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Identity and the practice of family history

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Abstract

Research on family history argues it performs the task of anchoring a sense of ‘self’ through tracing ancestral connection and reconstructing narratives of cultural belonging. As such, it has been analysed as a form of ‘identity-work’. This paper draws on a small-scale qualitative study of family historians to think further on how we view the identity-work of family history. The paper explores how the storying of family histories relates to genealogy as a social practice: as a leisure hobby, a form of historical research, and an information-processing activity; and examines the social organization of its narrativity, in which various practical engagements render certain kinds of genealogical information and processes more, or less, ‘storyable’. It argues that key features of ‘identity-work’ in family history, such as the construction of genealogy as a personal journey of discovery and the personification of, and identification with particular ancestors, emerge as a consequence of the procedures and internal goods of family history, organised as a set of practical tasks. The paper explores ‘identity-work’ as a situational, strategic consequence of people’s engagement in specific practices, which provide an internal logic to their actions.

Keywords: identity; family history; genealogy; narrative; leisure practices; hobbies.

Introduction

The popularity of amateur genealogy in countries like Britain, Australia and America, and the increasing accessibility of online genealogical sources, has generated a mass engagement with archival historical research. Research into popular genealogy argues that it performs the task of anchoring a sense of ‘self’ through tracing ancestral connections. The framing of the BBC series ‘Who do you think you are?’ suggests family history reworks *self-identity*, and genealogy is frequently framed as a quest to know ‘who you are’ in terms of ‘where you come from’ (Nash, 2002: 28), with academic analysis stressing its importance for ‘self-making, self-exploration and self-understanding’ (Kramer, 2011a: 428-9). However, family histories are also stories, and the practice of family history in part a production of narrative accounts, organised for practical purposes and varying audiences. This paper examines how the storying of family histories - and the identity-work this entails – is related to the practical organisation of genealogy, which serves to render particular sorts of genealogical information as more, or less, ‘storyable’. I do not argue here against the notion of family history as ‘identity-work’. ‘Identity’ is an over-extended concept, and it is hard to imagine any social practice which does not contribute to ‘identity’ in some sense. But following Brubaker’s (2004: 4) disaggregation of the concept of ‘identity’ into ‘several less congested terms’, then family history clearly provides fertile ground for processes of ‘self-understanding’, ‘identification and categorization’ and ‘commonality and connectedness’. I adopt a parallel analysis which focuses first on family history as an archive-based leisure activity: to explore how the *tasks* of family history considered as a social practice help shape the emphases family historians place upon the information they uncover and the accounts they construct. If we think of ‘identity’ as something produced when we are engaged in doing other things, this paper explores how the practical organisation of ‘doing other things’ – in this case family history – helps to produce ‘identity-work’ in particular ways.

Why do people research their family history? Some see the rising contemporary emphasis on popular history as a reaction against rapid social change (Huyssen, 1995), with acts of commemoration serving to ‘anchor’ unsettled modern selves. It is suggested that the interest in family inheritance is provoked by ‘biotechnological’ reconfigurations of accounts of kinship (Franklin and McKinnon, 2001); that shifting discourses on ethnic ‘roots’ are a response to globalisation and post-colonial migration (Basu, 2007; Erben, 1991; Tyler, 2005; Nash, 2005); or that family history provides ontological security in the face of social dislocation, or weakening family connection (Erben, 1991; Basu, 2007). Others are more agnostic as to whether interest in family history is a response to changing times, instead seeing the pursuit as part of a general ‘fascination’ with kinship and ‘resemblances, likenesses, family “ways” and traits’ (Mason, 2008: 29; Kramer, 2011a, b). Whether or not analysts think the interest in family history arises from concerns about identity, however, they agree the process of tracing a family tree raises questions of self-identity and identification, and so *becomes* a form of ‘identity-work’. But, in one sense, the reasons why people research their family history can be bracketed. There are rules and standards for any social practice that constitute the practice itself, and studies of consumption using practice theory have suggested that it is the conventions and standards of specific practices which steer behaviour rather than individual motivation or taste. So, for example, the consumption paraphernalia of the hot rod enthusiast (modifying vehicles, attending rallies, buying magazines, memorabilia etc) follow on from the engagement in the practice of ‘hot rodding’ so that it is ‘the fact of engagement in the practice, rather than any personal decision about a course of conduct, that explains the nature and process of consumption’ (Warde, 2005: 138). Similarly, once engaged in the activity, the rules of conduct which constitute family history *as* family history direct practitioners to particular kinds of practice. These activities have consequences for ‘identity-

work’, but we should first see such practices as ‘family history work’ to fully understand their implications.

After reviewing research which frames the activity as a question of ‘identity’, the paper turns to examine family history as an archive-based hobby, to explore how this influences the framing of family history. Drawing on a small-scale qualitative project designed to explore the types of narrative that emerge in accounts of family history research (Bottero, 2011, 2012)¹, the paper examines the scripted ‘storying’ of family histories, and the role such stories perform in the display, and accounting for, family history practices. Finally, the paper explores the internal work such accounts perform, serving to organise the complex, fragmentary and ambiguous information that family history research produces, in the process generating particular kinds of narrative account.

Family history – ‘identity’ and practice

Consider family history as a practice. As Lowenthal notes ‘All accounts of the past tell stories about it’ (1985: 229) and in conducting family history, genealogists not only trace ancestors, they also find out about their lives and generate ‘storied’ narratives of ancestral connection through time. If identities are ‘the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past’ (Hall, 1990: 225) then the role of family history in shaping ‘identity’ is clear. But family history is also a leisure hobby, a form of historical research, and an information-processing activity – and these practical aspects have consequences for how narratives of family history are organised. Family historians trace a potentially large set of ancestors over a long passage of time, and using the census, registers of births, deaths and marriages, and a range of other archive sources (trade directories, wills, land registries, court and military records, newspapers) can uncover information on where ancestors lived, who they lived with, and the details of occupations, geographical movement and major life-course events. Websites and computer packages provide access to digitised archives and tools for recording the information discovered. Via the websites, magazines, DVDs and advice manuals which have sprung up to support the ‘industry’, family historians research connections through space and time, tracing ancestors across borders and along the routes of slavery, and industrial and colonial migration. As a hobby, it is frequently a time-consuming, painstaking and sometimes expensive pursuit. Whilst varying in their engagement, family historians often refer to the ‘addictive’ or compulsive nature of their ‘hunt’ for ancestors (Lambert, 1996) with the hobby described as ‘an infection, an obsession, a bug you catch and cannot shake off’ (Nash, 2002: 38).

Rather obviously, practitioners take up family history to find out more about their family history. But once engaged, for many the *process* of finding out becomes as significant to their experience as *what* they find out. The effective practical performance of family history requires judgement, problem-solving skills and technical expertise, and as such generates ‘internal goods’: in the acquisition of the skills and know-how necessary to conduct family history, and in the satisfactions that accompany the development of those skills, realized in pursuit of the practice (Macintyre, 1984). It is in the exercise of these skills that much of the pleasures of family history reside. But these internally generated rewards depend on family historians following a particular logic, which shapes the practices and information on which they place value. Analysts have identified a number of common elements in the identity-work of family history: with activities framed as a form of projection into the past, through identification with ancestors as people; as a personal journey of self-discovery; and as a selective and creative origin narrative, reshaping prior understandings of belonging. This paper explores how the conventions of family history steer the activities and accounts of family historians, and help produce these dimensions of ‘identity-work’. In doing so, it explores ‘identity-work’ as a situational consequence of people’s engagement in specific practices, which provide an internal logic to their actions.

Research into family history has emphasised its significance for processes of identity. Kramer, for example, sees genealogy as a ‘creative and imaginative memory and kinship practice’, used to ‘map affinities and connectedness, enact relatedness, and produce self-identity’ giving ‘selves in the present...a geographical and/or temporal “place to stand”’ and constructing historical and geographical ‘belonging’ (Kramer, 2011b: 379,392). Nash’s work on those tracing Irish ancestry found a ‘desire for connection, to match something in themselves to another place and to other people’, so that ‘finding out where they came from’ was linked to knowing ‘who they are’ (Nash, 2002: 37). Likewise Basu, researching ‘roots tourism’ to the Scottish Highlands (in the ‘pilgrimages’ of Australians and North-Americans to ‘ancestral homelands’), found the ‘sites of memory’ visited were both ‘sources of identity’ and ‘shrines of self’ (2007: 219). This emphasis on questions of *self*-understanding in family history is unsurprising, since social memory research emphasises the importance of biographical memory in shaping ‘identity’ through continuity to an imagined past (Thompson, 1993:36). Remembering the past is ‘crucial for our sense of identity’ since ‘to know what we were confirms what we are’ (Lowenthal, 1985: 197) with this ‘situating of the self’, occurring through ‘the development of a self-narrative that starts, not at one’s birth, but with one’s forebears’ (Lawler, 2008: 42).

Family history, then, can be seen as a form of ‘post-memory’ (Kramer, 2011a) or ‘sociobiographical memory’, allowing us to ‘experience events that had happened to groups and communities to which we belong long before we joined them’ (Zerubavel, 1995:290). The appeal of genealogy is said to lie in its ‘ability to both embody and individualize the past’ (Nash, 2003:194), with the idiom of family connection governing genealogy facilitating identification with ‘diverse historical eras, experiences and characters’, making it ‘easier than expected to project oneself into the historical past, to imagine oneself into the character and historic experience of one’s ancestors’ (Kramer, 2011a: 442). Practitioners frequently ‘disseminate information about the family to interested parties’ (Lambert, 1996: 137), operating as ‘memory workers’ in which an ‘important part of these memories, beyond the mere “facts”, are the arguments and interpretations that genealogists advance in favour of their ancestors’ (Lambert, 2002: 125). Such narratives are ‘well-rehearsed’ and ‘typically cast in story form’ (Lambert, 2002: 125). In such accounts, analysts see ‘the creation of “identity extensions” beyond the present – expressing responsibility for ancestral pasts and to future descendants via historical narrative’ (Hackstaff, 2010: 666), with ‘the ultimate need...not a fact or date, but to create a larger narrative, connect with others in the past and in the present, and to find coherence in one's own life’ (Yakel, 2004, n.p).

Any sense of ‘identity’ that family history confers is the result of a *selective* process, with certain ancestors or ancestral lines highlighted over others. Genealogy locates the individual in ‘complex and overlapping, rather than simple, linear histories’ (Nash, 2002:39) so tracing a family history (which can generate scores, even hundreds, of ancestral links) entails an active process of selection. These choices are seen as particularly revealing for questions of identification, belonging and relatedness. The past is ‘symbolically serviceable’ (Lowenthal, 1985: 128) and ‘is searched for something (someone, some group, some series of events) that confirms the searcher in his or her sense of self’ (Steedman, 1996: 103). Recognition is key to determining what is ‘made of the past’ with some traits ‘disowned and others embraced’ as ‘active identity-work in the context of kinship’ (Lawler, 2008:39). The significance of dominant discourses, not only of kinship, but also of history (of diaspora, wars and industrialisation, colonialism and slavery, nationality and ethnicity) in giving shape to such selections is apparent. Basu’s ‘roots tourists’ often highlighted their Highland Scottish heritage over others (for example over Polish, English or Lowland Scots ancestral lines), which he connects to the ‘romantic image’ of the Scottish Highlands ‘with its mountains and glens, misty isles and loch-side castles’ (Basu 2007: 41). But genealogy has the capacity to *disrupt* dominant discourses and give rise to unexpected notions of belonging and identity and Nash’s study of ‘settler’ groups (in North-America etc.) tracing Irish ancestry (2002: 48, 40), found the practice of ‘doing’ genealogy could have ‘unsettling results’ for popular accounts of

'Irishness' (and the Irish diaspora as a response to colonial oppression), as family historians often found unexpected inter-denominational marriages in their ancestry. Similarly, Tyler, reviewing US research on oral and archival histories of slavery, notes they can reveal 'forgotten interracial European and African ancestries' (Tyler, 2008: 1872).

Research on family history, then, identifies a number of common themes: family history as a personal journey of *self*-discovery; projection into the past through identification with ancestors as people; and family history as a selective and creative narrative, reshaping prior understandings of belonging and identity. How do these features of 'identity-work' relate to genealogy as an archive-based hobby? In what follows, I consider how family historians' storied accounts of ancestors connect to family history as a social practice with a well established set of procedures, resources and technologies. Gubrium and Holstein (2009:xv, xv-xvi) focus researchers' attention on the 'social life of stories', noting that research can 'strip narratives of their social organization' and frame narrative 'as a social product, not as a social action'. They emphasise the practical functions of stories, because 'storytellers not only tell stories, they do things with them' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009: xvi). One of things genealogists 'do' with stories of family history is to rehearse questions of identity, belonging and connection. However, such stories also perform 'work' in relation to the practical tasks of family history. Existing research has addressed many of these tasks, which I draw on in discussion. However, this paper places greater emphasis on the practical purposes of storying in family history, focusing particularly on how such stories (and the identity-work they entail) are located within the practice of genealogy, considered as an archive-based, information-processing leisure activity.

Family history operates as discourse of expertise, with rules about the correct (and incorrect) way to conduct ancestral searches. It requires effort, skill and enthusiasm, and produces a detailed but uneven body of documentary information. As a routine feature of the practice, family historians must sift through a mass of archive records to generate a smaller set of fragmentary, ambiguous and disparate archive evidence about kin. Whilst usually identifying scores of connections, for many ancestors little or no information is found. The typical results of a search produce perhaps a handful of ancestors, scattered haphazardly about a family tree, for whom detailed (or 'rich') archive information can be found, with the most detailed information generally held on ancestors who live on in family memories. For large numbers of ancestors, identified chiefly through the archive, only limited information (perhaps a date and place of a birth, death or marriage, sometimes an occupation) is discovered. The intractable nature of genealogical evidence is part of the appeal, with the dogged hunt for information one of the chief pleasures of the practice. But given the uncertain and incomplete nature of the evidence that family history produces, storied accounts perform certain kinds of practical organising and presentational 'work' in the conduct of the hobby, which we can particularly see operating in two interrelated kinds of scripted accounts: in stories of ancestors as people, and in stories of the research process which has recovered them. To further explore this we must examine the procedures by which family historians acquire genealogical information.

Telling a good story: recovering ancestors as people

Lambert (1996: 137) found family historians gave several major reasons for researching their family history: to develop a 'deeper understanding of oneself today by understanding one's roots'; for posterity – passing the family history on to future generations; to restore forgotten ancestors to family memory; and to get to know one's ancestors as people. In my study and that of others, family historians frequently frame their accounts as telling a 'good story' about ancestors, recovered from the dusty past as flesh-and-blood individuals, and these stories often have a 'polished' feel (Lambert, 1996, 2002; Yakel and Torres, 2007). Such accounts clearly extend those 'family stories' which are part of the ordinary currency of family

relations (Gillis, 1996; Smart, 2007). But stories about ancestors as acts of recovery are also stories of success in the research process, and of the family historian's skilled accomplishments in the archive. They serve as evidence of the family historian's activities, and of what is valued in the activity, and reflect the internal goods of family history. Internal goods arise from the possession of the skills which constitute a practice and from the pleasures that accompany the development of those skills, realised by practitioners 'in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence' definitive of a practice (MacIntyre, 1984a: 187). The attainment of family history skills and the pleasures of their execution—the internal goods of family history—are ends pursued for their own sake and are an important feature in the accounts of family historians. As a result, certain kinds of information and processes become highlighted. In what follows, I explore the practical significance of 'telling a good story' and 'personifying the past' in the conduct of family history.

Family historians are instructed to start from what is 'known' in the family, but to be sceptical about the 'facts' of family memory, and wary of the errors and inconsistencies that creep into archive sources. The start of family history research is generally a web search on the name of an ancestor, often generating many potential matches, which must be corroborated by age or other particulars. Such records throw up information about further connections which are traced in turn:

'You look at a census certificate and you try to extract as much information as you can, like finding out where an ancestor was born, which is brilliant because you can suddenly leap back and across the county and you find out a little bit more about him and you've got a line to track. Then you see other people in the household and you find out a bit more about them so that a preconception is destroyed, you think of somebody as coming from Yorkshire and suddenly found out she was born in Cheshire. You know so, Aha, then you you've then got a solid lead to find that person.' (William)

'I started to look up the census and it all sort of gelled in then, the children's name matched, the ages matched, and you think, well it's got to be...' Jerry)

This search activity, an absorbing process of 'messing around' in archives and making sense of old records, is one of the chief pleasures of the practice. Family historians speak not just of the addictive nature of their pursuit, but also of their enjoyment of the 'hunt' (Lambert, 2002:126) which is likened to detective-work, solving a crossword or completing a jigsaw puzzle, and procedural conventions for tracing and corroborating links provide a logic of empirical discovery. But whilst 'empiricist' in orientation, the practice of family history requires an active process of interpretation, reflected not only in family historians' storying of accounts, but also in their explicit presentation of such narratives as interpretations of research. As Lambert notes 'The process of "discovering" a family's past includes a significant degree of invention', so that 'confronted with a few "facts", respondents were invited to "complete" the stories in their imagination' (Lambert, 1996, 138; 2002: 123). The fragmentary nature of archive records requires this 'storying' to make sense of ancestors' lives:.

So they've migrated south when they were tenant farmers. Why? I've got a theory but – that particular John there. Flag him up and see his details. He, I think, appears in Manchester running or owning a pub. Now, perhaps – this is one of the bits I want to check – if he did it's possible he met his wife there, Anna, who comes from the Chorlton area. She was working, they got hitched and decided to set up house in the south of Manchester. He was a farmer perhaps running a pub as a job to earn money, anything.' (William)

‘You’re making up stories aren’t you? You’re just filling, filling in the gaps in the knowledge with the idea about who these people were.’ (Carol)

Studies of oral history and autobiography identify a series of ‘conventional forms’ or scripted sub-genres in such accounts (including the ‘legacy to posterity’, the ‘picaresque adventure’, the ‘success story’, the ‘plea for defence’ and the ‘conversion experience’), often employing traditional literary themes (such as ‘the feather in the hand of fate’, the event that ‘changed everything’ or ‘the person who persevered’) to make sense of events (Chamberlain and Thompson, 1998: 4). Similar scripted themes are found in family historians’ accounts not only of ancestors but also of the conduct of family history itself, which is framed as a process of uncovering secrets, discovering unsuspected facts, recovering forgotten lives. The puncturing of myth and legend is, of course, a standard trope of historical narrative (Samuel and Thompson, 1990), here linked to the rules of procedure, evidence and interpretation which constitute family history *as* family history. Stories of ancestors build in the process of the research work, framed as a hunt through archives, requiring detective-work and problem-solving skills. Research on family history has concluded the practice demonstrates the ‘creative and negotiated dimension of kinship’ in which ‘people take as much pleasure in *making* themselves connected and rooted, as in *being* rooted and connected’ (Kramer, 2011b: 393). But a key pleasure here rests in the successful performance (and display) of the research itself, with practitioners gaining a ‘major source of personal satisfaction’ in ‘learning research skills, the challenge of problem-solving, the thrill of discovery, [and] associated feelings of competence’ (Lambert, 1996: 136). That their accounts so often take a particular form – recovering ancestors as people about whom there are ‘interesting’ stories to tell – is related to the internal goods of the hobby.

In seeking to personify the past and story ancestors’ lives, family historians must work with the contingent, fragmentary and limited nature of what survives, and is found, in archives. The richest personal detail is generally available on ancestors remembered in family stories, with archive research often framed as throwing new light on ‘known’ kin. Family secrets are frequently hinted at within families (Smart, 2011), so ‘half-known’ family stories (the illegitimate child, the ‘hushed-up’ adoption, the ‘first’ abandoned family) can be revealed (or confirmed) through archives, with family history reconfiguring family memory. For more remote ancestors identified only through archives, the types of records available (kinship registrations, vital statistics, household residence, records of carceral institutionalization) means ‘interesting’ stories often tend to be ‘sexual stories’ (illegitimacy, very large families, bigamy, incest etc) or accounts of the ‘picaresque’, hardship and the hand of fate (criminal histories, encounters with authority, poverty and sudden deaths). By the nature of what survives in genealogical archives, some ancestor’s lives are more ‘storyable’ than others, so questions of selection (and identification) are constrained by the internal goods of the practice. The attempt to recover ancestors as people means ‘family history seeks to enrich pedigrees with biographical, historical and other contextual information situating ancestors in their time and place’ (Lambert, 1996: 166). But this depends on what can be found in the archive, with certain records providing more valued material than others. Take Sally’s presentation of her great-grandfather’s life as a ‘quite exciting running away to sea story’:

‘He ran away at 13, and he disappears off censuses, and we can’t find him for about 17 years. The next time we found him, he’s in Glasgow and he’s 30 and he was getting married to my Great Grandmother ... for 17 years we don’t know where he went. But we know he ran away to sea ... From what I did find out from my Great Aunt he just used to appear and reappear quite randomly, and leave them quite short of money. They lived in a tenement in Glasgow. And he was a bit of a drinker. And he used to randomly come back and bring some very exotic gift like a monkey to a Glasgow tenement, which of course died of the cold! [...] He’s quite interesting to me, because I think he never really mentioned his life to his kids because my Dad was convinced that they were Scottish going all the way back ... And the real clincher for

my Dad was finding out that he was born in a street half a mile away, in Bolton! My Dad was gutted! I mean that was the irony! He was born in his grandparents' house, which was in X Street in Bolton, which is near B&Q. I said, "You've come as far as B&Q, Dad." And he was like, "No!" He was just like, "You're kidding me."... I said, "Well at least you don't have to wear the horrid kilt!"' (Sally)

Sally's account is of family history research uncovering previously unsuspected details which reconfigure her family's memories of a 'colourful' ancestor. The discovery process and surprising results are now themselves a well-polished family anecdote. Sally explicitly identified with her great-grandfather as someone who had done 'something different', which she related to her own situation, as the only member of her family to have moved away and gone to university. But Sally's focus on this ancestor as someone who had done 'something different' was also a question of how the facts of his life meant more of a story could be constructed around him as a 'character':

'You're never looking for the boring stuff. My Dad's family, once you go back from the quite exciting running away to sea story, you get a lot of farmers who have the same name. And it's great to know that your family can go that far back and that you're related to most of Rochdale, by the looks of it. But— you're really looking for stories of people that did something different...it gives you more clues about their life really...' (Sally)

My respondents placed most value on those records – the 'jewels in the crown' of their research – which provided vivid snap-shots of past lives, recovering ancestors as living, breathing people. Letters and diaries offer rich 'personal' information, but are relatively rare. Newspaper, legal, military and school records, however, can provide picturesque cameos of the people captured in the archive. For my sample, these included records like the newspaper report of the shipwrecked mariner who 'escaped a watery grave' only to 'die on land...the greater portion of his body destroyed by crows'; the dead child, body-snatched from her grave, whose corpse was found in a box by suspicious staff at a stagecoach hotel; and the bride 'dressed gorgeously in a net dress embroidered in silver' whose wedding was attended by F Scott Fitzgerald and whose cake 'weighed 80 pounds'. Some records conveyed a physical sense of ancestors, such as the Marine veteran of Trafalgar, whose enlistment papers noted his light brown hair, his fresh complexion and his grey eyes. Other records offered startling glimpses of incidents in ancestors' lives, their actions frozen in the archive, as in the court records of an ancestor accused of attempted rape whose victim testified that he 'got her down on the floor but had not carnal knowledge of her person' and 'afterwards pulled out his pocket book with several ten pound notes in it and offered her any money to let him have his will of her'. Such ancestors leapt from the archive as fully-figured people about whom there were stories to tell – with such stories demonstrating the success of the research as an act of discovery and recovery. But a family history generally contains relatively few instances of such vividly realised ancestors:

'Just because they're old doesn't necessarily make them interesting does it? ...You've got to get a story behind them, and the further back you go the harder it is to create a story about somebody.' (Derek)

For many ancestors there is little evidence available, and family history requires effort and skill to dig this out. This labour is showcased in accounts which closely interweave stories of ancestors with stories of the process of grappling with information in the archive:

'it's quite difficult to piece it all together and make sense of it. But the sense I've made of it is that she left her first husband, for whatever reason, ended up in Bury giving birth to my grandmother. A few years later met a man called James who, himself, was already married. I haven't been able to find a death certificate for his

wife, his first wife. I don't think he actually married my great-grandmother, I don't think they actually got married. I haven't found marriage certificate, but they lived together as man and wife ... I was drip feeding it to my mum as I came across the information, and ... she found it very difficult to accept that that could have been the case, and was sort of saying well you know, I'm sure they wouldn't have lived together if they hadn't have been married!' (Pauline).

In 'showing their work' in this fashion, family historians display the internal goods of their practice: demonstrating the technical requirements and accomplishments of their hobby, and the value they place on these activities. This shapes accounts in a particular way, with the narrative of the research process a central framing device which becomes an 'interesting story' in itself, as family historians 'write themselves in' to the narrative. The potential significance of this for processes of identity, identification and self-understanding is apparent. But this also places the active, practical role of the family historian at the heart of accounts of family histories. And if family historians' work in the archive serves only to confirm that which is already known, then in some sense their work is a failure or, at least, is rendered less interesting. The production of 'good stories' as surprising or unexpected acts of recovery is a demonstration of success in the practice. Lambert's research into those researching convict ancestors in Australia, for example, noted the 'competitive nature of the search' for convicts – seen as 'collectibles' – with one respondent suggesting her husband's convict ancestry possessed greater 'narrative potential' than her own non-convict ancestry (Lambert, 2002: 119-120). The appeal of convict ancestors is as "'interesting" stories, whether measured in terms of accomplishments, drama, human interest, tragedy, cruelty or injustice' (Lambert, 2002: 120), and such stories are linked back to the present day, as genealogists write themselves and their family into the longer narrative of their ancestry:

'my respondents told me at some length about the ways in which the [convict] stain had played itself out in their living and ancestral families. They speculated about who in their families might have known about their convict origins and how this knowledge might have been suppressed or "lost" to family memory, talked about their personal encounters with the stain and told me about their family's reactions.' (Lambert, 2002: 116)

In generating such accounts, family historians trace the continuing influence of the past in the present. They also locate their *own activity* of tracing distant connections and collecting arcane historical information in terms of its contemporary relevance and significance. More generally, family history is framed as the 'democratic recovery' of the dead, a process of 'restoring individual ancestors to living memory, without regard to rank' (Lambert, 2002: 112) in which genealogists 'reconstruct missing archives and absent records in the attempt to restore the transmission of memory between generations' (Kramer, 2011a: 431). Such powerful framing devices of family history as the recovery of the dead (in vivid stories of past lives) serve as a rationale or 'vocabulary of motive' (Mills, 1940), in which family historians frame (and organise) their potentially recondite hobby.

One role of hobbies lies in providing a sense of creativity and accomplishment as 'Learning and playing by the rules of the game for making a good collection help the collector gain a sense of mastery and competence' (Belk, 1995: 150), and the desire to share their enthusiasm is a feature of hobbyist accounts. Genealogy provides a personal angle on history, but the idiom of kinship which facilitates the family historian's identification with people in the past may make the subject less accessible for others (much like the dubious interest of other people's holiday photographs). Kramer (2011b) notes family history is sometimes seen as dull, or lacking contemporary relevance by those who do not pursue it, and family members can feel resentment about the energies genealogist devote to the distant dead. My respondents frequently offered 'health warnings', suggesting their research was really only of interest to

immediate family, swiftly qualified by reference to those family members who took no interest in it.

'I've made a little start on one [a family history] for my wife. [*And she's interested in the family history?*] Not particularly. I don't get any impression that she is, no. I sort of got the feeling I might complete it and then it's there for Jim [son] if ever he should want it, really. I don't know. [*And is he interested?*] No.' [Both laugh] (Ken)

Family history as a hobby is not dissimilar to 'collecting hobbies' (such as collecting stamps or memorabilia), with a similar accounting for practices. Collecting is not a guilt free activity (it may be seen as self-indulgent, or as taking time and money away from family) and hobbyists often feel prompted to justify their activity to others (Belk, 1995). With striking similarities to family historians, collectors form accounts which justify their activities, by stressing the addictive nature of their hobby, and by emphasising their role as saviour of lost, neglected or endangered objects, so that the 'collecting even of such mundane objects as Mickey Mouse characters ... can make collectors feel that they are part of a great tradition and are contributing in a small way to either art or science' (Belk, 1995: 76). Constructing family history as the rediscovery of ordinary lives universalises and provides relevance for the pursuit:

'You've got to stop me in a moment because I will wander off. I mean I have people who pretend they're lamp posts when we're in the street because if they stand still long enough I won't see them and I won't tell them my latest research! But having said that.....*right!* [...] I suppose it was all about bringing them back to life, do you know what I mean? Because as we both know, the majority of people in history are just totally and utterly ignored. I mean my great grandmother I think, her whole history is summed up by something like seven or eight official documents. And that's it' (James).

The framing of accounts of ancestors' lives, then, serves to reflect the value added by the work undertaken, providing proof of expertise in stories of the successful transformation of knowledge (in themes of recovering the forgotten, uncovering secrets, discovering surprising new facts) that careful research in archives has achieved. However, such narratives are not just a means of displaying or accounting for family history. They also perform work within the practice of family history itself: operating as an organising device helping to connect and interpret disparate and incomplete information, whilst retaining the inherently ambiguous nature of that information and so continuing to display the family historian's exercise of judgement.

Work in genealogical archives routinely generates a mass of partial and ambiguous material, and stories of both ancestors and of the research process serve to 'fill in the gaps' in this material, organising the information into plausible sequences and scenarios and allowing family historian to decide between alternative explanations. This again serves to place the family historian at the heart of their account of their family history. In their accounts, family historians refer frequently to the sifting process and to their own mistakes in the search, to the mistakes and misinformation of others (via family memory, the family trees of kin, and related ancestral information found on tree-sharing websites), as well as the dubious nature of some archive records. Practitioners develop not only a strong sense of the correct way of proceeding but also an investment in those values, which helps organise accounts. The narrative of the research process as a journey of (re)discovery, linking past to present, is a key framing device helping to connect disparate, fragmentary and ambiguous archive records.

As analysts have noted, the procedures of family history both require, but also constrain the storying of ancestors, with discoveries in the archive providing the capacity to *disrupt* dominant discourses and cherished assumptions in surprising and unexpected ways. There are

limits to the malleability of interpretations of history (Zerubavel, 1995), since norms (of credible sources, acceptable links etc.) govern how we may legitimately debate the past (Appadurai, 1981), and there are clear conventions within family history about this. As Nash notes, for example, the ‘demand that searchers start with themselves and work backwards, can challenge some of the neatness of a kind of idealised Irish identity in which a single Irish line is the only one that matters’ (Nash, 2002: 38). And as well as promoting unexpected inclusions, the tracing process is governed by criteria of exclusion, with family historians sharply aware of the potential to get carried away and ‘go wrong’:

‘I wanted some drama in the family and I found another Galloway and there was like some criminal records, you think, I shouldn’t really be looking at this, but it’s really good! And he was deported to New South Wales and it was his wife’s application for him to go for murder. And I was like, yes! So I tried my best to make him fit. I wanted, but no. It was more like a round peg in a square hole... I was like adamant, let’s get this criminal in the family! Because it is easy when you find somebody to go, yes, that’s them. And then you think, there’s no way those dates match...’ (Jacky)

Family history research, then, generates fragmentary and often quite miscellaneous information about ancestors, whilst procedural norms serve to highlight the incomplete and uncertain nature of the evidence found in archives. Consequently, family historians routinely rehearse issues of accuracy and interpretation and stress that what they uncover is provisional or limited:

‘sort of half glimpsed stories, which I often say it’s like looking through a dirty window, you know you can see some of what’s going on but you can’t get it all.’ (James)

Narrative always provides an interpretation of events, shaping their meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995; Toolan, 1988), but family historians explicitly flag their stories *as interpretations*, reflecting the limited evidence they work with and the caution towards evidence that ‘good practice’ requires. Take, for example, Carol’s account of her female ancestor, Annie. In a process she described as a ‘detective story’, Carol had reconstructed Annie’s circumstances from the census and birth registers, which indicated that Annie had given birth to several illegitimate children, all subsequently adopted. Carol had reached a tentative conclusion about Annie’s story which acknowledged other possible interpretations:

‘she was pregnant, or getting pregnant while she was as a housekeeper in that household ... so the fact that she had gone to York had this child and then gone back or, gone to work as a housekeeper for this man and then was working subsequently as a housekeeper for this man [Joseph L] ... So I thought Joseph the man she was working for, was probably the father of these. Now whether it was a consensual relationship or not I don’t know. You know she was his servant and he had been married and had been widowed twice, and he had six sons, and so, you know I’ve been looking into his tree, cause he is probably the unknown father in all this, so I’ve been sort of delving in. [...] I would never know whether this was a consensual thing or whether he was talking advantage of her, but the fact that she sort of kept going back sort of suggests that it was a relationship that they were having in secret.’

Bennett argues such types of stories emerge in when people must deal with complex or ambiguous information, and are framed according to a ‘dual standard of “Did it happen that way?” and “Could it have happened that way?”’ and are based on ‘the premise... that reality itself can be misleading’ with any interpretation fallible (Bennett, 2001: 97). Carol’s story of her ancestor’s life organises and interprets the fragmentary material about Annie, whilst retaining a sense of its limitations and uncertainties. In doing so, of course, Carol writes herself – and her sense of connection to Annie – into the family history, and the act of *making*

connections also becomes framed as one of *being connected*. Carol emphasised not only her own role in recovering and interpreting the information, but also in giving testimony for Annie.

‘...the online things are great but they don’t kind of make the story properly ... the links are very, you know, difficult to find anyway, I mean nobody would link Joseph with Joseph L, and I’ve made the links because I’ve dug around and things, but I wanted to be able to kind of make the link more obvious than it is to anyone ... it doesn’t tell you much, does it, about who, you know, who was with who? ... I think I need the narrative, especially with this story [of Annie] because it is a story, it is a kind of, you know, piecing together of these bits of information kind of made a story about, you know – I need to see that she kept going’ (Carol).

Key features of identity-work in family history – such as the construction of research as a journey of discovery in which the family historian takes centre stage, and the personification of and identification with particular ancestors – emerge as a practical consequence of the procedures and internal goods of family history. Given the uncertain and incomplete nature of the evidence that family history produces, storied accounts of the research perform practical organising and presentational ‘work’ in the conduct of the hobby. It has been argued that the pursuit of family history ‘compels everyday personal engagement with the meaning and legacy of inheritance for collective and individual identification and identity’ (Kramer, 2011b: 379). Certainly the procedures of family history and the internal goods of the practice compel family historians to place *themselves* at the centre of their accounts of ancestors and of their family tree. Narratives of the research process operate as a central framing device in which family historians ‘write themselves in’ to the story, with past and present linked as a journey of discovery into the past. In the process, discourses of ‘identity’ – as a *personal* journey of discovery – often operate as a powerful linked organizing device, showcasing the activities and expertise of the family historian, whilst also connecting the rather disparate pieces of information that the practice generates. The conduct of family history is often (though, it should be noted, not always) framed within explicit discourses of a search for personal identity and a sense of self. Such talk of self and identity is a strategic resource: the narrative tools employed to make sense of and account for the practical tasks of the activity. Carol’s narrative, for example, is not only of a journey of discovery in the archive but also of a personal journey of *self-discovery*. Carol linked uncovering Annie’s lover to her own sense of ‘self’:

‘Cause some of my genetic makeup comes from him and I’ve got this blank in my tree where, you know, I have no definite idea of who, what, where that goes to you know, and so it’s just that really it’s just my desire for completeness [...]I’m interested in you know, what makes me up.’ (Carol)

The idea that family history serves to ‘fill in the gaps’ in our knowledge of what ‘makes us up’ is a common trope in accounts of genealogy, however in such accounts we can also see discourses of self and identity being used to ‘fill in the gaps’ in family history. Kinship connections are in one sense somewhat arbitrary links, so the process of tracing a family tree often produces miscellaneous information about a heterogeneous collection of individuals. Often widely separated in space as well as time, many of these ancestors will only be linked to each other through their kinship to a distant descendant – the family historian. All family trees, after all, converge on ‘ego’. Carol’s family history research, for example, had generated not only her ‘detective story’ of Annie and Joseph, but also several stories of ‘shot-gun weddings’ and of ‘doing a bunk’; as well as stories of her independent great-grandmother, employed into her 80s (though lying about her age) and inexplicably fluent in French; of a wealthy provisions’ merchant, ‘importer of Danish Hams’ who had married his dead wife’s sister; of the gamekeeper’s son privately educated at a Catholic boarding school; of an innkeeper living on a bleak and isolated moor; of the ironstone miner killed in a rock fall; and

of the couple who met at Blackpool on a Wakes Week. The key theme that linked these disparate narrative elements was Carol and her connection to these people, discovered through her family history search. Just as stories of the research process serve an integrating function linking fragmentary evidence, so accounts of the research process as journey of self-discovery help family historians make connections between what is often a quite disparate and incomplete set of ancestral stories.

Conclusion

This paper has explored family history as a social and discursive practice, examining accounts of family history in terms of such stories' *practical* orientation – fulfilling specific tasks in the conduct of family history, and reflecting the internal goods and values of the practice. Whatever the broader reasons why people pursue family history, once recruited into the practice strong procedural conventions organise their activities and accounts. An absorbing leisure hobby of 'messing around' in archives, the enjoyment of the pursuit consists as much in the 'thrill of the chase' as in what is actually discovered. Family history is a pleasurable but also laborious, sometimes esoteric hobby, and in storying their family histories genealogists showcase their expertise, and provide an accounting for the practice, to themselves and to others. Family historians routinely sift through a mass of archive records to generate a smaller set of fragmentary and ambiguous archive evidence about kin, and for many ancestors little information is found. The procedural and problem-solving elements of family history – searching and sifting through detail, tracking and checking links to follow the 'right' connections from a mass of possibilities, assembling the elements to puzzle out what records suggest about past lives – provide challenge and a sense of accomplishment for practitioners, but also a strong narrative frame for accounts. The emphasis on shaping a 'good story' and recovering ancestors as flesh-and-blood people from potentially 'dry' archive records demonstrates the family historian's success in their pursuit. Accounts are framed as 'human interest' stories, and with an emphasis on the *research*, in an organizing device framing family history as a process of recovery, linking past and present, and placing the active role of the family historian at the centre of narratives.

If we think of 'identity' as something that is produced when we are engaged in doing other things, this paper has examined how the practical organisation of 'doing other things' – here family history – helps produce 'identity' in particular ways. Whether or not the pursuit of family history helps genealogist to find greater coherence in their wider life or sense of self, it certainly seems that the practice of family history, as well as the information it uncovers about individual ancestors, can provide a 'resource for identity-work' (Kramer, 2011b: 391). The investment and pleasure of family historians in the skilled accomplishment of their tasks is clearly one consequential aspect of the practice. But this paper has also utilised a disaggregated notion of 'identity', to suggest that the various elements of 'identity-work' discussed here emerge as a situated, pragmatic consequence of people's engagement in specific practices, which provide an internal logic and set of values for their actions and discourses. The components of identity-work in family history (in themes of a personal journey into the past, of (re)establishing connections with ancestors as people, and of the transformation of prior understandings of belonging and connection) are features pragmatically and situationally evoked as family historians pursue particular tasks and engagements in the research. And just as the forms of connection and identification that are produced within family history reflect the internal logic of the practice and its constructions of value, so too discourses of self and identity often perform a utilitarian function as organising and accounting devices within the practice. If family history, and the information it uncovers about individual ancestors serve as a resource for 'identity-work', then so too discourses of self and 'identity' serve as a strategic resource and presentational device within 'family history work'. This is not to deny the potential significance of these different elements of

‘identity-work’ for ‘identity’, but rather to suggest they be viewed as contextual, pragmatic and strategic features of task-based practices.

One potential implication of this is that rather different discourses of ‘identity’ and forms of ‘identity-work’ may emerge for other practices and other pragmatic purposes. It is hard, then, to assess the broader significance of the elements of ‘identity-work’ produced through family history without some sense of how they fit within the other multiple practices and engagements of those who engage in family history as a leisure hobby. It has long been noted that people order the events of their lives in narrative to gain self-understanding and to have an explanatory account to offer others – what Crites (1971) called the ‘autobiographical imperative’. But whilst lives and selves are narrative constructions, made coherent through the ‘biographical work’ that links events into life (and family) histories, they are also ‘locally informed and organized’, that is, embedded in concrete situations, and produced out of the ordinary procedures and local requirements of practical reasoning (Gubrium and Holstein, 1994), which should alert us to the strategic and situational nature of rhetorics of the self.

¹ 21 family historians were interviewed in an in-depth qualitative interview study based in Northern England. All, bar one, resided in the UK. Participants were recruited through the leafleting of libraries and Family Record Centres, news-group and message-board adverts to websites of Family and Local History Societies, and by snowball sampling. The achieved sample (of 13 men and 8 women) is predominantly ‘middle class’, white, older and well-educated in its characteristics. All bar one were ‘white’. Their ages ranged from 25 to 79, with a mean age of 57. During a 3-4 hour semi-structured interview, participants were asked how they had conducted their research and what they had found out, using ‘family tree elicitation’, an extension of photo elicitation (Hirsch, 1997). This methodology was designed to explore those features of their family history that my participants saw as interesting and significant, and to explore the range of archival information that had been collected as ‘hinterland’ to their stories of their family trees.

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