Making narrative connections? Exploring how late teens relate their own lives to the historically significant past

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Abstract

This paper reports on a study that invited 187 16–18-year-old students in the United States to draw diagrams showing connections between their own lives and the past. Interviews were subsequently held with 26 study participants. The degree to which students made connections between their own lives and the past, and the various ways in which they integrated personal and historical narratives, are discussed, with three examples explored in detail. The ways in which interviewed students talked about their diagrams point to the significance of individuals' understandings of the nature of historical knowledge for how they use the past to orient their own lives.

Keywords: historical consciousness; historical understanding; history education; identity

History educators are increasingly interested in what young people know or think about the past – rather than what they don't – with the assumption that taking students' existing thinking into account could enhance history education practices. Similarly motivated, this research took an open-ended approach towards exploring young people's historical consciousness or how they use the past to help orient their lives. Other papers in this issue examine the ways in which young people understand or construct narratives about a collective or historically significant past. This paper takes a somewhat different tack: given that individuals in their late teens are developmentally primed to consider issues of identity, what kinds of strategies do they use to connect their *own* life stories or personal narratives to the historically significant past, including but not limited to national narratives? Further, how do they talk about these narrative strategies and how might the ways in which they talk about them relate to their understandings of the nature of historical knowledge?

This exploratory study involved 187 16–18-year-olds in four different state schools in the Greater Boston area in the United States; further contextual details are provided below. Students drew diagrams to explain how the past 'helps explain who you are and the life you are living or hope to live', and provided accompanying written explanations (in an exercise adapted from Seixas, 1997). Interviews were conducted with 26 students about their responses. The 187 diagrams varied greatly in terms of both form and content, with approximately one-fifth of diagrams reflecting only students' personal experiences. However, most students did make connections between their own lives and the historically significant past, nearly always in highly personalized ways that bore little resemblance to 'official' history textbook narratives.

They used various narrative strategies: situating their own life story within a broader historical context; exploring the relationship between individuals and bigger historical processes; tethering their own life story to the story of a group or community to whom they felt they belonged (e.g. a nation, a racial/ethnic group, a religion, humankind writ large); presenting their own life as being at the confluence of various unfolding historical narratives; and/or exploring how the past is helping to shape the ongoing story of their own personal development.

Mapping out some of the ways in which individuals narratively connect their own stories to a broader human past contributes to existing theory about historical consciousness. Moreover, differences in the *ways* in which young people spoke about their diagrams suggest that their assumptions about the nature of historical knowledge – that is, their epistemological understandings of history – relate to important differences in terms of how they conceive of their identities and lives, hinting at the potentially profound impact of the kind of history education that promotes rigorous historical thinking.

Below, relevant literatures on historical consciousness, narratives, identity and history education are discussed. The study methods are then outlined. An overview of the study findings is provided before more in-depth discussion of three student diagrams and how those students talked about their diagrams is presented. The paper concludes by reflecting on the implications of the study's findings and possible avenues for future research.

Conceptual framework

Individual historical consciousness

Historical consciousness is a concept of growing interest to experts who have pioneered and pressed for disciplinary approaches to teaching history (Ahonen, 2005; Lee, 2004a; Seixas, 2004). Applicable to both individuals and communities, historical consciousness is fundamentally about how as humans we orient ourselves in time and relate our own lives to the past and future: what theorist Jörn Rüsen calls 'historical identity' (1993). Importantly, orientation involves both *situating* oneself (where am I/we now?) and *directing* oneself (where am I/we going?) within a historical continuum that expands beyond one's personal life experience. For communities, historical consciousness is intimately bound up with collective memory, including the selection of which public events get commemorated or even remembered, and how the community's origins are explained (Lowenthal, 1996; Nora, 1996; Rüsen, 1993). While recognizing that individuals are inseparable from the larger enterprise of collective memory, this study relates to aspects of *individual* historical consciousness – that is, how young people orient or make sense of their *own* lives within a historical continuum. Rüsen emphasizes that historical consciousness is not limited to 'how much' history individuals know, even though a certain level of knowledge or 'experience' is a prerequisite: 'what is important to discover in regard to historical consciousness is not the extent of knowledge involved, but rather the framework and effective principles operative in making sense of the past' (Rüsen, 1993: 80). This study helps address the need for initial, small-scale, qualitative investigations into individual historical consciousness (Billman-Machecha and Hausen, 2005; Lee, 2004b; Seixas, 2005).

The role of narratives

This study assumes that we construct and enact meaning and identity through discourse, particularly through narratives, which lie at the heart of how we make sense of who we are and our relationship to the world (Bruner, 1990; Hammack and Pilecki, 2012). Bruner

defines narratives as 'acts of meaning' or cultural products through which we construct our understanding of the world – constructions that, according to Danto (1965), are necessarily infused with references to the past. Bruner contrasts narratives with 'paradigmatic' or 'logico-scientific' thinking, which involves trying to identify events as instances of an established law (Polkinghorne, 1988). Bruner believes that there are universals to be found across narratives, such as a 'structure of committed time' with a beginning, middle and end organized according to their human relevance (Bruner, 2005: 26). Though bounded by human actions, stories typically generate 'gists or morals' that transcend the particularities of the narrative told and invite the audience to judge the reasons behind individual actions. Narratives can be represented through a variety of forms, including the diagrams that are analysed in this paper. Importantly, Bruner finds it impossible to separate the thought that gave rise to a narrative and the narrative itself: such a distinction is not made in this paper.

Research shows that narratives play a key role in the formation of national identity (Billig, 1995; Reicher and Hopkins, 2001) and theories about political processes and one's role and agency within them (Andrews, 2007). Similarly, theoreticians, including Rüsen, consider narratives integral to historical consciousness (Polkinghorne, 2005; Rüsen, 1993; Wertsch, 2004). Referring to 'the narrative competence of historical consciousness', Rüsen posits that telling stories is how individuals synthesize different dimensions of time and impose moral meaning on the past.

In everyday discourse, we rarely tell complete and coherent narratives. Rather, it is through 'small stories' or 'narrative fragments' that we shift in and out of different ways of narrative telling (Baynham, 2010), as reflected in the data collected for this study. Hammack and Pilecki (2012) suggest that the ways in which we select or construct narratives are often 'saturated with emotion' and not always rational or consistent. As individuals, we necessarily create narratives according to the 'cultural tools' available to us (Wertsch, 2002), including national narratives. The prevailing Québécois narrative, for instance, is that of melancholic tragedy (Létourneau and Moisan, 2004), while a progressive 'narrative template' of American exceptionalism predominates in the United States (VanSledright, 2008; Wertsch, 2004). Schools traditionally play an important role in propagating official history narratives; however, young people also interact with many other kinds of sources that relay information about the past, including popular films, news media, national ceremonies and rituals, books, television documentaries, families, religious communities, museums and historic sites (Barton, 2001; Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998; Wineburg *et al.*, 2007). In this study, the students interviewed referred to movies, historic sites and family history, for instance, as well as what they had learned in school or read about elsewhere. That is, they engaged with narratives that were culturally available to them, albeit in unique and personally meaningful ways.

Identity

For the purposes of this study, 'identity' is defined as 'the attempt to differentiate and integrate a sense of self along different social and personal dimensions' (Bamberg, 2011: 6). A complex and multidimensional endeavour, it invokes overlapping sociocultural categories including gender, race, ethnicity, occupation, class, nation state, religion and sexual orientation. The current study assumed that identity is actively *constructed* by the individual rather than passively 'owned' or 'received'; *situational* insofar as it develops in context and is subject to change; and *shaped by narratives*, as indicated above. Importantly, the students' perception of the researcher – an English-accented, white female of approximately forty years old, affiliated with a university – as

well as the particular school contexts in which they interacted with her, would have influenced the narratives they chose to tell, particularly during the interviews.

Developmental psychologists, meanwhile, view late adolescence as the pre-eminent time in the life cycle for explicitly addressing issues of identity (Erikson, 1968; Nakkula and Toshalis, 2006), as it is a period when young people typically develop an integrated sense of self and the capacity or cognitive tools to consider their lives in an abstract sense or as an overall 'story' (Damon and Hart, 1988; Harter, 1999; McAdams, 1993). Indeed, emerging research suggests that developing the ability to create autobiographical and intergenerational narratives is crucial for the emotional and psychological stability of young people (Fivush *et al.*, 2011; McLean *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, at least in contemporary western contexts, questions concerning one's identity and life purpose understandably come to the fore as young people prepare to leave their families and attain increased autonomy. This study chose to focus on 16- to 18-year-olds on the grounds that they would be likely to be both willing and able to reflect on the relationship between themselves and history.

Historical knowledge and understanding

A few quantitative studies have tried to measure young people's attitudes towards the past, most notably that of Angvik and Von Borries (1997). Meanwhile, studies incorporating qualitative approaches have shown how young people's family or national affiliations affect the kinds of narratives they tell about the past (Welzer, 2008) or their historical reasoning (Goldberg *et al.*, 2008). Other studies have shown that students' social and cultural environments impact how they make meaning of their history education, and that they are far from passive recipients of textbook narratives (Barton and Levstik, 2004; Goldberg *et al.*, 2006; Rantala, 2011). Still others have shown how students' interpretations of national history differ according to their racial/ethnic identity (Almarza, 2001; Epstein, 1998; Hawkey and Prior, 2011; Peck, 2010; Traille, 2007) and immigration status and experience (An, 2009; Grever *et al.*, 2008). While this body of research is informative, the focus in this study was on the ways in which young people explicitly make connections between themselves and history. Other studies have explored how young people think about themselves as members of a specific generation (Lenz, 2011), personally relate to school history topics (Barton and McCully, 2005), or feel a sense of connectedness to the overall study of history (Audigier and Fink, 2010; Haeberli, 2005). However, these studies have not focused on the narrative *processes* by which individuals relate their own lives to the past.

Finally, this study draws on literature concerning young people's historical thinking, particularly with regard to their thinking about the nature of historical knowledge. For example, a common misconception among children is that historical knowledge is just 'there' and does not need to be constructed from historical sources (Ashby, 2005; Lee, 2005; Wineburg, 2001), although they may eventually develop the insight that historical accounts are contingent and must answer questions and fit criteria (Lee and Shemilt, 2004). Borrowing from that work, this study broadly considered whether young people talked about their diagrams (and other historical accounts, including narrative accounts) as tentative interpretations of their relationship to the past or as straightforward, unambiguous accounts. It is worth nothing that to date there has been a lack of clarity regarding the theoretical relationship between epistemological understandings of history and historical consciousness (Lee, 2004b), although a recent paper points to an integral relationship between the two, with a sophisticated (or 'genetic') level of historical consciousness necessitating the development of a 'historiographical gaze' (Thorp, 2014).

This study drew, then, from diverse bodies of literature, some theoretical and some empirically grounded. The overarching impetus was to understand ways in which young people relate their own lives to the historically significant past. While this study emphasizes the highly individual and context-specific ways in which young people create or weave together narratives about themselves and the past, it also integrates insights from cognitive research that point to the predictable development of more enduring epistemological or disciplinary understandings among young people. These two approaches, while potentially incompatible, can be reconciled if students are seen as developing *capacities* for meaning-making rather than holding particular ideas (Hofer and Pintrich, 2002; Kegan, 1982). How students deploy their fundamental epistemological understandings may vary from one discursive context to another, but students who have not grasped the constructed and contingent nature of historical interpretations, for instance, are never going to construct narratives in ways that reflect that understanding.

Methods

Sample

Of the four research sites, two schools were situated in affluent suburban communities, one was in a mixed-income semi-urban community, and one was in a mixed-income urban community. Table 1 presents demographic features of the overall sample, as self-reported by students. The sample was balanced by gender and was somewhat racially/ethnically diverse; however, the study was not intended to be generalizable to some broader population, especially as potentially important information was not collected regarding students' social/economic or religious backgrounds. Moreover, the study was focused on the general processes by which students used the past to make sense of their lives, identities and values rather than on the actual substantive connections that they made. Understandable differences in *what* students talked about (e.g. slavery and the civil rights movement vs the Islamic Revolution in Iran) were less important for this study than *how* they talked about the past, or what kind of *epistemological stance* they took towards it (which were not expected to be influenced by gender or racial/ethnic background).

By dint of being enrolled in college preparation classes (Honors or AP), these students were relatively successful academically and likely to be able to articulate their relationship to the past, although information about their grades or history education was not available. Students participated during class time towards the end of the school year in a variety of subject area contexts (accounting, English literature, government, history and psychology). The subsample of the 26 interviewed students was intentionally diverse, in terms both of demographic characteristics and of their diagrams and written responses. With respect to student work, variation was sought regarding (1) the number of connections students made between themselves and the past, (2) the relative sophistication of their reasoning about the nature of historical knowledge as indicated by a follow-up activity (see below) and (3) the uniqueness or typicality of their diagrams relative to the rest of the sample. However, it is important to note that for reasons of timing, the interview sample was selected based on an initial reading of the diagrams and other written responses rather than on the more thorough analysis described below. All interviews were fully transcribed.

Table 1: Breakdown of sample (n=187*)*

		Number of students in overall sample	% of overall sample	Number of students interviewed	% of students interviewed
Gender (n=187)	Male	105	56%	14	50%
	Female	82	44%	14	50%
Race/ ethnicity (n=175)*	African-American	9	5%	4	14%
	Asian	24	14%	2	7%
	Hispanic	3	2%	0	0%
	Native American	0	0%	0	0%
	White	124	67%	18	64%
	Mixed/other	14	8%	4	14%
Family mobility and language (n=175)	At least one foreign born parent	74	39%	11	40%
	Student has always lived in current neighbourhood	111	59%	15	54%
	Student has lived outside New England	50	27%	5	29%
	Language other than English spoken at home	56	30%	9	32%

* Demographic details were missing for some of the sample.

Data collection

As mentioned, students were asked to draw a diagram on a blank piece of paper to show how the past 'helps explain who you are and the life you are living or hope to live' and to then explain the form and content of their diagram. The idea was that a concise diagram format would allow students to construct an overview of the ways in which they thought about themselves in relation to the past, although it was usually unclear if this relationship was something they had reflected on previously. The open-ended nature of the task allowed students to approach it in ways that were personally meaningful to them. Students typically spent approximately 45 minutes on the task. While this paper focuses on the diagrams, students went on to complete other activities, including one designed to surface their epistemological reasoning about the nature of historical accounts (adapted from Boix Mansilla, 2001), which they also discussed in their interviews.

Initial coding rounds

Students' diagrams proved highly varied, posing a challenge for analysis. Initial coding focused on the content of students' diagrams. Across all the diagrams, almost half of the items (46 per cent) related to students' direct personal experiences, such as starting a new school or moving house, or features of their everyday lives, including personality traits, hobbies or tastes. Only a quarter of the items referred to what might be called the historical past: events likely to feature in students' history textbooks and which preceded their births. A further 9 per cent of items referred to 'historical' events occurring within the students' own lifetimes or contemporaneously, such as the election of Bush or Obama and the War on Terror; 20 per cent of items comprised themes or topics not tied to a particular time or period, such as immigration, racism or literature.

The vague wording of the task instructions – 'show how the past helps explain who you are and the life you are living' – meant that many students legitimately chose to focus on their *own* past as well as or instead of the historically significant past. Close to a fifth of students (17 per cent) included *only* events that either they or immediate members of their family had personally experienced, and/or aspects of their present-day lives. Over a third of students (34 per cent) included mostly or only such items ('mostly' was defined as two-thirds or more of items). Over a tenth of students (13 per cent) included mostly or only historically significant items in their diagrams, while close to half (47 per cent) combined different types of items so that no one type dominated. While such statistics arguably hint at the relative sensitivity of individual students to the past, the sheer amount of history that individuals chose to include in their diagrams was not useful for indicating the degree to which or process by which they were making connections between their own lives and the past.

The next round of analysis attempted to differentiate between students who told stories to explain their personal connection to the past and those who approached the question more 'analytically', as per Bruner's distinction between narrative and paradigmatic thinking. However, given the centrality of narratives to how we make meaning of our lives, it proved more productive to focus on the ways in which students integrated personal and historical narratives in their diagrams. Bruner, commenting on written texts, has stated that 'it is not that narrative and paradigmatic modes of discourse fuse, for they do not. It is, rather, that the logical or paradigmatic mode is brought to bear on the task of explicating the breach in the narrative' (Bruner, 2005: 94). This distinction played out in this study as follows: students typically drew a diagram containing narrative threads (or a single coherent narrative) and then wrote explanatory or logical comments either within or alongside the diagram. Interviewed students retold or elaborated on these narratives, while also breaking out into analytic commentary on them.

Findings overview: Students' incorporation of personal and historical narratives into their diagrams

Table 2 summarizes the ways in which students combined personal and historically significant items in their diagrams, if they did at all, and the overall narrative effect, if any. The labels in bold indicate the presence of what appeared to be coherent overarching narratives within the diagrams – be that personal narratives, historical narratives, or ones that brought these two kinds of narrative together. Personal narratives refer to stories about students' own lives or those of their immediate family. Historical narratives involve the historically significant past, as recognized by a relatively large group of people, including historians. They could be narratives about particular events or historical developments, such as the struggle for women's rights or the United States gaining independence from Britain, more interpretative sweeps of periods of history such as the twentieth century, or even address how history itself unfolds.

It is important to note that students were not asked to produce coherent narratives of their relationship to the past in their diagrams: an absence of a coherent narrative does not mean that individual students were incapable of and/or resistant to producing them, just that they did not do so in this context. Moreover, since students were given the challenging task of simultaneously thinking of items to include *and* arranging those items diagrammatically, some diagrams can be interpreted as an initial jotting down of ideas – although, as Table 2 indicates, some of the diagrams that appeared to be lists or brainstorms effectively operated as narratives if there were sufficient thematic coherence and adequate context for the choice of items. However, in the case of students who were not interviewed, it is impossible to know if they intentionally selected or developed particular narrative strategies. The most compelling diagrams (a) included

less than two-thirds of items related to personal or family experiences, tastes, interests, etc. and at least some historically significant items and (b) integrated personal and historical narratives. However, Table 2 should be read as a summary of findings rather than as an evaluative schema.

Table 2: A summary of content type and narrative strategy in the overall sample of diagrams (n= 168)

A. Diagrams *only* include personal or family experiences, tastes, interests, etc. (n=31)	
LIST/BRAINSTORM: Current interests, friends, family, values, influences	20*
CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH: Tells story of own life and/or immediate family ***Personal narrative***	11
B. Two-thirds or more of included items are personal or family experiences, tastes, interests, etc. but other kinds of items are included (n=29)	
LIST/BRAINSTORM: Current interests, friends, family, etc. with history cited as an interest *or* events or influences, including items of broad historic or contemporary significance	17
CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH: Tells story of own life: some preceding history is included as background *and/or* broader contextual detail is included – e.g. contemporary events or developments ***Personal narrative with links to the historically significant past***	12
C. Two-thirds or more of included items are historically significant events (n=24)	
LIST/BRAINSTORM: Seemingly random connections *or* very general rationale for including items; e.g. things that have affected me; things I believe are important	13
LIST/BRAINSTORM: Coherent theme: items collectively serve to link own life story to bigger historical narrative(s) ***Personal narrative linked to historical narrative***	7
CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH: Chronological overview of history with self at end or as a point on a timeline ***Historical narrative with self inserted***	4
D. Integrated diagram: Mixture of different kinds of items (n = 84)	
LIST/BRAINSTORM: Seemingly random connections *or* very general rationale for including items; e.g. things that have affected me; things I believe are important or have learned from	23
LIST/BRAINSTORM: Coherent theme: items collectively serve to link own life story to bigger historical narrative(s) ***Personal narrative linked to historical narrative***	13
VARIED FORMS: Subsumes personal narrative within that of a group to which he or she belongs (e.g. Algerian Muslims, Ashkenazi Jews, Americans, human race) ***Personal and historical narrative tethered*** (**STUART**)	9
BROAD CHRONOLOGICAL APPROACH: Contextualizes own or family story within broader historical context; shows how own story or family's story has been intertwined with historical events or trends ***Personal narrative contextualized within broader historical narrative*** (**MELVIN**)	23
VARIED FORMS: Presents self as a product and/or part of a confluence of narratives; may involve complex causal connections ***Personal narrative seen as product of historical narrative(s) and/or at confluence of different narratives*** (**JESS**)	16

* Number of diagrams in sample fitting this category. Diagrams that only included general themes were excluded from this analysis.

Students' narrative strategies: Melvin, Stuart and Jess

While giving a sense of the distribution of approaches within the overall sample, Table 2 is necessarily reductionist and fails to capture what it looked like in practice for particular students to make narrative connections between their own lives and the past. This paper turns now to three specific cases to provide more nuanced discussion and to show that students connected themselves to the past in highly individualized ways. Melvin, Stuart and Jess (all pseudonyms) were selected because they created diagrams with mixed content but used different narrative strategies to bring personal and historical narratives together, as indicated in Section D of Table 2. Furthermore, there were interesting differences in the ways in which they talked about their diagrams.

In what follows, a few impressionistic details are given about each student to emphasize their individuality as well as to convey the researcher's perspective: the details are not necessarily significant. Then, evidence from the students' diagrams, their written explanations and interviews are woven together.

Melvin: Historically contextualizing his own life story; exploring the relationship between individuals and bigger historical processes

Melvin was a soft-spoken, affable student who wore a baseball cap during his interview. He referred to his Caribbean heritage and large family (he is the youngest of eight children), as well as his religious faith. He has travelled extensively to visit family in the Caribbean and Europe and has lived in various Greater Boston neighbourhoods.

Melvin's diagram, at first glance, is structured in the form of a swirling timeline. He starts with the Emancipation Proclamation – the abolition of slavery at the end of the American Civil War – which is presented as a necessary condition or background enabling his personal story: 'my education level, my quality of life, probably where I live, would have been completely different'. However, his diagram does not follow a strict chronology despite the arrows that connect the different items. The end of the timeline is only loosely structured, featuring aspects of Melvin's life circumstances, such as where he lives, the education he has received, the travel he has completed, and how these life circumstances have had an impact on who he is today. While Melvin incorporates the historically significant past into his diagram, his focus is somewhat tilted towards his personal life story.

Nonetheless, Melvin does more than merely describe his own life: he situates it within a broader historical context. His explanatory notes centre on how he came to have excellent life prospects despite the challenges he perceives of being a young black man living in the United States. Beginning his personal timeline with the Emancipation Proclamation and the ending of the Jim Crow laws serves to acknowledge his relative good fortune compared with previous generations; he also connects his own story to a wider collective narrative of social progress and technological change, which affect 'pretty much everyone in my generation'. By only selecting 'things beyond his control' for his diagram, Melvin uses the diagram narrative to explore the relationship between individual lives or free will and larger societal or historical forces. In his interview, he also referred to his siblings, his parents' political and religious views, and the liberal context of Massachusetts as influences beyond his control that have helped to shape him, blurring the distinction between past and present in his bid to explore the degree to which we shape our own destinies.
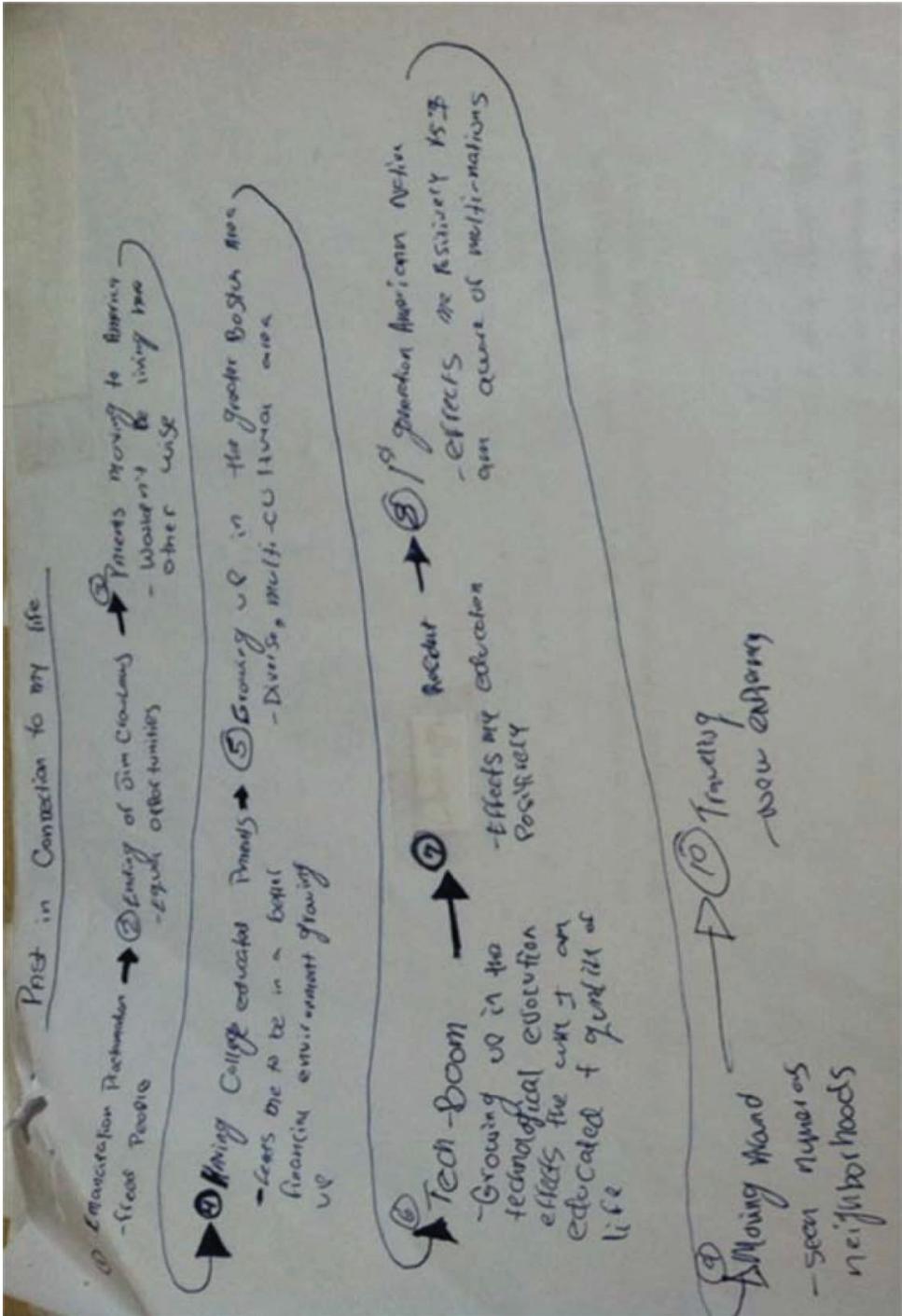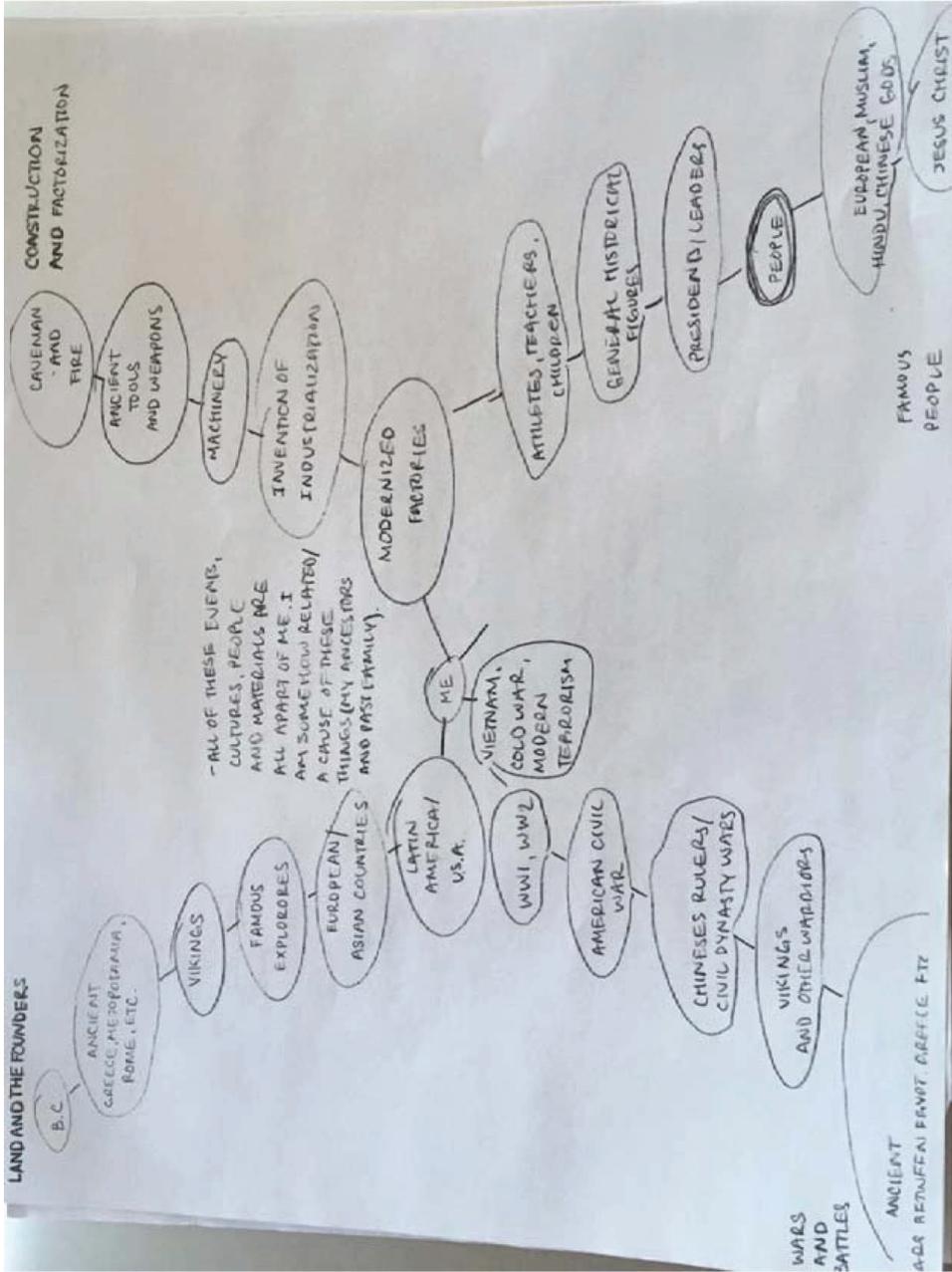
Figure 1: Melvin's diagram

Figure 2: Stuart's diagram

Stuart: Situating his own life at the confluence of various historical narratives; tethering his own story to the history of humanity

Stuart was a boy of Italian American extraction, with spiked hair, whose family has lived in the same semi-urban neighbourhood of Greater Boston for several generations. He joked around with his peers in class but became strikingly serious in the context of the interview, speaking in a heartfelt way about his family and his pride in being American. He also stated that history was his favourite subject.

Stuart's diagram was wide-ranging in terms of both theme and time span. He picked the following themes: 'wars and battles', which led up to or at least preceded 'modern terrorism'; 'famous people', with Jesus Christ the only named person; 'construction and factorization' [sic], which traces broad technological developments in human history; and 'land and the founders', which broadly relates to the discovery and/or establishment of different empires or nation states. The general chronological element to the threads suggests narratives unfolding over time, an impression reinforced by a comment made by Stuart in his interview:

> Interviewer: Obviously I've asked you to do this, but have you thought about this big picture before? Or was it just—
>
> Stuart: I actually have. I was just like sitting at home and just like thinking like why did everything start and like how it actually pushed itself into each other and it developed into everything and then I came along and I felt like I was a part of it, even though I wasn't like physically a part of it. Like I thought I was involved because of all this happening.

His metaphoric language, which conveys a sense of historical events sliding or piling into one another, draws attention to his being immersed in some bigger story concerning the whole of human history.

In his diagram Stuart situates his life at the confluence of different narrative strands unfolding in history; he also tethers his personal story to that of humankind writ large. That is, in being asked to show how his own life connects to the past, he elects to tell a broader story of humanity. If we compare Stuart's diagram to that of Melvin, it is less of an exploration of his individual story and more an expression about belonging to a collective story.

Jess: Exploring how the past is helping shape the ongoing story of her own personal development; situating her own life at the confluence of various historical narratives

Jess was a girl with long brown hair, an accomplished gymnast and dancer. She spoke of her Jewish ancestry and her family's involvement in the LGBT movement, as well as her close attachment to her local urban community, where she has lived her whole life. She articulated her words carefully, often pausing as if to reflect before responding to questions.

At first glance, Jess's diagram does not exhibit the kind of flow visible in the previous two diagrams. However, there is a swirling dynamic at play, made evident by her verbal explanation of her diagram:

> So, at the very centre of my diagram I have just a little kind of bubble that says 'me'. And I made it a bubble because I think I'm not all that sort of well defined but it's all sort of just mush and things just kind of flow in and influence me. So I have sort of a circle around myself and I have a bunch of different sorts of movements and events in history that I think have most influenced me such as the environmental movements and environmental degradation. The civil rights movements, the GLBT movements, women's rights movements, Jewish history, Jewish movements and wars are sort of the main *events* that influenced me and then in more of an inner circle I have more broad

topics such as education, technology, dancing and music that have – they all have their own sort of history and they all have a past that I don't necessarily know as much about in a concrete way but um – all of those things influence me so they're all flowing into the centre. That's where I am.
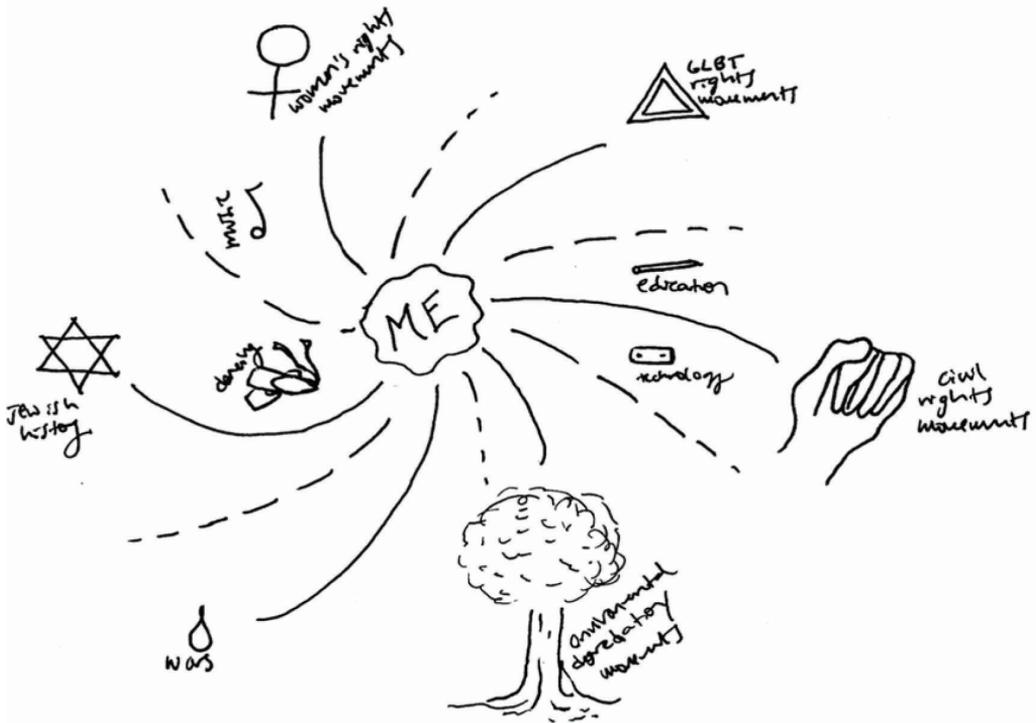

Figure 3: Jess's diagram

In this case her ongoing personal development arguably provides the narrative centrepiece or unifying factor. The diagram also serves as an assertion of her emerging identity – in terms of events that have influenced her values and sense of who she is, as well as her personal talents and interests. As became evident in her interview, however, she also situates herself as being at the confluence of different historical narratives. For example, she talks about being at a certain moment in the history of the environment, which has been shaped by previous generations' actions: 'my generation, we're going to be really, really dealing with that'. She talks about being shaped by and inheriting the legacy of the women's rights movement, civil rights movement and Jewish history. With regard to the gay rights movement, in which her family has been immersed, she has a sense of being part of history in the making: 'the movement is *now*. You know there's been movements in the past certainly but it's like a *huge* thing now.'

How students talked about their diagrams: The importance of epistemology

The ways in which students in the study talked about their diagrams were revealing of the potential relationship between their understanding of the nature of historical knowledge and their individual historical consciousness. In particular, there was a contrast between students

who presented their diagrams as contingent, subjective interpretations of the relationship between their own lives and the past, and those who appeared to present their diagrams as self-evident, straightforward representations.

Jess, for instance, talked from the start about not being 'all that well defined' as reflected by the blob at the centre of her diagram. There is a sense of fluidity or movement in her diagram – as much in terms of her own interpretation of her own place in history as in events or developments themselves. Showing an awareness of the limitations of her own knowledge, she states that she did not want to exclude items from her diagram simply because of her own ignorance.

Moreover, in talking about the different elements of her diagram she spoke in metacognitive terms about the differences between learning about Jewish history at the temple, where it was framed as 'our history', and at school, where it was treated as someone else's history. With regard to the women's rights movement she said:

> So women's rights' movements – umm – my mom was a pretty hardcore feminist and I've definitely inherited some of that and I've really enjoyed, mostly this year actually – I learned about women's rights in US History and that's been really interesting, sort of how that's played out. And probably because of my mother and other adults and other women that I've grown up with I'm like – very conscious of that, that I am a woman and that other women have done a lot to get to where I am today. And there's definitely a sense of pride for me. I have always been very sort of conscious of that heritage.

Here, Jess presents the impact of the movement as somewhat inevitable given her mother's values. However, she also refers explicitly to her enjoyment and interest in learning about this topic at school. She expresses her sense of connection to women's history and her active pride in it while also providing an explanation for *why* she feels connected to it, showing a capacity for self-reflection or metacognition. It is worth noting, however, that she did not comment on the progressive template that seemed to undergird her narrative.

Stuart, in contrast, presented his diagram in more fixed terms. When invited to talk about it, he proceeded to list everything contained within it:

> Well, first of all I put the land and the founders because these are the basic groups and people that started everything. The people who started Mesopotamia, Ancient Thebes, you know like that. People who were in the Roman Empire, all those Vikings, the famous explorers, Christopher Columbus, Magellan, et cetera …

In this extract he is citing undisputed 'facts': he does not use modifying language but instead states straightforwardly what happened. When asked how he knew about these aspects of the past, he responded, 'Most of the stuff came from school. I was just trying to think what happened.' Stuart expressed a great deal of connection to the past, including, as mentioned earlier, that he felt part of an ongoing historical process. While Jess spoke with pride yet analytic detachment of her connection to the women's movement, Stuart did not exhibit the capacity to talk in a metacognitive way about the content or form of his diagram – although this does not mean that he was incapable of doing so.

In his interview, Stuart also talked about learning from his grandmother about the past, including life lessons she gleaned from weathering the Great Depression. He referred to her corroborating what he learned at school:

> And it's cool because [my teacher] can teach me about it at the same time and then she can just tell me about the stuff. It's really cool … I like ask her 'Do you remember this?' … 'Do you remember bootlegging, and stuff like that?' And she was like 'yea, I remember that' which is cool because you actually know what happened. You can just talk to her about it.

It is notable that he does not talk about hearing his grandmother's *perspective* about what happened; rather, he views her as an authority on history, presumably because he thinks she directly experienced what is in his textbook.

Melvin's stance toward his diagram was more tentative, in no small part because he actually produced two diagrams: the first version was a brainstorm of influences on his life, which he thought conveyed an even spread of influences on his life. However, in the second version (featured in this paper) 'I tried to make it in chronological order so to speak. Like, what was inherited, then things that affected me later on.' Further, he spoke repeatedly about his particular life experiences affecting his perspective on the world and on the past:

> You know I wasn't brought up in the same type of environment that [my parents] were. I was brought up in America, in Massachusetts at that. And I thought that was something that really affects you and it affects how you look at like the international political system and whatnot … I think because my parents *are* from overseas it definitely helps me look at things on a larger scale. But, I do definitely think in comparison to them I look at things from an American perspective.

At the same time, he assumes some commonality with other people, such as people from his generation who are growing up in a digital environment. In Melvin's case his overarching narrative is *about* the way in which his outlook and life prospects have been affected by the past and external forces; however, he is also able to 'step outside' that narrative to reflect on the ways in which his approach to the task has been influenced by those very life experiences and family influences. Like Stuart, he is close to his grandmother. However, when he refers to talking with her about the past and her life in Trinidad, his comment is about her perspective: 'the obstacles of your past definitely affect your point of view'. In turn, he talks about her influence on him: 'I think the stories that you're told definitely affect the way you think.'

Other students made comments that indicated a relationship between their awareness of the constructed nature of historical knowledge and the ways in which they viewed their own relationship to the past. They (1) acknowledged their own subjectivity and/or the limitations of their perspective on their relationship to the past, (2) presented their diagrams and explanations as tentative and subject to alteration, and/or (3) stepped outside themselves to reflect on their reactions to learning about history. In fact, while Jess was the only student who made comments that covered all three of these categories, few students appeared to take the more straightforward view of historical knowledge apparently evinced by Stuart. The fact that students in the sample were academically successful, aged 16–18 and living in a city with a highly educated workforce and major academic institutions probably needs to be taken into account with regard to this finding.

It is also worth reiterating that the researcher was not a proverbial fly on the wall while collecting this data. For example, Stuart presented himself as a good student who liked history and respected his elders; just prior to the interview there was a drugs bust at the school by police and it is possible he wanted to convey that he was a 'decent kid'. Melvin discussed his relative good fortune compared with other young black men (including, implicitly, others at his school); in so doing he was able to communicate that he was from a highly educated family living in a desirable part of town. Jess, meanwhile, positioned herself as a thoughtful, politically informed student. While these impressions are purely speculative, they suggest that the school context and the perceived identity of the researcher – as well as the framing of the activity – helped to shape what students chose to share. However, recognizing that there is likely to be some fluidity in terms of how individuals relate their own lives to the past does not diminish the finding that the young people in this study used a variety of narrative strategies to do so or that the ways in which they talked about those strategies appeared to differ according to their epistemological understandings.

Implications

In conjunction with the overall summary shown in Table 2, these three cases provide snapshots of different ways in which young people used narrative strategies to connect their own lives to the past, as well as differences in the ways in which they talked about those strategies. While this study is highly exploratory, these cases point to the apparent diversity of ways in which young people think about themselves in relation to the past, as well as the significance of epistemological understanding in the construction of individual historical consciousness. Of course, many questions remain. For example, was the ability of Jess and Melvin to talk reflectively about their diagrams and their relationship to the past an indication of rigorous historical understanding in a disciplinary sense, or of more generic critical or abstract thinking skills? Further, how do teens' broad developmental trajectories – such as those outlined by Erikson (1968) – intersect with their historical understanding? It would be interesting to ask children of different ages to complete the diagram task. Younger students would presumably find it challenging to create a narrative about their own lives *in toto*, as indeed some of the students in this study may have done. Examining the potential links between the development of autobiographical story-telling skills and how young people relate their own lives to the past could be another productive line of research.

Methodologically, the study opens up some interesting possibilities, especially as the diagram activity invited students to synthesize their thinking about their personal connections to the past in a relatively open-ended manner. The task instructions and/or analysis could be altered to investigate related phenomena. For example, how, if at all, do students deal with the idea that as people they are evolving and may have a shifting relationship to or perspective on the past? To what extent do they portray themselves as active agents in their own right rather than individuals subject to forces beyond their control? How do differences among their various 'meta-historical' understandings, such as their working ideas about historical causality, relate to how they talk about themselves in relation to the past? How would they position themselves relative to perceived national narratives? While it is impossible to prove a direct relationship from this single study – or the reasons behind such a relationship – students who displayed an understanding of the constructed nature of historical knowledge also gave the impression of being more empowered in terms of talking about their future and navigating their own emerging identities.

With regard to practice, the range of personal diagrams produced by students confirms that if teachers are looking to build on their students' existing ideas and understandings, a 'one size fits all' approach is likely to be misguided and non-inclusive, and that national narratives are only one kind of narrative to which young people feel connected. This paper does not advocate that young people be invited to relate everything they learn in history to themselves. However, offering open-ended and potentially creative opportunities for them to reflect on the connections they perceive between themselves and the past is likely to be engaging, particularly for older teens given their broader developmental need to establish independent identities.

Furthermore, such opportunities can actively build historical understanding. Given the sheer variety of diagrams that will almost certainly be produced within a single classroom, students can learn a great deal by looking at and discussing the diagrams of their peers in ways that develop their understanding that people have different perspectives on the past, and that these perspectives are shaped at least in part by biographical or other contextual factors. Looking at others' diagrams can open up different possibilities for young people in terms of how they think about their own relationship to the past and give them a new perspective on their own identity and outlook. Indeed, the power of this approach can be further enhanced if classrooms are digitally connected to classrooms in other countries engaging in the same activity, in part because it allows prevailing and assumed national narratives to become visible.

While some people would certainly resist the notion of letting young people use school history as a venue for exploring or interpreting their own lives, identities and values, this research sheds light on some of the varied ways in which young people relate their own lives to the past or use it for orienting purposes. As Jess in particular demonstrated, a sophisticated understanding of the nature of historical knowledge can go hand in hand with a self-awareness and even pride in one's relationship to the past. We arguably owe it to our students to help them think about who they are and the lives they are living or want to live in our rapidly changing and ever more complex world. We need to support them to interpret the past and to develop robust historical understandings; we also need to support them to interpret their own narratives.

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Notes on the contributor

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