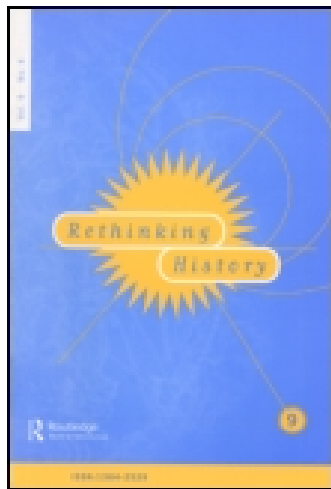


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Biography, Time and Local History-making¹

Brian Roberts

This article examines how individuals compose biographical interpretations of their lives. The intention is to explore how individuals make their personal histories within wider history-making local communities. Such historical narratives are composed by families and groups and are also formed within societal narratives (e.g. popular stereotypes, ideological themes). While the connection between narrative and time has commonly been described here there is an attempt to provide a model to aid analysis of individual and social narratives. It is argued that such a model would draw more systematic attention to the importance of time in the construction of biography and in history-making. The discussion makes reference to a community study undertaken in south Wales.

Keywords: Biography; Time; Time-perspectives; Narrative; History-making

A great deal of debate has taken place about the relation between narrative and history or, more strongly, history as narrative (cf. Munslow 2000a, pp. 169–173; 2000b; Hinchman & Hinchman 1997; Tonkin 1990, 1995; White 1973, 1987). Here the intention is to understand how the temporal comprehension of social processes is achieved by individuals within ‘narrative accounts’—which may be interpreted as ‘forms of accounting’ by individuals in forming their own history within group history-making (Gergen & Gergen 1984; Gergen 1999; see also Roberts 2002, ch. 7). Within narrative accounts connections are made between life events to demonstrate a sequence, process and order, and to establish a sense of direction and meaning (Gergen & Gergen 1984, p. 174; see also Brockmeier 2000). They may also relate to attempts by individuals to shape a personal unity or coherence through ‘stories’ (Widdershoven 1993, p. 7). Of relevance here is

the fact that in the many ‘stories that people tell about themselves, reference to a limited number of past (and possibly future) actions is made in telling their own life’ (Van Langenhove & Harré 1993, p. 97). However, the ‘stories of the self’ (and the wider group) must be seen as being produced in relation to different and changing social audiences, and also as containing ‘historical accounts’ of specific individuals and groups. A difficult issue has been how to chart and interpret the complex interlinkings of time and narrative within individual and group accounts. This article provides a model (building on a previous version) as an analytical tool to chart and interpret individual and group narratives of the past.

This discussion draws, in general terms, upon research undertaken during 1990 and 1991 in a former mining valley containing the small towns of Blaina and Nantyglo in south Wales.² The general objective of the research was to examine how the lives of individuals within different generations experienced and interpreted the decline of mining and other employment, and the destabilization of local cultural patterns. Mining areas have been noted by commentators for having a traditional ‘community spirit’—a strong sense of togetherness and a high degree of mutual aid (Bulmer 1975; Light 2000; Lockwood 1966; Roberts 1999b). While this portrait can be overstated, in south Wales the relative physical and social isolation of the mining communities, the harshness of everyday work and communal life, and bitter industrial relations are often said to have formed the basis of a distinctive ‘valleys identity’ (see Francis & Smith 1980).

In Blaina and Nantyglo the tempo of change appeared to be quickening and was shifting the contours and relative importance of communal identities—the valley, the valleys, south Wales, Wales and relations with south-east England (see Roberts 1999a, 1999b). It seemed that an ethnic ‘reformation’ at individual and group levels was occurring due to the social and economic shifts in the valley.

Here the intention is not to relate the detailed findings of the research, but to consider a key issue it raised—how to analyse the conceptions of time in individual and group narratives.³ The article is divided into a number of sections: first, ‘Individual and Local History-making’ describes the complexity of historical narratives found in the research locality; ‘History-making and Biographical Narrative Accounts’ discusses the usefulness of a narrative and time model for areas of research; and finally, ‘Biographical Time Perspectives and History-making—Towards a Model’ outlines a method for analysing narrative accounts of the past.

Individual and Local History-making

The examination of how individuals and groups saw the past and present in the research in south Wales revealed that there was not only a surprising range of historical narratives, which seemed at first to have simply their own purpose and character. On closer 'reading', each source had intricate links with other accounts. These narratives ranged from those forms given by the 'ordinary resident' in conversation and interviews, through to local history and other groups, to local newspaper journalists, tourism publicity writers, visiting academics and museum workers, and council employees. Interestingly, sometimes an individual would have more than one role in local 'history-making'. Each account of local history was therefore constructed within a complex field of private and public history-making narratives. Such narratives could take group or institutional forms as in everyday informal settings of the family, pub or street, or more formally in school history talks, local history meetings, newspaper features or by some other means (e.g. the use of 'history' in the decor of local pubs). Each narrative setting provided some varying account of the history of the valley and its people (see White 1981).

In summary, the research in the south Wales valley uncovered not only the importance of a sense of history for individual and communal identities. There was a whole set of interrelated oral, written and visual historical narratives, which showed a complexity in relations between public and private accounts. These accounts may give various 'senses of place' and belonging within a locality, which may be intertwined in an intricate manner. Such experiences and constructions composed by individuals and shared within groups vary in emphasis and scope from the street and village, to the region and nation. In addition, they are subject to shifts according to differing social settings and socio-historical moments.

History-making and Biographical Narrative Accounts

The plotting of differing conceptions of time in biographical narrative in a more systematic manner may help to strengthen existing work on narrative construction. Commonly, writers point to a limited number of basic forms of narrative, which are usually found in hybrid form in individual, group and communal situations depending upon cultural limits. Gergen and Gergen give three examples of these more 'complex variants'—'the tragic narrative', the 'happy ending' or 'comedy', and the 'happily ever after' myth—which depend on the particular sequence of the basic types (Gergen & Gergen 1984, pp. 176–177; Gergen 1999, pp. 70–72). Similarly, Brockmeier

(2000) argues that life events become meaningful only when they are 'integrated into a particular gestalt of order and sequence', and focuses on two 'structural features'—genres and metaphors—which organize and compose the narratives. In this way six models of autobiographical time are identified—the linear, the circular, the cyclical, the spiral, the fragmentary, and the static model (Brockmeier 2000, p. 61). Gergen and Gergen place particular stress on 'dramatic engagement'—feelings, emotion and drama—in the narrative form which derives from the relationships between events. Dramatic engagement has two aspects: the 'acceleration of narrative slope' or rate of change (i.e. when 'events deteriorate'), and the 'acceleration in the direction of narrative slope' (i.e. the 'turn of events'). Importantly, Gergen and Gergen (1984) point out that there is a 'social negotiation of narratives' between individuals and groups since narratives not only draw on wider vocabularies or symbols but they are also composed with an audience ('others' definitions') in mind. Thus biographical history-making is shaped and fully understandable only within relations with a wider narrative field. As Brockmeier states, 'narrative models' 'encapsulate culturally normative views, patterns of experience and evaluations. They structure stories within the hermeneutic horizon of culture' (Brockmeier 2000, p. 61). However, we should add that there is still a personal distinctiveness and experience which cannot be fully subsumed within other historical narratives or broader ideologies. It is here where the model proposed, albeit schematic and provisional, could be applied to show how individuals (and communities) shift between narrative variants and conceptions of the past-present-future.

The proposed model in drawing attention to shifts in perceptions of time can point to how myths, symbols, group membership and notions of place (cf. Smith 1986, 1992) of an individual or communal narrative contains various conceptions of time. Notions of time, incorporating the meanings, pace and reinterpretation of events, are vital elements of narrative accounts provided by individuals and groups in their oral and other accounts. In trying to understand the roots of group identities, such as local community or even nation, broader accounts, for example, the effects of economic transformation or modernization (cf. Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1990), are important alongside the longevity of tradition, myth and symbol (cf. Smith 1986, 1992). However, in these processes of structural and cultural transmission through public and family structures the subtlety of the interrelation with biographic history-making should not be neglected (Roberts 1999c). For example, we can refer to intergenerational cultural transmission in the family (Bertaux & Thompson 1993). The family passes on traditions, myths, skills and social outlook—mental maps which guide life;

narratives or stories which, as Thompson argues, are the 'raw material' for both history and social change (Thompson 1993, p. 36). Family narratives thereby provide the symbolic context, which contributes greatly to personal history-making as new experiences arise and future expectations are mapped. An analytic model could be used to place individual narratives alongside others, including those from within or between family, generation, gender, ethnic or other groupings. It could therefore be employed to represent complex interrelations within and between individual and wider narratives. Finally, a model would aid an understanding of key differences and similarities between individual narratives and between group narratives. Included here would be the intricate movements and interconnections within differing accounts between conceptions of past-present-future. In this way it would enhance the mapping and interpretation of processes of cultural transmission and narrative history-making in the family or other social groupings.

Biography, Time Perspectives and History-making—Towards a Model

The recognition of the presence of complex individual and group or wider public conceptions of the past raises important issues for an understanding of local history-making. First, questions surround the interrelations between such individual and wider conceptions in the processes of biographic history-making. Second, an issue concerns how processes of social transmission operate in general or theoretical terms. Third, and more specifically, is the question of how narratives, which must be seen as including perceptions of time, attach meanings to experiences and place in particular socio-historical instances. In describing the past, individuals and groups in everyday conversation, more formal life narratives and official documents and so on may each give a variety of accounts. These accounts may lack internal consistency and differ in content, in terms of the importance and sequence given to events, the periods described and how change is understood (perhaps as fate, cause or intended/unintended). By focusing on the 'time perspectives' held by individuals and groups the ways in which the past is perceived and structured in biographical and local history-making may be clarified (Roberts 1999a).⁴ Finally, the conception of the past is a vital component in the formation of biographical and social identities since it provides symbolic resources for definition and renewal.

The re-formation of identity found in Blaina and Nantyglo was not simply determined by official or public constructions handing down prescribed re-creations of the past, for example, through sponsored events and tourist images promulgated by the local councils and government

agencies. There was also a more firmly ‘grounded’, although related, process of formation and transmission within the wider local population. While more romanticized, nostalgic and homogeneous conceptions and uses of the past may well be employed to exploit ‘heritage’ by the tourism or heritage industries, even they carry the *potential* for reminding groups of their distinctiveness, social boundaries, and may ironically contribute to more radical historical narratives. At least in Blaina and Nantyglo, there was a more subtle process taking place. This was more than merely an acceptance of ‘official histories’—which often bear a sanitized portrait of progress and cultural distinctiveness. Instead, there are various interpenetrating narratives produced by official and unofficial ‘curators’ of the past, creating histories of the locality. The historical ‘work’ within the area may be described as constituting a historico-cultural narrative field for the interplay of both individual and group narratives.

The perceived continuities with the industrial past in the area had been ‘stretched’ in experience to the limit. In this circumstance, a deep sense of communal loss had been experienced but not generally as a simple expression of ‘finality’, regret or an associated social despair. On the contrary, while there had been some appreciation of ‘an ending’ and some fear of the future, there was more a feeling of optimism over the previous few years. A concern for jobs and social cohesiveness was paralleled by efforts for social renewal. Nevertheless, the changes in the valley, including the loss of symbolic markers, had strained the links with former social patterns of life and social identifications. The result was that a ‘re-creation’ of communal identities was being attempted from the identified fragments of traditions, symbols and social patterns of the past (Roberts 1999b).

When individuals were asked to remark on the past and present situation of the valley—and its future—the responses tended to take certain forms. These responses could stress continuities with the past, say, in terms of communal solidarity or values, or a radical break, citing perhaps the loss of the way of life associated with the pits. Another type of response was to emphasize the distinctiveness of the area’s history (see Gagnon 1981). Typically, there were a number of such responses with some evaluation of changes within one interview. For example, a respondent might say that community spirit was formerly wonderful but had declined—but could get better again. It seemed from a close inspection of the interviews that there was a complex set of related interpretations of past, present and future. Various time conceptions were possible carrying particular elements, imagery and moral sentiment. In summary, these findings raised questions concerning not only how narratives are constructed and modified by individuals but also how they are transmitted from generation to generation

and from group to group. In containing conceptions of past, present and future they also carry judgements on social changes and guides to the scope and reasons for action (see Corner and Harvey 1991; Rees 1993).

The manner in which individuals perceive time in narratives can be represented diagrammatically, while still maintaining that such a model does not seek to restrict individuals and groups to a rigid classification (Table 1). The aim is to demonstrate how individuals shift processually between time tenses in an attempt to make sense of the changes in their own and communal life.⁵ A schema can show more clearly how narratives are 'timed', since through narrative experiences are given meaning, ordered and connected, as 'memories' are formed and reformed (see Erben 1998; Ricoeur 1981, 1984, 1985, 1988).

Within a particular biographical account (an interview or document) an individual may move between different time tenses, for instance, at one point speaking in the Past-past—as if personal events, beliefs and patterns of life were gone forever. At another point, responses may be completely within the Present-present—the here and now. Later in an interview (or document) there may be reference to the past as the future (Past-future), or even the future as in the present—the future as already here (Future-present). Thus, a movement can be discerned with perhaps some events seen as gone, some traditions still upheld or some lost beliefs to be revived. Even so, there is usually some general summary of life that is clear in an interview. Individuals often seem more attached to a particular time perspective—a combination of a time tense (say Future-past) and an orientation or mood, perhaps an anxiety or nostalgia. Similarly, when examining interviews within a group (according to age, gender, ethnicity or other background) commonalities in time perspective may be found which relate to a shared experience, such as poverty in early life. The analysis of commonalities of tense and mood in groups can still retain the individual distinctiveness of a narrative where non-shared elements are voiced or shared themes are given a particular degree of emphasis.

Time perspectives are not merely individual or group perceptions of personal or shared socio-historical trajectories which include conceptions of informal and formal spaces, close or wider relationships and patterns of expectations. The above model of interpretations of the past-present-future may be used to chart more formal or institutional shifts within which individual and group narratives are formed or are shaped in terms of some reaction or accommodation. Like individuals and groups, organizations also compose historical narratives in a complex way, and their constructions may also be analysed according to a past-present-future schema. For instance, an organization such as a local council department, a heritage site

and interpretation centre, and tourist publicity within a particular locale may all demonstrate some movement between time tenses and orientations within their work while perhaps showing a bias towards a certain time perspective. Thus we would expect a heritage site to reflect differing notions of the past while one tense remains dominant (e.g. Past-past).

Of importance here is the interrelation between the differing forms of history-making (and present-making and future-making). Thus, an individual, a group or an organization might move between differing notions of the past when talking of communal institutions, family life and social behaviour, and might say that the past was over, continuing or perhaps to return. In the research in south Wales it was also clear that the 'past' even when seen as passed by interviewees, groups and organizations, was also often still located in the unfolding present. Similarly, the future could be seen as a continuation of the present and the past, or simply as yet unknowable—in the future but still constructed as part of the present. In short, a more detailed view of how individuals and groups move in and out of various time perspectives or 'tenses' was needed in an attempt to understand what guided the perceived trajectory and history-making in the locality. Within their narrative-formation individuals seek 'answers' to such questions as: How have I arrived here? What is happening now in my life and in the group? How has the community changed? What is to become of us? How can we change things? Can we draw on the 'past'? (see Roberts 1999a, p. 22; also Adam 1990, p. 37). Similarly, groups and organizations draw on a narrative history-making to tell and explain their formation and continuance, while pondering on or setting guides for the future.

There is a further role for the above model regarding the relationship between biography, time perspectives and history-making. In historical writing, in the descriptions and explanations that historians use in texts, differing uses of time are apparent. In academic 'history-making', past events may be described and explained in texts as past—or past events portrayed as still of contemporary relevance. In addition, there may well be different uses of time associated with various 'voices' in the text—in the actions described, and quotes from writings, speeches and conversations of historical actors. These individuals also perhaps employ several time perspectives within their reported communications as they comment on previous, contemporary or possible later events. The historian can also use several voices when describing, commentating, summarizing and explaining in their writing of the text (see Atkinson 1990).

A broader comment may also be made in terms of the writing and practice of history if conceived as a literary form among other literary pursuits (c.f. Tonkin 1990, 1995; White 1973, 1987). Forms of history-making are very

complex literary constructions, which tend towards certain time perspectives. Thus oral history, some would argue, has been close to history as reminiscence or legacy (Present-past) and, perhaps, a nostalgic or a 'rosy portrait' of the past (Past-past). Local communal histories may be associated with reminiscence as a practice for gathering memories and even some voiced continuities with the present, or merely as a means of some recapturing of 'days gone by'. Rather further afield, although a form of history-making, the historical novel or romance may be placed very much in the Past-past or Present-past conceptions of time. Where history-writing has a strong narrative structure there is a keen sense of continuity associated with the underlying application of 'story'. Here, the use of Past-present may be discerned—often held together by some assumptions or themes based on the continuity or revival of traditions and roots. This is found particularly where there is a reliance on 'national stories', past heroes, symbolic past events, group or national character, victories and setbacks, and myths which simplify the complexities of historical circumstances to sustain the overall moral and story. Finally, history-writing can bear some comparison with science-fiction-writing, since it may draw conclusions about what is to happen. While the 'future' has an obvious part to play in science fiction, the wider movements through time, including drawing on 'history', have been major distinguishing features of the literary genre.

History-writing, generally, has not been immune from making parallels with the present when making history. Of course, its very practice is set within the vantage point of the present. It also provides conceptions of the future again, especially in providing commentary and conclusions where continuities are outlined, verities assumed and predictions may be offered. In short, there are histories of the past, the future and the present. Time perspectives are in complex combinations within forms of history-writing. The above model draws attention, in a schematic and provisional manner, to how history-writing draws upon the differing conceptions of time.

Conclusion

Biographical and local history-making can be profitably considered according to narrative—the formulation of experience according to time perspectives. Narratives of the past are written in the situation, experiences and interpretations of the present, and may also reflect an imagined future and considerations of action. Biographical history-making narratives are constructed within the social interchange between individuals and between groups, and are affected by wider socio-historical influences. Within a specific locality, local history-making is formed in a diverse and complex

manner, reflecting the interplay of narratives provided by individuals, families, groups and organizations (e.g. heritage, tourism, local councils, local newspapers, commercial enterprises, and educational groups and institutions). A single model cannot fully reflect the detailed intricacies of such processes. However, it can alert researchers in biographical, ethnographical and historical study to the forms and movements that history-making may take in a given social or historical setting. It can also serve as a means of sensitizing historians and others to the differing conceptions of time used in historical research practice and writing.

Notes

- [1] Sections of this article (revised here) were presented to the Memory and Social Transmission ESRC funded seminar series, Department of Social Anthropology, The Queen's University of Belfast, in September 1994; 'Communicating Experience', IX International Oral History Conference, Goteberg, 1996; and 'Oral History, Memory and the Sense of Place', American Oral History Association Conference, Philadelphia, 1996.
- [2] The research was based on eighty individual interviews and a number of group discussions. Observation, census and other survey data, official documents and other material was also collected. The research was supported by ESRC Award R000232060 'Social and Economic Change and Life Courses in a Welsh Community'.
- [3] A book *The Greening of the Valley: Social Change in a Former Mining Valley* is in preparation.
- [4] The idea of 'time perspectives' is adapted from Schutz (1971, p. 214).
- [5] The idea of 'time tense' as adapted from Schutz (1971, pp. 214–215) (see also Mead (1956), and the comparison of Mead and Schutz by Adam (1990, pp. 34–42)).
- [6] Earlier versions of this diagram were introduced in papers presented at the 2nd European Sociological Association Conference, Budapest, 1995; Auto/biography Study Group Annual Conference, Manchester, 1995; and Biographical and Memory Research Group, Seminar Series, University of Huddersfield, 1997, and developed in Roberts (1999a).

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