



Inheriting the past: Exploring historical consciousness across generations

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ABSTRACT: Despite significant research into the meaning and operation of historical consciousness, there is still much to be understood about its hereditary function. For example, what does historical inheritance look like? How does it influence our individual and collective historical consciousnesses? And, just as critically, what happens to historical consciousness when history is deliberately withheld, when that inheritance is suspended or severed? As a way into some of these questions about *passing on* the past, this paper draws on a qualitative research project into historical consciousness in Australia to explore how so-called ‘ordinary people’ see themselves as part of a historical narrative. It reveals that historical inheritance is critical to our historical consciousness, and it notes the profound impact of forgetting on participants, raising important questions about the role of ‘silence’ and ‘absence’ in the formation of historical consciousness.

KEYWORDS: Historical Consciousness; Historical Inheritance; Inter-Generational.

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been significant research into history’s meaning and place in contemporary society: memory studies reveal the myriad ways we connect with, commemorate and contest the past (Ashton & Keane, 2009; Hamilton, 2008; Spillman, 2003; Wertsch, 2002; Olick, 2003; Samuel, 1994; Lowenthal, 1997; Halbwachs, 1992); historians unpack heated debates over national pasts as they play out in museums, history syllabuses and official remembrance (Berger, 2007; Macintyre & Clark, 2003; Nash, Crabtree & Dunn, 1997; Olick, 2003; Linenthal & Engelhardt 1996); and educationists explore the practice of how we learn history in a disciplinary sense, how we come to ‘think historically’ (Stearns, Seixas & Wineburg, 2000; Wineburg 2001; Sandwell, 2006; Taylor, 2003).

At the same, increasing attention has been given to the *process* of historical connection itself: what does the past mean to us? Why do we constantly draw on history in our present lives? Such questions go to the core of ‘historical consciousness’, a growing field of research situated at the intersection of those areas—of historical thinking, public history and memory studies—that analyses the presence (and pastness) of the past.

In the words of Jörn Rüsen (2012), a leading theorist of historical consciousness, the term can be best understood as “historical sense-generation” (pp. 45-47). This *making sense of* the past, he suggests, is ‘a mental procedure by which the past is interpreted for the sake of understanding the present and anticipating the future’. Rather than simply defining levels of attainment in historical literacy or understanding, Rüsen (1987) argues that historical consciousness covers ‘every form’ of thinking about the past, from ‘historical studies’ to the “use and function of history in private and public life” (p. 284). In other words, the questions

used to get students thinking about their relationship to the past in class are the same questions we implicitly consider day to day, as the Canadian history educationist Peter Seixas (2006a, p. 15) has considered: How should we judge the actions and values of people in the past? How did things get to be as they are today? And which stories about the past should be told and passed on to the next generation?

Thus historical consciousness includes not only humanity's capacity for critical historicism, but also its interest in the past: it is both learnt (through the disciplinary skills of history) and innate (in that we recollect) (Rüsen, 2005; Ahonen, 2012; Lee, 2002; Megill, 1994). More than simply helping us to understand how we connect to history, historical consciousness reveals history as fundamental to the ways we think about ourselves: turning 'what happened' into history is a unique and ubiquitous human activity.

Central to this process of day-to-day history making are the histories we are bequeathed and leave behind. Despite significant research into the meaning and operation of historical consciousness (eg. Seixas, 2006b; Straub, 2005), there is still much to be understood about its hereditary function. For example, what does historical inheritance look like? How does it influence our individual and collective historical consciousnesses? And, just as critically, what happens to historical consciousness when history is deliberately withheld, when that inheritance is suspended or severed?

Some scholarship does exist on the relationship between historical consciousness and inheritance — most notably, Sam Wineburg et al.'s exploration of intergenerational historical consciousness and school education (Wineburg, Mosborg, Porat, & Duncan, 2007) — yet there is still much to be understood about the ways historical inheritance and occlusion shape both historical engagement *and* what oral historians describe as our 'composure' (the ways we construct narratives of ourselves) (Summerfield, 2004; Abrams, 2014).

As a way into some of these questions about *passing on* the past, this paper draws on a qualitative research project into historical consciousness in Australia. The project uses interviews with one hundred people from five communities around the country to examine: (1) the ways we connect to past, and why; (2) how people engage with public and official accounts of the past, popular histories, community and family histories, as well as contested narratives; and (3)—as this paper explores—how people see themselves in the process of historical inheritance.

Broadly speaking, the research confirms understandings of historical consciousness as a process that is ultimately fluid and shifting constantly during our lives, rather than representing any specific level of attainment. And participants explained how life events such as birth and death were catalysts for historical engagement that marked their own life stories. In particular, my paper uses this qualitative research to explore how so-called 'ordinary people' see themselves as constructed by, and constructing, a historical narrative—and in turn it reveals that historical inheritance is critical to our historical consciousness. The paper also notes the profound impact of forgetting on participants, which raises important questions about the role of 'silence' and 'absence' in the formation of historical consciousness.

The Whose Australia? project

"We all make histories endlessly", the Australian historian Greg Denning once mused. "It is our human condition to make histories" (Denning, 1996, p. 35). That constant presence of the past as an effect of our humanity also captivated Paul Ricoeur, who wrote about our 'historicity'—the "fundamental and radical fact that we make history, that we are immersed in history, that we are historical beings" (as cited in Hamilton, 2003, p. 81).

The effects of our historicity have been explored by a number of scholars in recent years, several of whom have noted warily that an increasing popular interest in the past has come at the expense of more critical historical engagement (Tosh, 2008; Lowenthal, 1998; Nora, 1996-98). As John Tosh (2008) has argued, “We are confronted by the paradox of a society which is immersed in the past yet detached from its history” (pp. 6-7). Thinking ‘*about* history’ and ‘thinking *with* history’ must not be conflated, he continued. To be sure, that distinction Tosh champions between the popular ‘past’ and more rigorous ‘History’ (with a capital H) has been widely noted in memory studies and public history (Jensen, 2009; Hamilton, 2003; Lowenthal 1997).

Others question if such an opposition is the best way to describe the overwhelming presence of the past. In a recent Canadian study involving interviews with nearly three and a half thousand people, researchers cast doubt on whether popular historical interest necessarily came at the expense of critical historical thinking: ‘We acknowledge that many Canadians may be alienated from formal history, but we did not begin with this assumption ... [and] our respondents, it seems, were as at home with “history” as they were with “the past”’ (Conrad, Ercikan, Friesen, Létourneau, Mulse, Northrup, & Seixas, 2013, pp. 8-9).

This *Canadian and Their Pasts* project built on two large qualitative studies from the US and Australia, which similarly explored the ways people engaged with history. Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen’s (1998) influential American study noted a wealth of ‘popular history making’ in the United States, in addition to more established academic and official historical productions. Similarly, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton’s (2010) *Australians and the Past* project interviewed hundreds of Australians and noted a widespread contemplation of what they neatly termed “past-mindedness” (p. 10).

Such research also confirmed ordinary people’s distinct lack of engagement with more formal national narratives, which they considered to be much more prescribed and remote. Participants in all three studies often found it difficult to engage directly with the national history they learnt at school, for example, confirming the public anxiety about historical knowledge being in a state of perpetual ‘crisis’ across all three jurisdictions (Sears & Hyslop-Margison, 2007; Clark, 2003, 2008; Nash et al., 1997; Symcox 2002; Morton, 2000, 2006). Meanwhile, their own stories and experiences generated very strong connections with the past, revealing how the intimate past is the one that matters most: respondents kept objects to pass on to their own children or grandchildren, participated in family reunions, compiled genealogies, visited museums, heritage trails and historical societies; they talked about the past with their friends and families; and they avidly consumed history—in the form of historical fiction, documentaries and popular history books.

The project this paper is based on, titled *Whose Australia? Popular Understandings of the Past*, has been strongly influenced by these large, pioneering studies. Like them, it seeks to shed light on historical consciousness by examining the ways people engage with the past throughout their lives. But it does so by asking participants to reflect on how they locate their own historical sensibilities in the context of wider public and academic debates over the past. And for that reason, the research employs a new method that could best be described as ‘oral historiography’ to examine popular engagement with Australian history. This approach uses techniques of oral history, focus group work and qualitative analysis to examine how history is understood in the community.¹ Unlike a number of prominent research surveys, the *Whose Australia?* project does not measure levels of factual historical knowledge (Civics Expert Group, 1994; Print 1995; Ministerial Council, 2006). Nor does it focus on Australians’ popular history making (such as their interest in genealogies, membership of historical societies, and historical consumption) (Crozier, 1994; Kyle, 1994; Sear, 2013). Instead, this

oral historiography seeks to uncover how people negotiate family and community histories as well as national narratives, and why.

By people, I mean ‘ordinary people’, Australians from all walks of life: those who may read the newspaper, but equally may not; those interested in history, and those who have been turned off the subject since school; the unemployed, retirees, young people, migrants, Indigenous Australians and small business owners. All are relevant. Their quotidian historical discourses provide the primary source material for this research.

Admittedly, there is nothing ‘ordinary’ about a researcher inviting themselves into a community group to ask questions about the past. But the voices this project captures are indeed everyday—and they shed considerable light on how people around the country see themselves as historical beings. I use the term ‘ordinary’ advisedly, however. For one thing, it is difficult to distinguish such an emblematic word from the public discourse it inhabits. Politicians and public commentators notoriously draw on the imagery of ‘ordinary’ people for political traction, conjuring and controlling everyday collective images such as ‘the mainstream’ and ‘working families’ as a way of enhancing their political legitimacy (Brett, 2005; Phillips & Smith, 2000).

Despite the political valency of ‘ordinariness’, however, this paper persists with the image of ‘ordinary Australians’ because that is how many people see and describe themselves (Hirst, 2002). This participative research has been particularly influenced by Judith Brett and Anthony Moran’s excellent long-term qualitative study, *Ordinary People’s Politics* (2006), which traced the political beliefs and engagement of several Australians over many years. In this sense, the research attempts to produce what historians Jean Burgess, Helen Klæbe and Kelly McWilliam (2010) have called “participatory public history” (p. 152)—giving voice those ‘ordinary’ or ‘vernacular’ historical conversations. The participants in the study are neither professional historians, politicians nor public commentators, but they do have opinions about public contests over Australian history that warrant acknowledgement and examination.

Despite the constant co-option of ‘ordinary people’ into public discourse, there is still much to be learnt about how they engage with the nation and how they articulate their own historical consciousness in the context of powerful public historical narratives. As the American history educationist, Sam Wineburg (2001), has noted, there have been “few attempts to track how the processes of historical memory play out in the lives of ordinary people: how it is that the proverbial person-on-the-street embodies (or doesn’t) the broad social processes posited by theorists of collective memory” (p. 249). Rûsen himself (2005) is insistent on examining the significance of what he describes as the “most profane procedures of memory” (p. viii). And the Finnish scholar Sirkka Ahonen (2012) has similarly defined the “vernacular level of social memory” as a critical element of historical consciousness (p. 13).

In response, this research aims to populate public and political discussions about national history with the voices of ordinary people from around the country. Five communities were chosen to conduct this qualitative study using a purposive sampling method as a way to generate a breadth of socio-economic, cultural and geographic background among participants (Phillips & Smith, 2000, pp. 206-207): Marrickville (a municipality and suburb in inner Sydney), Chatswood (a community in Sydney’s affluent north shore), Brimbank (a multicultural and working class community in outer western Melbourne), Rockhampton (a large rural town in Central Queensland), and Derby (a remote town with a large Indigenous population in far North-western Australia). Both individuals and focus groups have been interviewed for the project, and were approached through community organisations such as seniors’ centres and sporting clubs, education institutions such as universities and TAFEs, as well as migrant resource centres, youth groups and so on. In total, I have spoken with 100 people individually and in groups in the five communities.² Aged from their teens to their

nineties, these diverse participants from very different backgrounds reveal the many complex and varied ways that people connect to the past.

Historical generations

In the *Canadians and Their Pasts* study, researchers found that 75% of respondents had an heirloom they wished to pass on the next generation (Conrad et al., 2013). The American and Australian research it was based on had also found similar evidence of overwhelming desires among participants to inherit and pass on objects from the past (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998; Ashton & Hamilton, 2010). Others have noted the importance of family stories and personal narratives as critical components of our historical legacies (Allen, 1992). Drawing on sociologist Erik Erikson's term of 'generativity', Anna Green (2013) also senses the importance of the passing on family stories not simply to our own historical sensibilities, but to the development and care of the next generation.

But when are these intergenerational historical connections forged? Perversely, perhaps, death is a common *moment* for people to begin asking those historical questions of themselves and their families. Again and again in their interviews for the *Whose Australia?* project, participants regretfully described a sense of sadness in their connections to the past: if only they had brought out the tape recorder earlier; if only they had asked their parents about that family heirloom; if only the story had been written down or told sooner. It was a sad irony, said Richard from Chatswood, that 'you don't want to find this information out until you're older, and it's too bloody late! Gone!'

For Vicki in Marrickville, her father's death had created a constant historical vacuum that she wanted to fill: 'My father died when I was 12, and as you get older, and get married and have your own children, you don't get that dialogue that you do with that part of the family', she said. 'So I suppose that was my first, um, I wanted to know more, I wanted to know more about his side of the family.' Following his father's recent death, Don from Chatswood had compiled his memoirs, which he then circulated around the family. 'I'd never thought of it as history, particularly, when I was younger', he explained. 'Only later. You think of it particularly after your parents have died, I think.'

Indeed, the physical loss of a loved one was often described in the interviews as a profound loss of *memory* and *history*. Wendy, a volunteer English teacher at a migrant resource centre in Chatswood, talked about her mother's death in those terms precisely: 'You know, she had recipes, she had everything. She was like a walking encyclopedia of *our* life and the way *we*, our family, did things. And that was just shut down instantly.' That sense of grasping at a past which had simply *gone* was a common experience for many of those I spoke with.

Others described the feeling as a collective loss among their community more broadly. For a group of Indigenous teachers in Derby, the experience of death as a historical erosion was an issue the community as a whole needed to address: 'When you start losing the old ones, your history disappears', said Janie. And in a place where history and narrative is explicitly custodial, the death of a story keeper (sometimes known as the 'right one' or 'boss' of a story) has profound consequences for the maintenance of language and culture. 'Yep. It's just orally spoken, you know', added Alison, another teacher. 'And these days, the old people are starting to lose their memories and stuff.'

So the scramble to reassemble family stories following loss, as well as the urge to pass on history as our own ends become imminent, are clearly responses to the historical rupturing that comes with death and dying. Jenny, an Indigenous elder from Derby, had not been interested in history when she was young: 'it was just school, education, work, friends—that was it. As I get older now, I'm realising that I have to do all this stuff while I can, you know,

so it can benefit our grandchildren and great-grandchildren in this family.’ That motivation to connect to the past was frequently linked with death—sometimes with a healthy dose of self-deprecation: ‘As you see that end date, you think, “Maybe I’d like just something left behind!”’ quipped Peter from Chatswood.

Just as the disruption of death drew many closer to their family histories, birth was an equally powerful impetus to look back. And in many of the interviews, it was these life events—the birth of a child, or the death of a parent or grandparent—that sparked a strong historical engagement among respondents. Some, like Kyleen, a university student in Brimbank, wanted to mark the historical moment by taking a lock of hair or casting prints of their newborn. And the proliferation of some industries that exist solely to capture those historical ‘moments’ confirms the constant urge people have to mark them in their lives (De Groot, 2009). For others like Dany, a member of a Chatswood synagogue, the birth of a child was a catalyst for historical connection itself. Dany hadn’t been ‘very interested’ in family history, but after her daughter’s birth she became very connected: ‘I suddenly realised that I knew *nothing* about my family ... I really, really wanted to find out stuff so that I could tell my kids, and particularly my grandchildren. And I’m really glad I did now, because now I know.’

These ‘moments’ of historical connection are critical to this paper for the way they point to the hereditary function of historical consciousness. Again and again in their interviews, participants described how they became interested in history during these explicitly intergenerational life events. Events of birth and death were not only life events in people’s personal narratives, but became prompts for them to place themselves in a longer, intergenerational historical narrative. Such moments frequently prompted questions for participants about what they wanted to inherit from the past, as well as what they wanted to pass on. In other words, their historical sensibilities were touched explicitly by questions of historical inheritance.

As people get older, moreover, they gain the language to give their narratives more meaning (Bruner, 2005; Polkingorne 2005). And in turn, those narratives become even more critical to their sense of self, which perhaps explains how research subjects increasingly turned to the past as a way of understanding our own narratives during the course of their lives (Wertsch, 2004). Participants essentially saw themselves as characters in a long and complex story. The stories themselves varied greatly, of course, as the precise location and details changed with each interviewee. But the actual *use* of established storylines—noting the struggles and joys of childhood, migration, work and family-life—across the generations was a recurring, if not universal, mode of explaining their histories (see, for example: Allen 1992).

Indeed, many participants described a sort of growing *historical recognition* they experienced as they got older. They developed a historical consciousness that increasingly framed their life experiences in a narrative that was related both to older generations and those coming. ‘I think as you get older you maybe appreciate history a lot more’, Malcolm from Chatswood commented. ‘Yes, you’re sort of becoming more a part of it yourself!’, agreed Don. ‘That’s true’, added Malcolm. ‘You have time to appreciate it too.’ For Anita in Chatswood, it was the cultural vacuum of migrating to Australia from the UK that had confirmed her need for history. ‘It’s becoming more and more important’, she acknowledged. ‘I think once I got to my early forties then history became important. And when I moved to Australia, yeah, I was forty, forty-one when I got here, and I didn’t have any family here. I had two friends—that was it. And I *crave* history.’

Even younger respondents described this process of a developing historical consciousness as they became adults. ‘I didn’t have a lot of interest, you know. As you’re growing up when you’re younger, you don’t care [about history]’, said Manisha in her focus group at a

university in Brimbank. ‘But as I’ve gotten older I think I’ve taken more of an interest in the culture and history.’ Silvie also sensed that that she had ‘become quite inquisitive’ as she’d grown older. And her classmate Kyleen felt the same: ‘it hasn’t been till I’ve gotten older that I’ve been more interested in it, because when you’re children it’s like “*whatever*”.

Reading their comments, it is possible to discern ‘historical consciousness’ as a process by which we connect our own narrative to a larger story and develop that state of “pastmindedness” articulated by Ashton and Hamilton (2010, p.10). Indeed, narrative psychologists read this *act* of everyday narrative construction an ongoing linguistic and developmental process. Emphasising the “importance of story-making for human understanding and action”, scholars such as Donald Polkinghorne (2005, p.4) explain the significance of storytelling in human life as a predisposition that is confirmed and continuously reinforced by a complex cultural emphasis on narrative in human societies (see also: Bruner 2005; Wertsch, 2005). In other words, we understand ourselves by the stories we tell—hence our enduring affair with history. As we get older, moreover, we gain the language to give our narratives more meaning. And in turn those narratives become even more critical to our sense of self, which might explain why participants described increasingly turning to the past as a way of understanding their own narratives during the course of their lives (Wertsch, 2004).

Passing on the past

Understanding this ‘archetypal disposition’ of our family storylines reveals the ways we make history day to day—as Jerome Bruner (2005) notes, “we impose coherence” on the past, we “make it into history” (p. 37). So this urge to ‘make stories’ is an innate part of our historical consciousness. And the fact that participants sustain these storylines across generations reveals not only the process of their historical consciousness but its importance in their lives. It is clear from these interviews that the *meaning* respondents gain from inheriting and bequeathing their family histories is a sense of themselves as part of a historical narrative. And the sheer volume of family history guides and narratives (which are often self-published) demonstrates the immense scale of this historical inheritance (Kyle, 1994).

But why? Why the need to ‘pass on’ the past? In their influential research into the presence of the past in American life, Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen looked at inheritance as a ‘quest for immortality’—a desire to be remembered by future generations. In the hundreds of interviews they undertook they noticed a recurring theme, particularly among older participants, who “burned with the wish to pass on everything” (Rosenzweig & Thelen 1998, p. 80).

This is true, but not quite the whole picture: for this research reveals historical inheritance as a quest for identity and belonging, rather than simply a desire for eternal life. There is strong evidence that participants *want* to inherit things from the past, be they stories, objects, or even values. After all, the act of passing on is also an act of reception: respondents in the *Whose Australia?* project hope to be remembered by creating and maintaining traditions, bestowing objects and ensuring their stories would be heard. Yet that historical legacy also needs to be seen in a generational sense, where those very same participants also want to know *more* about the past. They are hungry for history just as they desire to pass it on to their descendants.

As Neville, from a Men’s Shed in Sydney’s Chatswood described in relation to his own family:

Now I’m trying to find things to create the family history. I’ve got step-children, and I gave my great-grandfather’s silver pocket-watch to one of my step-sons when he was married. And now

I'm passing on the family bible, what I'm calling the family bible, to my son. So I actually think I'm trying to create the family history that hasn't been there before, because things that belonged to my grandfather, whom I was very close to, went to his oldest grandson, which was not me. So his memorabilia I didn't get to keep, so I'm kind of constructing that before I die, so the next generation is the keeper of the keepsakes.

At the Rockhampton Historical Society, Fay had inherited a number of objects from the past that she wanted to pass on when she died:

Um, Dad's hat, from the '60s, you know, every man wore a—Oh, a countryman—wore a hat to town. You know, you come to town once a week, you wore a hat. So I've kept Dad's hat. My mother's embroidery, my grandmother's embroidery, and my aunt's embroidery. They're just a few, there's lots of others, but just those sorts of things.

Fay's friend Margaret from the History Society had kept the 'doily holder bought at Jenolan Caves on my mother's honeymoon in 1931'. Meanwhile her daughter was 'anxious to keep my grandfather's watch'. Meanwhile, for two Indigenous participants, it was language, culture and place that needed passing on, rather than things: Jenny from Derby, was in the process of organising a 'return to country' to her family's traditional lands. 'I realise now with my grandchildren I've got a lot of work to do with teaching them what I know', said Jenny.

Older Australians aren't the only ones forging connections between generations. Sylvie, a Greek Australian university student from St Albans was collecting Greek recipes from her family: 'I'm basically getting all the recipes from my mum, and what she's gotten from her mum and her mum', she said. 'I'm actually making this now, just from knowledge, and I know my sisters want to do the same thing.' For many participants from migrant backgrounds, that question of cultural inheritance was particularly strong, and a number of them spoke about the need to pass on language and traditions as a way of maintaining their cultural heritage with family back 'home'.

So that question of inheritance is ultimately a dynamic one, reaching across generations in both directions, rather than simply an act of bestowal. 'Inheritance' refers not only to what we pass on, but what we take on from the past, how we see *ourselves*. It is as is as complex and conflicted as we are, as Anna Green (2013) has suggested, creating "a thoughtful dialogue between generations" (p. 397). It is not surprising, then, that we tend to get more interested in the past as we get older and life events—those familiar 'chapters' of birth, death, work and marriage—become part of our own lives.

Histories left behind

Critically, however, that idea of 'inheritance' has its corollary in forgetting (Connerton, 2008). More than mere absent-mindedness, forgetting in this sense is understood as an *act*—the fact that some histories are passed on, while others are deliberately withheld (See, for example: Ricoeur, 2004; Buruma, 1995; Hein, 2000; Healy, 1997; Veracini, 2007; Wolfe, 2005). As the historian and writer Anna Haebich contends (2011) "Forgetting and ignorance are never benign conditions: they do things" (p. 1035).

In highly repressive societies such as Soviet Russia, for example, the constant editing and erasure of official national histories resulted in people's censorship of their most intimate family memories and cultural identities (Wertsch, 2002; Fitzpatrick, 1999). These personal historical "purges" or "memory gaps", as Veronika Duprat-Kushtanina (2013, pp. 227-232) calls them, were a means of surviving the system by distancing oneself from the past. Yet they came at a cost. During her research, Duprat-Kushtanina "discovered blanks in the history of many families ... Some events, people, or even periods have been completely erased from the family stories passed down to them" (p. 226).

Closer to home, the historian Henry Reynolds (1998) wondered why Australians had also been kept from the truth of their nation's Indigenous history. 'Why didn't we know? Why were we never told?' he famously asked. 'How did Australia itself forget the truth about pioneering around the vast frontiers?' Reynolds' intervention marked major shift in Australian history, where that 'great Australian silence' regarding Indigenous history had become indisputably and irrevocably challenged (and where Indigenous memory was finally upheld as more than a mere counter narrative) (Nugent, 2003; Stanner, 1968).

In a number of my interviews, there was also a distinct awareness among participants of history's potential for both continuity and discontinuity through the generations. Dorothy from the Rockhampton CWA described it in those terms precisely: 'Yes. I mean, you go back through it and some people say you've got skeletons in the closet. But that's life!' What's more, for many participants, those ellipses were as influential in shaping their historical consciousness as remembrance itself: their identities and their relationships to the past had actually been *formed* by the experience of silence. As this group of youth workers in Brimbank explained, narrative omissions were key to the way they sketched out and understood their family histories:

Matthew: Yeah, well towards the end my mum got a bit intrigued, because when my grandma was sick she started saying all this stuff that during World War II we changed our last name and everything, but we don't know anyone in Poland to find that out—because my grandpa was a Russian Jew so he had to change his name because of that, supposedly.

Nastassia: I know it's the same in our family. Like there's little bits and pieces of stories but it's kind of too hard to track it back to what it actually is.

Mostly, the stories respondents described in their interviews had been forgotten for a reason—a sadness, perhaps, or a historical shame. And the idea of *protecting* future generations by withholding the past has been noted in studies of family history, such as Anna Green's UK research in which a number of her participants held back information "deemed less reputable" from their interviews (Green, 2013, p. 391). The German historian Harald Welzer (2008) related similar scenarios in his work into intergenerational histories in Germany, where information about relatives' roles in WWII was simply omitted or altered in the recollections of family members.

It is not simply perpetrators who need protection from the legacy of the past, however. For Dany, a member of a Chatswood Synagogue in Sydney, being victims of Nazism had kept her parents silent: 'Because of the Holocaust, their response was to just forget about the past and just try and settle in Australia and have a future. And for me, particularly, they wanted me not to suffer the way they suffered. So they protected me by telling me nothing.' Silvie from Brimbank explained how her grandparents had simply left their family heritage and history in Poland, along with their former lives, when they migrated to Australia. 'My parents didn't find out about their heritage so we've lost a lot of information', she said. 'There's a lot about my past that I just won't know, just because culturally it just wasn't discussed around the dinner table about, you know, where they're from and their heritage and so on.

But what is the effect of this silence? A growing body of research has explored the importance of history to our sense of self in relation to historical consciousness, but what about our historical *unconscious*? What is the impact of the histories we *don't* know? For some, like Jarrod in Rockhampton, that historical absence was rationalised as an inevitable and acceptable feature of our technological and ephemeral culture: 'I'm wondering how important history is going to be in the future, in the world we're going into', he wondered. Such comments are critical reminders that for many 'ordinary people', history does not figure a major part of their lives.

Nevertheless, others like Silvie experienced such historical “occlusion” (to use Wineburg et al.’s 2007, phrase, p.66) as a ‘sort of a sense of loss’, she explained. An understanding ‘that there is a big part of who I am [which is gone], and it’s a bit of a loss of identity’. That loss was even more pronounced among certain Indigenous participants, whose families had been victims of government policies of forced child removal throughout the twentieth century in Australia (Attwood 2005; Moses 2001, 2008; Haebich & Kinnane 2013).

These Stolen Generations represented a colossal intergenerational rupturing of not only families, but family *histories and narratives*, which some participants explored in their interviews. Tali, an Indigenous woman from Marrickville, unwittingly evoking Duprat-Kushtanina’s Soviet research, talked about a ‘gap’ in the way her extended family understood themselves because of the stolen generations:

family history is your cultural history, so it’s that gap that was created when they were taken away from their mothers into the hostels in Alice Springs, and how they have to go back and see if they can connect the two pieces together, and they say that it was really difficult. So their search for being Aboriginal, and defining themselves as Aboriginal within their family history, was sort of disconnected.

For Janie, an Indigenous student teacher in Derby, the stolen generations had the effect of removing her history.... ‘It’s very hard to find out information,’ she said, ‘because nothing is kept on Aboriginal children, or Aboriginal people. So if you’ve got a grandparent who was stolen or taken away, it’s very hard to find all the connections. And all you get are little bits and pieces from the departments, and stuff that’s kept at Battye library’ (the State Library of Western Australia). The experience of the stolen generations had created distinct disconnections from the past, where whole family stories and important kinship information had simply been lost. Furthermore, compounding the physical removal of Indigenous children, the historical records were located in Perth, almost two and a half thousand kilometres away.

Again, it is the voices of participants themselves that reveal important insights into the dimensions of historical consciousness. Today, the history of the Stolen Generations is far from silent—thanks in large part to the testimony of Indigenous people, as well as the work of researchers, community workers, teachers, and advocates (for example: Haebich, 2000; Manne, 2001; Read, 1999; Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).³ Yet the ‘memory gap’ that lingers on is much harder to define—and it is clear from these interviews that the effect of historical ‘forgetting’ figures powerfully in individuals’ historical consciousness.

Conclusion

There has been increasing research into the role of historical consciousness in the development of individual and collective identities, such that the term itself has become critical to the way we understand the role of history in public and private life around the world (eg. Rüsen 2012). Till now, however, the function of inheritance has not been widely considered. This study critically expands our understandings of historical consciousness by: (1) exploring the act of passing on the past as an ongoing and multivalent process (of bestowal and reception); and (2) proposing historical ‘unconsciousness’ as vital to the ways we conceptualise historical engagement.

As this paper has explored, the stories we are bequeathed and leave behind are critical to our historical sensibility. Participants frequently explained their historical engagement as a desire to understand themselves as part of a multigenerational narrative, and many also spoke about the stories and objects they had inherited and wanted to pass on in turn. Moreover, as this research reveals, forgetting is an equally powerful agent in the process of historical

consciousness, and those ‘memory gaps’ noted by participants are critical reminders of history’s capacity to define our sense of self. Indeed, it is in those silences that further research may be able to contemplate the dimensions of our historical consciousness with greater complexity.

Endnotes

1 I have found reference to ‘oral historiography’ only once in any widely cited work – by David Henige, in his survey of the varied practices of oral history: David Henige *Oral Historiography*, London: Longman 1982.

2 At their request, the names of some participants have been changed.

3 And the generosity of a number of Indigenous participants taking part in this project is no exception.

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