced how we conceptualize and research the past. We recognize that archival data are traditionally treated as a sole means of describing what happened in the past, with little reflection on the processes of constructions in organization studies (Decker, 2013; Decker et al., 2020; Kipping and Üsdiken, 2014). In this article, we address this concern through incorporating narrative temporality into our reflection on how we construct our interpretations and analysis of the archival stories.

Narrative temporality encourages a radically reflexive approach in shifting the relationship between researchers and the researched/observed towards an interactive, situated and negotiated process (Hernes and Schultz, 2020; Tamboukou, 2014). Reflecting upon our journey of selection, readings and analyses of archival stories, this process can be considered as a negotiated narrative involving ‘a polyphonic and synchronic process constructed by many acts of interpretation across time and space’ (Cunliffe et al., 2004: 277). As researchers, we are not objective observers of history; instead, we actively participate in co-creating narratives and stories through engaging with the existing archival narratives as well as interweaving our own interpretation and experiences with them. This process becomes increasingly essential in historically-relevant studies in organization studies, as Decker et al. (2020: 2) urge that such historiographical reflexivity, as ‘an engagement with history as a source of theorizing as well as a repertoire of methods for researching the past’, should be positioned as the centre of any research comprehending the past of organization and society.

Drawing on this reflexive, anti-positivist tradition, archival narratives are perceived as critical readings of archival evidence rather than as objective and authentic representations of the past (e.g. Decker, 2013). Archival materials are not self-evident but are subject to multiple interpretations of researchers and archivists. Any archival story is based on the extrapolation from existing/existed materials preserved under particular

conditions (e.g. Hamilton et al., 2012) and ‘necessarily be a reinterpretation’ (Freshwater, 2003: 739) of its content. In this sense, archival stories attract the attention paid to how both archival evidence and the archive (site) itself are approached as a place of varying power players exerted influence. These could be realized through the choice of what to retain and what to discard (Decker, 2013; Hanlon, 2001), to shape what is made visible and what should be kept invisible.

Therefore, we recognize our interpretations of archival stories selected for this article as meta-narratives, which brings further attention to analysing the archival experience of others reflexively (Boje et al., 2016; Cunliffe et al., 2004). Interpretations and readings as meta-narratives involve identifying different versions of the existing narratives and stories, including alternative and competing narratives, to acknowledge that our analyses and findings only contribute to one version of those narratives. As depicted by Tamboukou (2014), we are always constructing an archive of our own that brings fragmented archival data and theoretical thoughts together. We are therefore attentive towards our voice and narration through refraining from claiming a fully comprehensive knowledge of any past event and through highlighting the possibility of alternative interpretations. This is consistent with narrative temporality tradition in terms of moral interdependence and reflexive responsibility, by recognizing communicative opportunities and making them available to all research participants (Cunliffe et al., 2004; Shotter, 1993). This process of self-reflection is important, as to be critical and reflexive in analysing the archival experience of others, we ought to reflect upon such interpretive experience of our own.

## **About and beyond the archival stories: Revealing multiple temporalities of secrecy**

Our anti-positivist approach indicates that archives are by definition incomplete, because they are at best fragmentary. But in this article, we explore not that which is by its nature absent but that which is intentionally concealed: the secrecy. Through selecting and organizing with pre-existing rules and/or individually interpreted value of the materials, the archival stories provide a useful lens for viewing the complex dynamics and decisions of concealment and revelation involved in archiving processes, illuminating themselves as a site of secrecy in multiple temporalities. The ‘tick-tock’ sound of time is actualized and recognized through particular power (re)configuration and/or social (re)identification projected by and gave sense to both interpreters and re-interpreters. This section will discuss such complex dynamics in three ways through the tensions between visibility and invisibility, connections between visibility and invisibility, and beyond visibility and invisibility.

### *Tensions between visibility and invisibility: The making and remaking of archival stories in temporalities*

The selection, evaluation and writing of archives reflect the perspectives of those who will interact with the archives (Thomas et al., 2017: 12) and are often used to protect the powerful. By concealing specific materials in the form of restricted archives, it can install

a selective mechanism of its accessibility (e.g. reduce the probability of public access) and therefore protect the materials. Archival stories, as the writings of archives, can therefore mask concealment and its related invisibility through the legitimacy of revelation and its possible visibility to maintain the boundary of secrecy. The making of archival stories can therefore put a barrier between visibility and invisibility, which might be built along with the possibilities of weakening the barrier.

This can be exemplified through the controversial and never-published Child Development Centre (CDC of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services) Twin Study throughout the 1960s and 1970s. In 2018, two documentaries independently produced by CNN in association with Channel 4 ('Three Identical Strangers') and ABC television ('The Twinning Reaction') attracted public attention through the stories of siblings who were raised in different adopted families and who, having lived separate lives, rediscovered each other. The stories are rooted in the controversial CDC Twin Study between the early 1950s and the mid-1970s. It was conceived by Dr Peter Neubauer, director of CDC, and his colleagues, and tracked the development of twins or triplets separated from birth through to adolescence (Segal, 2000, 2006, 2012). The adoptions were made through the agency 'Louise Wise Services', where the clients and the adoptive families were mostly Jewish. The adopted families, specifically chosen based on their different parenting styles and economic levels, were told that 'they and their children were part of an ongoing study of child development that would require annual home visits and psychological testing' (Perlman, 2005: 271) and were intentionally kept unaware of the multiple birth status. As indicated by Dr Viola Bernard, who was an advisor to Louis Wise Services, the co-investigator of the study, and placed the twins (Segal, 2012), this study provided a natural laboratory situation to study certain questions such as the nature–nurture debates (Perlman, 2005).

The study first came to public attention when the only 'set' of triplets rediscovered one another through a college connection in 1980 at the age of 19. Following media reporting and public questioning of this ethically controversial study, it had vanished from the face of the earth (Perlman, 2005: 275). Dr Lawrence Perlman, who was a research assistant of the study in 1968–1969, sought to locate the data and made inquiries with the head archivist of the Yale University Library, wherein no record of files was found (Perlman, 2005). He phoned Neubauer for clarification:

On January 31, 2005, he returned my call but declined to answer the question, only asking why I wanted to know the location of the data. I explained that I was writing a remembrance of the study. He stated that he had no time to talk, would need to call me back, and abruptly hung up. Thus far, I have not received a response to the call or a follow-up email inquiry. Subsequently, the archivist at Yale did locate the files, listed as Manuscript Group 1585. They were gifted to Yale in 1990 with the proviso that the records remain sealed until 2066! (Perlman, 2005: 275)

As Perlman (2005) further notes, the records can only be accessed with written authorization from the executive vice president of the Jewish Board. Through making it into a restricted archive, materials of the CDC study have been kept as secrets to outsiders. One question can be raised here: is such secrecy possible with the involvement of various research staff having knowledge of the process? Yet it is because of, rather than despite,

the variety of staff involved in the study, many individuals might have interacted with a (small) part of it (e.g. Perlman, 2005; Segal, 2005). This constitutes and sustains the maintenance of the secrecy in a way that many of them might not be able to spill the secret, because they do not have a bigger picture of it. They might be in the know without knowing about that which they have been in the know.

However, contrasting to the intended invisibility, the making of archival stories is itself a visible symbol of concealment and possesses a material existence of the concealed, which in turn poses possibilities to renounce the protection of secrecy. The existence of the concealed becomes a discoverable vehicle for potential revelation. Secrecy and risks are therefore interrelated and co-constitutive: when risks engender secrecy, a managing strategy, secrecy, can generate unwelcome risks that weaken such strategy (e.g. Jones, 2014). As a way to manage the managing strategy, practices of remaking archives are employed as a defensive strategy for exclusion to maintain the historical concealment and to turn the revealed concealment into concealed revelation. This can lead to the representation of intentionally (and significantly) redacted information or perhaps even the destruction of archives, (re)shaping what is made visible in relation to what is kept invisible in archival stories. The British Royal Family has engaged in those actions of destruction. Queen Victoria was the first among British monarchs to publish edited extracts from her journals, which spanned around 70 years in 122 volumes (Ward, 2014). While it was a huge success with 20 copies sold in 1884, Princess Beatrice copied the entries into thick, blue-lined exercise books, censoring and altering as she went, and then burnt the originals of 'potentially sensitive materials . . . to protect her mother and other members of the family' (Thomas et al., 2017: 32). This 'legacy' of censoring and destruction continued in history. Princess Margaret destroyed a lot of 'potentially sensitive materials' (Thomas et al., 2017: 32) contained within her mother's, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother's, archives. This act included the destruction of letters from Diana to the Queen Mother because 'they were so private . . . [and] she was protecting her mother and other members of the family' (Rayner, 2009, cited in Thomas et al., 2017: 33).

This case study exemplifies the fact that far from being objective lenses to the past, archives are often better understood as the outcome of agentic processes of manufacturing and maintenance with a view to framing the main historical narration around a particular interpretation. Archives therefore act less to reflect social relations and more to produce and reproduce them (e.g. Hanlon, 2001). The significance and meanings ascribed to the stories are projected onto it through particular prejudices and interests. Through controlling the production and dissemination of knowledge in unique ways, the concealed knowledge becomes a form of sociocultural capital and produces an impressional consciousness of the past. This further engenders a specific way of retention of a particular past as a temporal background that is constitutive of the present experience and future expectations. Beyond what is kept and redacted lies the multiple meanings of archives, such as the political purposes that shape how particular documents were drafted (Grey, 2012), generating the possibilities of reconfiguring temporal features of the past, producing an opening onto the multiplicity of time, and reshaping the particular connectivity among past, present and future. In this way, our understanding of the visible would inevitably be partial and problematic, as within the complex and particular dynamics of archiving there are

layers of secrecy generating and generated between the concealed and the revealed, before the concealed being concealed, and after the revealed being revealed.

As interrelated operations of revelation and concealment, writings of archives are themselves acts of secrecy in its ongoing accomplishment processes. When acts of secrecy involve forms of protection such as the construction of unequal knowing and the maintenance of ongoing differentiation, it is itself vulnerable (e.g. Courpasson and Younes, 2018). Secrets do not remain guarded forever, as what is known offers possibilities of further penetration (Simmel, 1950: 346). The protection of secrecy is therefore temporary, which relates to the particular historical contexts and characteristics of relations embedded. Although archives should be a beacon of light (Thomas et al., 2017) for elucidation, we should be attentive not merely to what they reveal but more importantly to what they conceal and marginalize, and to the extent that what they conceal might reshape what was and will be revealed. This fact points to a dilemma in writing archives in general: what should be unveiled and what should be kept concealed? It implies that revelation and concealment are mutually constitutive and incomplete: what is archived requires communicative efforts to uncover the hiddenness, and what is communicated in turn creates and maintains aspects of the hiddenness. This might be achieved in ways such as simplification, uses of terminologies, and/or compartmentalization in making sense of both past and present and perhaps future. For example, the complexities of Bletchley Park and its operations were rigorously compartmentalized to make comprehending the totality of its story 'difficult and perhaps impossible' (Grey, 2012: 3). Hence, declassification of secretive documents does not necessarily mean the revelation of secrecy, which will be further illustrated in the next section. In this sense, although Thomas et al. (2017: 7) argue that 'the worst silence of archive is secrecy', what is revealed can itself be secrecy. Archives therefore become a process of constructing a language for secrecy and its strategy with cultural and political implications.

### *Connecting visibility and invisibility in archival stories: Concealment as a clue for revelation and revelation as a way of concealment*

As a language and strategy, archival stories can produce incoherence of narratives across time, which connects, rather than separates, visibility and invisibility. The released catalogue for the sealed files of the twin study at Yale University archives refers to records on 11 individuals, while there were in total 13 in the original study (five sets of twins and one set of triples) (Segal, 2006). Although it is not clear why the twins were dropped from the study, it triggers speculations and continued investigation, which might be unfinished and fragmented, of the hidden aspects of this and other related studies (e.g. Segal, 2006, 2012). Moreover, through declassified memos, Hoerl and Ortiz (2015) explore how secrecy influenced the decision-making processes within the FBI's covert and illegal counterintelligence programs against the American New Left between 1968 and 1971. They found that the FBI's internal memos were written with a desire to maintain good relationships with the director. The names of informants and particular targets were redacted from the file. However, as Cunningham (2003) observes, such censoring is inconsistent, as the sequences of information and action discussed in the memos offer possibilities to identify the redacted information.

In this sense, the missing information becomes the clues for what is hidden. The site and process that maintain secrecy become the site and process where secrecy can be disclosed. Historicized secrecy (or secrecy in and as archives) is not likely to be destroyed completely, as its significance is made up of the accumulated traces of the past. What is made visible can be a way of concealment, as particular elements are strategically chosen (not) to reveal, with attention given to managing the reaction and impression of particular audiences. Such concealment in turn shapes the meaning of the visible. For instance, archivists wrote to reveal the population loss in the Holodomor in 1932–1933 from close examination of Ukrainian archival statistics (Motyl, 2010). A famine produced by Joseph Stalin and causing the deaths of millions of Ukrainian peasants has been a politicized ‘distant past’ that largely formed Ukrainian historical narrative and identity (Motyl, 2010). However, archival materials available for the years 1932–1933 in the governmental institutions of archives in the Ukraine are ‘virtually useless’ (Boriak, 2008: 203), owing to the purposeful withdrawal of related records. Hence, in the writings of archives, although concealment can be a way of revelation, the revealed can also be a way of concealment.

Chronological gaps discovered in archives are more telling. The purging of archival materials occurred in UNHO archives, a powerful body responsible for statistics and population census: there were only 135 files extant for 1932 and 81 files for 1933. In terms of 1933–1941 records, there is documentary proof of their destruction by commissariat officials just before the German occupation of Kyiv in September 1941. At the time, 12,679 files were destroyed, equal to half of the pre-war holdings. A final purge was undertaken in 1962, and 2500 files were destroyed in total (Boriak, 2004). The chronological gaps are not just about the difference within a sequence of events, but also the meaning of the difference as situated, responsive performances (e.g. Cunliffe et al., 2004).

Revealed through the co-constitution between concealment and revelation, the process of creating archives brings visibility and invisibility to bear upon each other and become itself the living memory of the past that has been selectively embedded in the constantly emerging processes of secrecy in the present. Such secrecy is ongoingly formed and yet stays incomplete. It is manifested through and manifests ‘the non-linearity of subjective experience’ (Dawson and Sykes, 2019), which produces multiple accounts of the past that gives sense to and is made sense by current experiences. It shapes how individuals experience time in the continuation and connection of the past, present and future (George and Jones, 2000). As the mystique of secrecy, although what is articulated as the past might not be (entirely) ‘true’, it can be experienced as very real in the present.

### *Beyond visibility and invisibility: The multiplicity and uncertainty of realities*

Viewing archival stories as a site of secrecy allows the stories to be considered as an ongoing process of secrecy that forms and reforms the emerging tensions and connections between visibility and invisibility surrounding and within the materials. Yet why is it important to understand such visibility and invisibility?

The significance of the understanding implies that archive is not a limitation to, or separation of, the multiplicity of temporality. It is precisely an opening onto the multiplicity



through experiencing reality as ‘a kind of temporal “reach” or “stretch”’ (Carr, 1991: 95) where our construction and recognition of a historically specific context are changeable, flexible and above all developmental. More specifically, interwoven in the hidden and chaotic dynamics between visibility and invisibility, writing archives forms a particular organization of power relations and social identification by revealing certain dimensions of events and experience in specific ways. When such configuration becomes the background of the present experience, it might trigger questions and challenges of the incoherence and/or maintenance of the coherence between past and present. This process reshapes the dynamics and decisions of concealment and revelation and constitutes a reconstruction of social and power relations. Derived from the action and experience of the past and the present, a sense of future could be engendered with certain anticipation and expectations. It is a reflexive and retrospective process of (re)structuring time and of (re)structuring our (e.g. audience of archives) way of *living in time*.

In this way, the multiplicity of reality can be created through the ongoing construction of secrecy where temporal incoherence and confusion are a condition and consequence of it. Alternatively, it might allow for continuity and stability for certain realities, as secrecy can avoid upsetting prevalent power structure and social relations. This could be illustrated through the reasons that the CDC twin study has been so compelling and attracted significant publication attention. One possibility could be that no report of the study has been made visible, constituting the tantalizing attempts of wanting to know the secrecy that might contain ‘juicy’ information and be of special value hidden within its invisibility. A form of such special value could be relevant, pointing to another possibility that the story of reunited twins is embedded with the implicit suggestion that it could happen to anyone (Wright, 1997: 37). Therefore, between and beyond the shades of visibility and invisibility lies the uncertainty of possible realities reconstructed by a fluid, rather than fixed, past. In the case of the CDC twin study, such uncertainty feeds the fantasy that one might have a doppelganger who understands oneself almost perfectly because ‘s/he is almost me’ (Wright, 1997), but one does not know who that might be. The unknown further strengthens the sensational feeling that makes it more special to suspect that even if there is a slight possibility of its occurrence, it might happen. Importantly, what goes beyond this fantasy is the projection and recognition of a possibly different life one could have lived, which extends the connectivity among past, present and future into multiple possibilities.

Hence, what is embedded within the dynamic tensions and connections between visibility and invisibility is the negotiation of a temporality of social existence and the emergence of (a sense of) multiple realities. The latter is recognized through reflection ‘in retrospection, in the moment, and in anticipation’ (Cunliffe et al., 2004: 269) in a sense that as one reflects on past experience, the reflection is influenced by both the currently experienced moments and the future probabilities one anticipates (Cunliffe et al., 2004). In this way, past and future are not defined by irreversibility or singularity (Sartre, 1956: 130). Instead, they are experienced through both the dispersion and juxtaposition of their multiple forms (i.e. pasts and futures), constituting the multiplicity of temporality experienced, sustained or reshaped within and through processes of secrecy that are continuously completing and yet remain incomplete.

## Concluding discussion

The primary contribution of this article has been focused on the conceptual shift of understanding secrecy as ongoingly temporalized processes by extending anti-positivist approaches to the study of historical archives. Among the limited studies on secrecy in organizations, we draw on temporal sensitivity, a rarely explained character of secrecy, as a platform to extend the conceptualization of secrecy as not solely a process for concealment. Although some studies (e.g. Wolfe and Blithe, 2015) touch upon the coexistence of concealment and revelation, we illustrate *how* they mutually constitute each other as and through the inherently temporal processes of secrecy. We argue that at the definitional level, secrecy should be recognized through its paradoxical nature as interlocking processes of simultaneous concealment and revelation in multiple temporalities. In doing so, this article brings forward the social and multiple nature of time by considering archival stories through the lens of secrecy, and the temporal nature of secrecy through the processes of writing archives.

More specifically, we explore the potential of this extended conceptualization through varying examples of archival stories in different forms and contexts. What the stories share in common is that the making and remaking of secrecy are subject to multiple temporalities, including but not limited to sequencing, timing and past–present–future dynamics. The example illustrations shed light on the paradoxical dynamics of secrecy generated by and which generate its temporal complexity in three interconnected ways. First, writing archival stories can selectively mask the concealed and its invisibility through the legitimacy of the selected visibility to maintain the boundary of secrecy. The temporal production of knowledge generates a form of impressional consciousness of the past and shapes the temporal background of the present. The temporal connectivity constructs a strategic language through and for secrecy with power and political implications. However, such a strategic barrier built between visibility and invisibility could be transformed into possibilities of their connections rather than separations. For instance, in the case of the CDC study, writing archival stories is a way of concealing particular materials with restricted access. Yet a written story indicates the material existence of archives that visibly symbolizes the concealed, attracting further opportunities for attacks and penetration. Hence, illustrated as the second way, archival stories bring visibility and invisibility to bear upon each other, constituting that the site and process that sustain secrecy can become the site and process where secrecy is revealed. In this sense, the past is not a static memory; rather, it is ongoingly reconstructed through the emerging processes of secrecy in the present. Secrecy in this way is ongoingly formed and yet is incomplete, producing multiple accounts of the nonlinear subjective experience of time. Third, going beyond what is intentionally and selectively revealed, the temporal complexity of secrecy suggests multiple accounts of possible realities where past and future are not considered as irreversible (Sartre, 1956). It is the multiplicity of pasts and futures that forms and reforms our present experience and therefore constitutes the ongoing negotiation of our social existence.

From the perspective outlined here, the temporal sensitivity of secrecy can be considered as a reflexive as well as a retrospective process of living in time and participating in structuring time, enabling a historical inquiry of secrecy. Time in this sense ‘becomes

human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode' (Ricoeur, 1984: 85) grounded in our consciousness and experience (e.g. Cunliffe et al., 2004). This article therefore opens up the possibility to explore organizational secrecy as collectively constructed processes of temporality and provides a platform for future theoretical and empirical studies on secrecy, such as the temporal interactions between different types of secrecy emerged in our study.

To further illustrate such temporal interactions, the incident of Diana's letter can be an example. Two types of secrecy are particularly relevant here, including formal secrecy and informal secrecy that are defined and differentiated through methods of intentional concealment and protection. Formal secrecy is created and regulated in officially established and recorded ways, and informal secrecy takes place via socially negotiated norms and morals, such as confidential gossip (Costas and Grey, 2014a, 2016; see also Fan & Grey, 2020; Fan et al., 2020). In this sense, archival stories involve formal secrecy, as becoming archives requires a process of formal documentation and classification. More importantly, archival stories also go beyond formal secrecy and involve interactions between formal secrecy and informal secrecy in the (re)making. Going back to the incident of Diana's letter, when Princess Margaret destroyed it as otherwise it might bring shame to the family, informal secrecy took place in consideration of social conventions and norms. When the royal archivists kept such destruction of the letter secret and therefore formally removed it from the history of the Royal Family, formal secrecy was at play. In this way, the creation of informal secrecy becomes both the trigger and the content of formal secrecy. The destruction of letters was later made available and accessible to archivists and the public. This indicates that the revelation of informal secrecy can mark the existence of formal secrecy. Hence, not only can informal secrecy be an (unintended) by-product of the increase or decrease of formal secrecy (Costas and Grey, 2014a), but formal secrecy can be a by-product of informal secrecy. The temporal dynamics of concealment and revelation within archival stories are therefore a condition and consequence of the ongoing interactions between formal secrecy and informal secrecy.

Through exploring multiple temporalities and its significance in understanding secrecy, this article also contributes methodologically to incorporate archival stories into organization studies. Historical archives have attracted growing interest in the field of organization studies with the rise of historical contextualization theory. Despite this development, archives continue to be particularly underutilized as a source of empirical materials within our discipline (Rowlinson et al., 2014). Furthermore, there has been little empirical and theoretical attention visited on the question of how archival materials can be used once placed in archives, even though textual and visual materials have long been recognized as part and parcel of organization studies. This article offers a possible lens to investigate archives through secrecy as a social construction and historicized temporization with multiple temporal processes.

This analytical lens foregrounds that archives and archiving processes are themselves secrecy in its ongoingly accomplishing processes, generating incoherent and yet interconnected temporalities that constitute the multiplicity of reality. Such multiplicity of temporality and reality is embedded in mixtures of clarity and ambiguity with selected and fragmented combinations of making certain knowledge (more or less) accessible and

concealed. It is the tangible qualities of archives that offer ‘special opportunities for manipulating and concealing meaning’ (Bledsoe and Robey, 1986: 205). Although archives indeed widen our understanding of organizational secrecy formed and experienced in multiple temporalities (Carr, 1991; Munn, 1992), secrecy in turn has enriched the understanding of the dynamic nonlinearity and the complex temporalities of archives and archiving processes. With this understanding, future research can draw on the secrecy lens as a medium to restore the lost temporal awareness in organization studies (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldbberg, 2000) of and through archival stories.

For such future studies, the intention is not to describe any historical event for the purpose of developing a testable claim. Instead, it aims to account for the particular phenomenon through rich and detailed reconstruction of the descriptions and reflections of the research process of historians. A radically reflexive approach should be employed, through which the relationship between researchers and the researched (i.e. archival stories) can be transformed into a more interactive and situated process. Such a process would encourage investigations of both others’ interpretations of the archives and researchers’ reflections upon their re-interpretations. Through such situated positioning, researchers can reposition themselves as co-creators of historical stories and narratives. This facilitates understandings of secrecy beyond its particular context to further produce an analytical reflection on such contextualization.

Our everyday organizational life is not just the life of the ‘present’ as ‘the present is the transition from the past to the future’ (Cunliffe et al., 2004: 269). Embedded within such transition might be the increasingly pervasive and mundane and therefore overlooked aspects of organizational life such as secrecy. Temporalizing secrecy through the co-constitution between concealment and revelation paves a way to understand how we make sense of ‘meanings’ through temporal experience and actions, because ‘we are historical beings first, before we are observers of history’ (Dilthey, 1968: 277–278, cited in Carr, 1991). In this way, we are not bystanders of secrecy; rather, we are intertwined with it.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our acting editor Tim Kuhn and the three anonymous reviewers for their ongoingly constructive and inspiring comments. We also hope to express our gratitude to Paul Blackledge, Chris Grey, Mike Zundel and Roy Suddaby for their support and encouraging comments on the earlier versions of this article.

## Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iDs

Ziyun Fan  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1480-8361>

Yihan Liu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8653-6057>

## Note

- 1 Both authors contributed equally to this article.

## References

- Alvesson M and Sköldböck K (2000) *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE.
- Anand V and Rosen CC (2008) The ethics of organizational secrets. *Journal of Management Inquiry* 17(2): 97–101.
- Barbour J (2000) *The End of Time: The Next Revolution in our Understanding of the Universe*. London: Phoenix, Orion Books.
- Bean H and Buikema RJ (2015) Deconstituting al-Qa'ida: CCO theory and the decline and dissolution of hidden organizations. *Management Communication Quarterly* 29(4): 512–538.
- Biesenthal C, Sankaran S, Pitsis T, et al. (2015) Temporality in organization studies: Implications for strategic project management. *Open Economics and Management Journal* 2(1): 45–52.
- Blackledge P (2019) *Historical Materialism*. In: Vidal M, Smith T, Rotta T, et al. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 37–56.
- Bledsoe CH and Robey KM (1986) Arabic literacy and secrecy among the Mende of Sierra Leone. *Man* 21(2): 202–226.
- Boje DM (2008) *Storytelling Organizations*. London: Sage.
- Boje DM, Usha H and Saylor R (2016) Antenarratives of organizational change: The microstoria of Burger King's storytelling. *Human Relations* 69(2): 391–418.
- Bok S (1982) *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Boriak H (2004) Sources and resources on the famine in Ukraine's state archival system. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 27(1/4): 117–147.
- Boriak H (2008) Population losses in the Holodomor and the destruction of related archives: New archival evidence. *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 30(1/4): 199–215.
- Born G (2015) Making time: Temporality, history, and the cultural object. *New Literary History* 46(3): 361–386.
- Callender C (2002) *Time, Reality & Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Carr D (1991) *Time, Narrative, and History*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Carr EH (1961) *What is History?* London: Palgrave.
- Colebrook C (1997) *New Literary Histories: New Historicism and Contemporary Criticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Collingwood RG (1946) *The Idea of History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Costas J and Grey C (2014a) Bringing secrecy into the open: Towards a theorization of the social processes of organizational secrecy. *Organization Studies* 35(10): 1423–1447.
- Costas J and Grey C (2014b) The temporality of power and the power of temporality: Imaginary future selves in professional service firms. *Organization Studies* 35(6): 909–937.
- Costas J and Grey C (2016) *Secrecy at Work: The Hidden Architecture of Organizational Life*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Courpasson D and Younes D (2018) Double or quits: Understanding the links between secrecy and creativity in a project development process. *Organization Studies* 39(2–3): 271–295.
- Cunliffe AL, Luhman JT and Boje DM (2004) Narrative temporality: Implications for organizational research. *Organization Studies* 25(2): 261–286.
- Cunningham D (2003) The patterning of repression: FBI counterintelligence and the New Left. *Social Forces* 82(1): 209–240.

- Dawson P (2014) Reflections: On time, temporality and change in organizations. *Journal of Change Management* 14(3): 285–308.
- Dawson P and Sykes C (2019) Concepts of time and temporality in the storytelling and sensemaking literatures: A review and critique. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 21(1): 97–114.
- Decker S (2013) The silence of the archives: Business history, post-colonialism and archival ethnography. *Management & Organizational History* 8(2): 155–173.
- Decker S, Hassard J and Rowlinson M (2020) Rethinking history and memory in organization studies: The case for historiographical reflexivity. *Human Relations*. Epub ahead of print 3 June 2020. DOI: 10.1177/0018726720927443.
- Decker S, Kipping M and Wadhvani RD (2015) New business histories! Plurality in business history research methods. *Business History* 57(1): 30–40.
- Dempsey JX (2009) The CIA and secrecy. In: Maret SL and Goldman J (eds) *Government Secrecy: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 421–438.
- Derrida J and Ferraris M (2001) *A Taste for the Secret*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc.
- Dyke H (2002) McTaggart and the truth about time. *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 50(March): 137–152.
- Fan Z and Grey C (2020) Everyday secrecy: Boundaries of confidential gossip. *Culture and Organization*. Epub ahead of print 13 August 2020. DOI: 10.1080/14759551.2020.1799213.
- Fan Z, Costas J and Grey C (2017) Secrecy and communication: Towards a research agenda. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 22(4): 562–566.
- Fan Z, Grey C and Kärreman D (2020) Confidential gossip and organization studies. *Organization Studies*. Epub ahead of print 11 August 2020. DOI: 10.1177/0170840620954016.
- Fauchart E and von Hippel E (2008) Norms-based intellectual property systems: The case of French chefs. *Organization Science* 19(2): 187–201.
- Feldman M and Almquist J (2012) Analyzing the implicit in stories. In: Holstein J and Gubrium J (eds) *Varieties of Narrative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 207–228.
- Feldman M and March JG (1981) Information in organizations as signal and symbol. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 26(2): 171–186.
- Fellman S and Popp A (2013) Lost in the archive: The business historian in distress. In: Czarniawska B and Löfgren O (eds) *Coping with Excess: How Organizations, Communities and Individuals Manage Overflows*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Freshwater H (2003) The allure of the archive. *Poetics Today* 24(4): 729–758.
- Gallagher C and Greenblatt S (2000) *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Gefou-Madianou D (2017) “Eyes shut, muted voices”: Narrating and temporalizing the post-civil war era through a monument. *Social Analysis* 61(1): 115–128.
- Gell A (1998) Time and social anthropology. *Senri Ethnological Studies* 45: 9–24.
- George JM and Jones GR (2000) The role of time in theory and theory building. *Journal of Management* 26(4): 657–684.
- Ghosh D, Sahadeo J, Robertson C, et al. (2006) *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Grey C (2012) *Decoding Organization: Bletchley Park, Codebreaking and Organization Studies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grey C (2014) An organizational culture of secrecy: The case of Bletchley Park. *Management & Organizational History* 9(1): 107–122.
- Hamilton C, Harris V, Pickover M, et al. (eds) (2012) *Refiguring the Archive*. London: Springer Science & Business Media.

- Hanlon J (2001) Spaces of interpretation: Archival research and the cultural landscape. *Historical Geography* 29: 14–25.
- Hannah D (2005) Should I keep a secret? The effects of trade secret protection procedures on employees' obligation to protect trade secrets. *Organization Science* 16(1): 71–84.
- Hernes T and Schultz M (2020) Translating the distant into the present: How actors address distant past and future events through situated activity. *Organization Theory* 1(1): 1–20.
- Hernes T, Simpson B and Soderlund J (2013) Managing and temporality. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 29(1): 1–6.
- Hodges M (2008) Heritage, temporality, becoming: On the ethnography of time. In: *Heritage and the Negotiation of New Futures for the Past*. ESRC Seminar Series, 'Conflicts in Time: Rethinking "Contemporary" Globalisation' I, May 2008, Dept of Anthropology, University College London.
- Hoerl K and Ortiz E (2015) Organizational secrecy and the FBI's COINTELPRO–Black Nationalist Hate Groups Program, 1967–1971. *Management Communication Quarterly* 29(4): 590–615.
- Hohendahl PU (1992) A return to history? The New Historicism and its agenda. *New German Critique* 55(winter): 87–104.
- Hopp C and Greene FJ (2018) In pursuit of time: Business plan sequencing, duration and intra-environment effects on new venture viability. *Journal of Management Studies* 55(2): 320–351.
- Ingthorsson R (1998) McTaggart and the unreality of time. *Axiomathes* 9(3): 287–306.
- Jones GM (2014) Secrecy. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 43(1): 53–69.
- Kipping M and Üsdiken B (2014) History in organization and management theory: More than meets the eye. *Academy of Management Annals* 8(1): 535–588.
- Langley A and Tsoukas H (2010) Introducing perspectives on process organization studies. In: Hernes T and Maitlis S (eds) *Process, Sensemaking, and Organizing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1–26.
- Levine R (1997) *A Geography of Time*. New York: Basic.
- McTaggart J (1993) The unreality of time. In: Le Poidevin R and MacBeath M (eds) *The Philosophy of Time*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 23–34.
- McTaggart JE (1908) The unreality of time. *Mind* 17(68): 457–474.
- Motyl AJ (2010) Deleting the Holodomor: Ukraine unmakes itself. *World Affairs* 173(3): 25–33.
- Munn ND (1992) The cultural anthropology of time: A critical essay. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21(1): 93–123.
- Nelson AJ (2016) How to share 'a really good secret': Managing sharing/secrecy tensions around scientific knowledge disclosure. *Organization Science* 27(2): 265–285.
- Otto B, Pors JG and Johnsen R (2019) Hidden in full view: The organization of public secrecy in Miéville's *The City and the City*. *Culture and Organization* 25(2): 91–103.
- Parker M (2016) Secret societies: Intimations of organization. *Organization Studies* 37(1): 99–113.
- Pedersen AR (2009) Mowing Away from Chronological Time: Introducing the Shadows of Time and Chronotopes as New Understandings of Time. *Organization* 16(3): 389–406.
- Perlman LM (2005) Memories of the Child Development Center study of adopted monozygotic twins reared apart: An unfulfilled promise. *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 8(3): 271–281.
- Pieters J (2000) New historicism: Postmodern historiography between narrativism and heterology. *History and Theory* 39(1): 21–38.
- Prosser S (2000) A new problem for the A-theory of time. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 50(201): 494–498.
- Rantakari A and Vaara E (2017) Narratives and processuality. In: Langley A and Tsoukas H (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Process Organization Studies*. London: SAGE Publications, 271–285.

- Rayner G (2009) Princess Margaret destroyed letters from Diana to Queen Mother. *The Telegraph*. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/theroyalfamily/6198996/Princess-Margaret-destroyed-letters-from-Diana-to-Queen-Mother.html#> (accessed 8 April 2020).
- Reinecke J and Ansari S (2017) Time, temporality and process studies. In: Langley A and Tsoukas H (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Process Organization Studies*. London: SAGE, 402–416.
- Ricoeur P (1984) *Time and Narrative*, Vol. I (trans. McLaughlin K and Pellauer D). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Ringel L (2019) Unpacking the transparency-secrecy nexus: Frontstage and backstage behaviour in a political party. *Organization Studies* 40(5): 705–723.
- Roberts E (2008) Time and work–life balance: The roles of ‘temporal customization’ and ‘life temporality’. *Gender, Work & Organization* 15(5): 430–453.
- Rowlinson M, Casey A, Hansen P, et al. (2014) Narratives and memory in organizations. *Organization* 21(4): 441–446.
- Sandbothe M (1999) The temporalization of time in modern philosophy. In: Baert P (ed.) *Time in Contemporary Intellectual Thought*. Amsterdam: Elsevier Science, 17–35.
- Sartre JP (1956) *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (trans. Barnes HE). New York, NY: Philosophical Library.
- Scott CR (2013) *Anonymous Agencies, Backstreet Businesses, and Covert Collectives: Rethinking Organizations in the 21st Century*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Scott CR (2015) Bringing hidden organizations out of the shadows: Introduction to the special issue. *Management Communication Quarterly* 29(4): 503–511.
- Segal NL (2000) *Entwined Lives: Twins and What They Tell Us About Human Behaviour*. New York, NY: Plume.
- Segal NL (2005) Commentary: More thoughts on the child development center twin study. *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 8(3): 276–281.
- Segal NL (2006) Revisited: The New York Child Development Center Twin Study. *Twin Research and Human Genetics* 9(6): 1040–1041.
- Segal NL (2012) *Born Together – Reared Apart: The Landmark Minnesota Twin Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Shotter J (1993) *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life Through Language*. London: Sage.
- Simmel G (1906/1950) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (trans., ed. Wolff KH). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Singh S (1999) *The Code Book: The Secret History of Codes and Codebreaking*. London: Fourth Estate Limited.
- Suddaby R, Hardy C and Huy Q (2011) Introduction to special topic forum: Where are the New Theories of Organization? *Academy of Management Review* 36(2): 236–246.
- Tabboni S (2001) The idea of social time in Norbert Elias. *Time & Society* 10(1): 5–27.
- Tamboukou M (2011) Archive pleasures or whose time is it? *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12(3): Art 1.
- Tamboukou M (2014) Archival research: Unravelling space/time/matter entanglements and fragments. *Qualitative Research* 14(5): 617–633.
- Taussig MT (1999) *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Thomas D, Fowler S and Johnson V (2017) *The Silence of the Archive*. London: Facet Publishing.
- Üsdiken B and Kieser A (2004) Introduction: History in organisation studies. *Business History* 46(3): 321–330.
- Vaara E and Lamberg J-A (2016) Taking historical embeddedness seriously: Three historical approaches to advance strategy process and practice research. *Academy of Management Review* 41(4): 633–657.



- Veesser H (2013) *The New Historicism*. London: Routledge.
- Ward YM (2014) *Censoring Queen Victoria: How Two Gentlemen Edited a Queen and Created an Icon*. London: Oneworld Publications.
- Wolfe AW and Blithe SJ (2015) Managing image in a core-stigmatized organization: Concealment and revelation in Nevada's legal brothels. *Management Communication Quarterly* 29(4): 539–563.
- Wright L (1997) *Twins: And What They Tell Us About Who We Are*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Son.

Ziyun Fan is a lecturer in Organization Studies at Northumbria University, Newcastle. She holds a PhD in Organization Studies from Royal Holloway, University of London. Her work primarily focuses on critical management studies, organizational communication, gossip and secrecy. She has published in *Culture and Organization*, *Human Relations*, *Management Learning* and *Organization Studies*. [Email: ziyun.fan@northumbria.ac.uk]

Yihan Liu is a lecturer in Organization Studies in Management School, University of Liverpool. She holds a PhD in Organization Studies from Royal Holloway, University of London. Her research concerns the historicization of organizational space and archive-based research. She has published in *Human Relations*. [Email: Yihan.Liu@liverpool.ac.uk]