



The banal significance of family history research: Experiences and narratives from participants of Swedish non-formal family history courses

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ABSTRACT

Is family history research always life-changing and sensational? Or is there something significant in the banal that the participants in this study reported? This study aims to explore the spectrum of experiences of family history research, focusing specifically on the banal. I argue that it is in examining the banal everyday motivations, experiences, and findings that a greater understanding of how the average individual negotiates and builds meaning through their use of cultural heritage, family history, and the past. The everyday banal is what is reproduced and remains after the effervescence fades away and the normal redundancy in traditional society continues. The banal withstands the sands of time and effectively (re)produces narratives and binary tropes of identity and the past. This study examines the narratives collected from semi-structured interviews with seven participants from two Swedish non-formal courses in family history research. These narratives are important as they reveal participants' engagement with historical consciousness and the relationship between the past, present and future. Moreover, the stories they tell are significant in revealing that participants learn family history research for numerous reasons, including "something to do" alongside those who wish to have a deeper historical understanding. Family history research is a collective and collaborative activity despite the individualised nature of focusing on one's ancestors. Participants' research led to discoveries that were not always revolutionary, reinforcing, for example, banal traits seen in themselves and banal activities they carry out today. This study found that while the reasons for participation, the act of attending class, and participants' research may not necessarily result in the extraordinary—thieves or kings—for these individuals participating in family history research, the banal reasoning and banal results are significant.

KEYWORDS

Family history research, Banality, Narrative, Non-formal education, Historical consciousness

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Introduction

With millions participating across the globe in some form of family history research, one cannot help but wonder if the goal is to fill in a family tree or if there is something more. This study seeks to provide insight into the global phenomenon on a personal scale, examining participants' perspectives of Swedish non-formal courses. How do participants describe their experiences, motivations, learning, and the perceived significance of family history research?

Family historians, while not often professionally trained, are perceived as actively contributing meaningfully to the discipline of History through self-directed learning that motivates and encourages a greater appreciation for the past (Edquist, 2009; Shaw, 2021; Shaw & Donnelly, 2021a, 2021b). As a form of public pedagogy, family history research enables individuals to build contextualisation and develop their historical thinking, empathy, and consciousness (Shaw, 2021; Shaw & Donnelly, 2021a, 2021b). Public pedagogy views everyday informal spaces as inherently educational within the organised social relations of daily life, including popular culture and media (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010). Burdick and Sandlin (2013) identify three streams of public pedagogical research: 1) *transferring knowledge* for emancipation, 2) understanding the *phenomenological relationship* of learning as active and embodied, and 3) *posthumanist rupturing* of self. This research aligns with examining the lived experience and negotiations of individuals of family history research and positions itself in the second stream.

Individuals' frameworks of historical understanding emerge from previous experiences such as films, television, stories, traditions and earlier schooling (Seixas, 1997, p. 22). Attention to a macro-historical context can enhance observing adjacent micro-events and people (Páez et al., 2017). Furthermore, understanding individuals of the past's contributions constructs appreciation and comprehension for actions, attitudes and motivations that persist in present times. Therefore, it is essential not to neglect individuals' interpretations of what is significant. Awareness of one's framework of historical understanding is not always clear. According to Seixas, pedagogy is to expose what is often "partially submersed frameworks for orienting themselves in historical time," as attributed significance reflects historical interpretation and the meaning of history (Seixas, 1997, p. 22). The challenge with historical significance is that there is not one set of unquestionable facts or significant events (Hunt, 2000), but for each individual, culture, and group, there can be multiple that are contextually and temporally dynamic. Examining what individuals and groups deem significant draws awareness and greater comprehension of decision-making, the organisation of the physical and social world and why conflicts exist.

Comprehending the significance of individuals' evaluation of family history research necessitates an inquiry into motivations and contexts as contributing to their framework of historical understanding. Research in family history predominately finds motivations as the pursuit of identity and belonging (Bottero, 2015; Moore & Rosenthal, 2021; Nash, 2008). However, Shaw (2017) found that while her Australian participants incorporated identity, it was not explicitly sought; their findings were used to confirm their previously held conceptions. Shaw found that her participants provided many overlapping reasons for their participation,

categorising these as Prompted, Inherited, Curiosity, History Buffs, and Recreation. Likewise, in Sweden, Börnfors (2001) noted that family historians often connected their motivations to tangible (e.g., photographs) and intangible (e.g., stories) inheritances that led to a sense of belonging and cultural embeddedness (identity). This reflects the portrayal of family history as a move of interest from the traditional disciplinary focus of notable events and famous individuals (e.g., wars and royalty) towards the banal, unremarkable or commonplace, embedded symbols and objects of historical narratives (Billig, 1995; Edquist, 2009; Karlsson, 2011; Nordgren, 2021; Shaw, 2021). Similarly, researchers found that motivation and reasoning can be related to one's lifespan and a desire to produce a legacy for future generations (Evans, 2023; Moore & Rosenthal, 2021). While others cite intellectual, spiritual, social and travel aspects as incentives (Moore & Rosenthal, 2021).

Compared to other family history experiences, such as ancestry tourism or genetic testing, attending a course may appear banal or non-consequential. However, researchers have shown that examining the banal can illuminate the context of sociocultural and historical complexities and influences. In this study, I explore how Swedish participants describe their involvement in family history research, who it is for, and what is significant for their understanding and conceptualisation of the past.

Theoretical approach

Historical consciousness and narrative

Examining participants' interactions and descriptions of their family history research involves assessing their awareness and interactions with presentations of the past. Historical consciousness is a culturally manifested process of becoming aware of the past through a dynamic present-day lens of understanding from individual and collective perspectives (Gadamer, 2004; Grever & Adriaansen, 2019). Participants' reflections are an engagement of the horizons of their experiences and knowledge with the (re)presentation of the past (Gadamer, 2004). This approach to the concept recognises that individuals carry with them previous historical knowledge and consciousness and insinuates a *negotiation* of this with new information and insights (not necessarily always leading to development) (c.f. Sexias, 2005). People are seen as dynamic rather than as a "blank slate" (*tabula rasa*), rejecting "strict relativism" and eschewing earlier ideas of history as a collection of "facts" and accepting a variety of legitimate histories (Körber, 2016, p. 441).

Historical consciousness is often connected to historical thinking in research and assessed through "competence models" (Körber, 2015) from a cognitive developmental standpoint (Popa, 2022). Others, such as Nordgren (2019) and Popa (2022), criticise this approach for the absence of relationships and recognition of its influence and negotiations between people, cultural objects, contexts and sociocultural communities. They prefer a hermeneutic approach examining meaning-making "that encompasses a vast, rich and ambiguous array of ways in which people and societies situate themselves in time and represent their past to themselves and others" (Popa, 2022, p. 173). This view of historical consciousness as meaning-making within a cultural complexity is what the current study applies.

Nordgren claims historical consciousness reveals "tensions and contradictions within and across historical cultures where the line between facts and myth, the unique and the exemplary, the distanced and the moral is crossed" (Nordgren, 2019, p. 781). This reflection on the past is expressed in narratives that individuals and collective groups apply, contributing to and influenced by contemporary historical culture (Aronsson, 2004; Karlsson, 2014; Thorp, 2020). Historical culture is all representations of the past and the institutions/organisations that present/teach and govern them in the present (Nordgren, 2016; Rüsen, 2005; Thorp, 2020).

Narratives are dynamic cultural carriers or tools (Barton & Levstik, 2004) "endlessly transformed by human beings to inform the next generation of universal 'truths' of what it is to

be human but within a vehicle that is continually culturally crafted to fit the listener” (Jarvis, 2019, p. 6). In creating narratives to suit their present context, individuals make sense of sequences of events and gain meaning and purpose by connecting themselves to a larger collective (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Karlsson, 2014). Historical consciousness guides and impacts these narratives as individuals engage with the relations between the past, present, and future (Nordgren, 2016). The stories we tell about ourselves and our families are purposeful and adjust over time, affected by culturally/temporally changing accepted behaviours and norms. They are significant to individuals’ ability to explain, understand and position themselves within a cultural society.

While an effective tool, the danger lies in mistaking narrative as history itself, forgetting that narrative is selective and represents one of many ways to make sense of the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Narratives are powerful and can cause alternatives to appear illegitimate and reinforce problematic tropes and binaries, such as the primitive past/modern present and moral past/immoral present. These presentations and their newly acquired experiences and knowledge through family history research affect participants’ perceptions and evaluations of the past.

Historical significance

While motivation connects to purpose and a future goal, significance is not linked to one temporality but can find significance in the past, present, and future. Significance is the attribution of inherent value or an evaluation of the value of something/one made by individuals (Martela & Steger, 2016). Martela and Steger (2016) argue that meaning-making is a reflective activity that develops mental connections between experiences, knowledge, things, and relationships (people). Individuals’ relationship with the past, what they perceive as relevant and meaningful, and their communication can represent their interpretation and construction of history (Thorp, 2016). This interpretation and construction of the past is also used for identity positioning and provides perspective for the future (de Saint-Laurent & Obradović, 2019).

Historical significance involves acknowledging certain events and individuals in the past and the perceived consequences of their actions. Numerous factors contribute to the perception of historical significance, such as the tendency for local orientation (e.g. national heroes/villains in textbooks), temporal nearness, and general norms and structures existing within a social context (Páez et al., 2017). Emotionally charged ingroup collective memories, reinforced through rituals and institutions, contribute to perceived significance (Páez et al., 2017). While memories fade and details are lost, the understanding derived from conclusions of the significance of events/people constitutes educational value (Hunt 2000). In various forms and countries, the so-called ‘history wars’ (Samuelsson, 2017) reveal the contention that can occur when questioning the value of earlier epochs in curricula. Perceptions of events and individuals change over time due to sociocultural contexts and access to information. While criteria scales exist, I focus on the individuals’ descriptions of what they deem significant and reflect what Peck and Seixas (2008) have condensed into two criteria: resulting in change/consequences and revealing or illuminating enduring/emerging issues.

Research design

In the spring of 2022 (Jan-June), I participated in two adult non-formal education courses offered by a study association and a local family history society in the southern region of Sweden. The study association provided an online course utilising the web platform Teams, comprising six (n=6) participants. The family history society met in person in a historic locale within a medium-sized city. It had eight (n=8) participants. Participants in both courses ranged between their early 20s and their late 70s. The courses were six sessions each; however, the in-person course continued as a study circle for a few weeks afterwards. The course leaders were not professionals but had extensive experience as family historians and were perceived as “experts” by the participants. As non-formal courses, there are no grades or prerequisites, and organisers limit the

number of participants (max 8 in-person, max 9 online). The online course was less structured and open for collaborative learning—participants were encouraged to lead sessions. Questioning the course leader’s correctness was regular and perceived as non-provocative. The in-person class did not know each other’s names and had a course leader with a more traditional approach, often sharing historical anecdotes and procedural knowledge in a one-way monologue. In this article, I focus on the individual participant’s narratives.

Those individuals who consented participated in an audio-recorded semi-structured interview after the course completion, held online, over the telephone, and in person. While this is a small sample study, the age and dominance of female participation demographics reflect the comprehensive statistics of Study Associations in Sweden (Statistikdatabasen [SCB], 2023). Seven (n=7) females participated in this study, and the interviews were 40 minutes long on average and transcribed verbatim. Questions posed included, “Why did you take this class?” “How did you become interested in family history?” “Describe something that you learned/surprised you.” Participants spoke freely, and the atmosphere was informal. Participants were informed of their rights to withdraw and, in the text, were de-identified using pseudonyms and removing identifying features. In the initial familiarisation and coding phases of reflexive thematic analysis, I identified several reoccurring patterns for analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022). These I clustered for broader patterns, generating initial themes including motivations, desired results, interest in the past, frames of identity, the relevance of place, and learning environments. I reviewed, redefined, and renamed themes multiple times. Themes are patterns anchored in shared meaning, not passively emerging, but chosen by the researcher to provide a rich, in-depth understanding (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I have chosen to organise the findings under the headings: Reasoning for family history research, Learning looking back-going forwards, and Significant knowledge.

This study is part of a larger research project that has sought and received approval from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority <https://etikprovningsmyndigheten.se/#Dnr2019-05944>.

Findings and discussion

The reasoning for family history research

Participants describe many reasons for taking the course and participating in family history research. Participants’ motivations for their interest in family history and attending the course are generally similar to categories found by Shaw (2020) and Börnfors (2001). Most participants relate to the categories of History buffs, Prompted (by event, loss, objects), or Inherited (someone else in their family started, and it was something that they just “did”). Others relate more to the more banal categories of Curiosity and Recreation, as demonstrated by Elyse, who says, “to meet others who do family history.”

The majority of participants’ narratives reveal a combination of these reasonings. Several participants note that the course was about creating a sense of accountability. As the participant Elyse states, “I wanted to deepen [my knowledge] a little bit more and get a kick in the ass too, to get going again” after falling into a slump. This sentiment of the course serving the purpose of an accountability partner is echoed by several participants. Edda notes, “This is my third course, and I took it [because] I don’t get anything done if I don’t take a course.” Noomi also states, “Yes [the course] contributed one hundred per cent. I wouldn’t have gotten started myself, if I hadn’t taken the course, I wouldn’t have been able to [do it].” Many note the simplicity of having something to do in bad weather, as more than half of the participants emphasise the impact of annual seasons. Alice says, “It’s a nice occupation, preferably in winter,” while one participant Maj explains her husband signed her up for the course because “he thought I should have something to do while he plays golf”. Reiterating that while for some doing family history is a passion for learning about the past, for others, it simply is a banal, regular activity to keep them occupied.

Despite this banal reasoning, most participants describe their interest in family history as connected to history buffs, prompted, and inherited categories. Therefore, it can be deduced that while some participated for banal purposes, they chose to participate in this particular class type due to their interest in family history and the general past. Moreover, it should be noted that while motivations for family history can and are categorised, these categories overlap.

A rite of age: "When I am retired".

Participants repeatedly refer to advanced age and retirement connected to researching family history, as if it were a rite of passage to participate when one becomes "old". This could be explained as the perception of having more free time. Ann initially thought she would "deal with [old letters, photos and stuff] when I'm retired. Then I have plenty of time. Then I must have something to do as well." However, she later questions why she thought this way. "I just figured out why should I wait until I retire? I'm doing it now instead. So, I signed up for this course." One participant, Edda, was contacted by a course leader to help a Swedish-American relative find family in Sweden. Edda says, "I didn't think much of it at the time. I was a little over 30 years old at the time", implying that she was too young to consider family history and underlying that it is an activity for the old. Participants reiterate this belief by explaining why their children are not interested now and "might not be until he turns 50-60" (Ann). Similarly, Maj says her daughter is not interested: "No, it's not hers. No, they have enough with the present." This statement not only implies that interest comes with age but also disassociates family history from the present and future. This division of temporality contrasts with many participants who actively engage with the past, present and future as simultaneously intertwined.

The over-representation of family historians in advanced age is also seen in other studies (Börnfors, 2001; Shaw, 2020). The association with advanced age and family history can be argued as a growing appreciation for life's fragility and brevity, as discussed by Hookoomsing in Eriksen (1996). This realisation of life's brevity can result in the psychological desire to, in some form, continue to exist, leaving a legacy for future generations (Moore & Rosenthal, 2021). Edda reflects that her interest in family history intensified when her parents died, saying she became "nostalgic or hembygdskär" (hometown love) in the realisation of her mortality and heritage that partly disappears with the memory "keepers". Perhaps it is, as Elyse, the youngest of the participants, says, "I think there are different phases in life and that you have different thoughts at different times." As every person's experiences, knowledge and relationships are uniquely theirs (Martela & Steger, 2016), the timing of these phases of life and the attributed significance are also highly personal. Thus, we can question if family history is an interest for those in the later years of their lives or an interest in the past in general. Furthermore, whether this perception of family historians as "older" will be changed over time with the introduction of genetic testing that markets to a broader population. It should also be observed that while most participants assert family history research is a pastime for the "old", this is often in direct contrast to their age and participation-perceiving themselves as exceptions to the "rule".

Learning looking back-going forwards

Edquist (2009) argues that "the family history research boom" (*släktforskningsboomen*) in Sweden is an example of the democratisation of historical culture. This reflects the public pedagogical perspective of learning outside formal education as active and embodied through negotiations of knowledge and experience (Ellsworth, 2005). Family history research is not necessarily a straightforward activity and is more than finding dates, names, and places. It reflects individual choices of what and whom to study and an underlying evaluation of what is significant to them. In Sweden, as in other countries, national, regional, and private archives, family history societies, websites, and companies offer various information and support beyond formal institutions.

Participants in this study attend regularly offered non-formal courses. They learn how to search databases and the order of activities family historians generally use to follow a person through their life (i.e., birth, baptism, where they lived, worked, married, children, and died). Moreover, participants learn to critically assess a source's reliability, the abbreviations, older handwriting and "old Swedish" in church books and other records. Course leaders often provide historical contexts for these sources and individuals and explain why information may be missing.

While many sit alone reading or searching archives, family history is not necessarily a solitary task. Participants in this study demonstrate this by sharing queries and solutions and practising together. Through their research, family historians connect to those who came before them, those who come after them, and those who are working beside them in the present.

Participants of this study often convey inheriting research, similar to the findings by Shaw (2017) and Börnfors (2001). Ann recalls receiving "memories of their upbringing in compendiums from older family members," something she says "gives a little more meat on bones" to create a more compelling and thick description of the factual events she records from the church book registers. Inheritance does not only come from behind or the past but is passed forward. As Moore and Rosenthal (2021) found the motive for leaving a legacy to future generations, participants in this study, despite their children not currently being interested, hope to pass their research on. Edda says, "I promised my kids that I'll document, write little stories around... like little, short stories around all these little trinkets that we have [inherited]." Noomi hopes her children and grandchildren will benefit from her work. She is giving them her research, "so my kids don't have to rummage among it, then they just have to add the ones that are in." Elyse, who does not have children, relays that she, too, has passed on her research in the forms of a family tree for her godson's confirmation and grandmother's 90th birthday. She explains that family history is not just a tree but that she "also tried to write a little bit, some life stories about those that are in the tree so that you still get the context as well." What they choose to include in these cultural inheritances reflects participants' evaluations of what is significant to share and what can be forgotten.

Participants also highlighted the transference of skills and the "how to's" of doing family history. Alice engages her mother, who did not do family history research previously, to participate in her family research. She now follows Alice to the national archives and visits places related to their family. Despite the individualised focus of family history research, participants' actions in this study reflect an interest in collaborative and collective history, including others in their research and doing research unrelated to their family (cf. Edquist, 2009). Participant Ann is teaching a newly retired friend how and where to start family research, and another participant is working with her neighbour on which archives to search. Participants express the benefit of reading and discovering together in class church book registers and the historical context. Therefore, as evidenced by participants' narratives, family history does not only engage those who participate in a course or initiate family history research themselves but, like rings on the water, creates connections and impacts participants' wider social network. The continuation of inheritance in the form of skills and information reveals participants' perception of their family history research as significant and the desire for longevity and relevance (Peck & Seixas, 2008).

Significant Knowledge

What participants learn goes beyond names, dates, and places of people from the past, affecting their understanding of history. Sofia states that she has always enjoyed doing family history research. It makes history "real" and puts her ancestors into a historical context, creating a more complex understanding, "I can put them in Swedish history how it was then... you kind of paint a little bit more, you get a bigger palette, you can see more things and a bigger context. I think [it] is exciting." Likewise, Alice notes that individuals and the present time do not stand alone but are connected within a broader context, stating, "You're not by chance ... you're in a context, somehow, and you come from something." Ann explains that if she learned that an ancestor worked at the matchstick factory, she would go to the factory's museum to understand how they made matches

and “what history or stories they have in their registers about those who worked with matches.” This example demonstrates participants’ connections from family history to other histories, broadening their scope of interest and understanding. Elyse notes how family history is “a lot about putting myself in a historical context...every generation is shaped by the previous one.” She explains that gaining this perspective and historical consciousness allows for a greater understanding of how people behave(d) and how past events impact the present.

Social heritage, I think is strong. You can understand in a different way how grandma has been, for example, based on the fact that she came from a family that was quite tough and was free church and, in a way, a little outside of society, so, in some ways, that, yes, yes and of course, it’s shaped my dad’s upbringing, and then in turn my upbringing, I think it’s a chain in some way. (Elyse)

Noomi demonstrates her development of historical consciousness, contrasting what was acceptable in the past to the present and draws comparisons between immigrants to Sweden today and those who left for America 150 years ago in a reflection of “how we had it then and how we have it today”. Noomi observes her change in perspective of her father-in-law’s disposition when she learns that his father sold him at auction at age five. This causes her to reflect upon the limitations of sources, noting the “heart-wrenching information that isn’t in the church books”. This reflects Shaw’s (2017, 2020, 2021) and Shaw and Donnelly’s (2021a, 2021b) findings of family historians’ heightened historical consciousness resulting in greater empathy. What participants relay as relevant and meaningful reflects their understanding of the past and the use of historical consciousness (Thorp, 2016). The emphasis on the consequence of the past on participants’ understandings and the impact on the present reiterates Peck and Seixas (2008) categorisation of Result. Thus, accentuating that what family historians deem personally significant can also impact a wider population by increasing empathy and understanding for those less fortunate in society.

Sweden today and yesterday

Connection to Sweden of the past demonstrates more than historical consciousness and empathy for the “new(er) Swedes” of today. Participants’ narratives convey a specific image of Sweden and the past, illuminating enduring binaries and the challenges to these, such as the past characterised by a different set of moral guidelines, as seen in the example of selling small children at auction. The past is described as more primitive, plagued by poverty, a place to escape (emigrate away from) to the more modern present, yet simultaneously nostalgic and containing something “golden” that should and is preserved and visited in the present. Alice describes that “they had large crowds of children” in the past. Noomi explains that it is because “there was no safety net... but that they must have the help of their children when they become old.” This picture starkly contrasts contemporary Sweden’s social welfare model that takes care of its citizens—which participants consider the “norm”. This poverty led to forced migration. Sofia recalls that her great-aunt attempted to emigrate to America with a newly divorced man but “could not come in”. They were turned away at Ellis Island because someone on the boat said he was married and had no divorce papers as proof. This example, like another participant who mentions their shock in realising there were divorces even 100 years ago, emphasises the perception of morals and what was socially acceptable in the past compared to today. The nostalgic and often politicised view of a traditional nuclear family unit may not be the whole picture of the past.

This conflicting picture of Sweden is also impacted by the participants’ described banal interests, such as reading historical novels and watching family history television programmes. The banal findings of participants reinforce the view by providing evidence, such as counting how many spoons there are to inherit. As Noomi describes, “Only 100 years ago there was a lot of poverty in Sweden...you can read the testaments [*bouppteckning*]”, noting how little they had, such as “five spoons, four plates.” While not ‘life-changing’, these banal findings reaffirm ideals and binaries held by participants. Makky (2020) points out that activities and things are not created to be banal but *become* banal and are redeemed by examining banalities. Banalities, he

argues, are “small and insignificant things, phenomena, and moments [that] ‘co-create- our daily life and the world as we know it’, and despite being fundamental and an “immanent part of our experience”, these are often overlooked (Makky, 2020, p. 94). Although more “exciting” results exist, such as Ann finding her ancestor’s murder reported in a newspaper, “he was beaten to death”, it was the findings of “strong entrepreneurial [widowed] women” who took care of the farm that she underscores significant. Ann sees herself as having this characteristic and hopes her daughter will be the same. These banal findings of the past and their remnants in the present make up most participants’ accounts, reiterating their felt significance.

Visiting historic Sweden in the present is made possible by local history museums and family history societies. Most participants also recall visiting or planning to visit where their ancestors lived. Elyse describes visiting where her family came from and walking beside banal everyday signage that “flags” the past embedded in the landscape of the present.

They had done a croft (torp) inventory ... so you walk beside the road [and] there are small signs that here was this croft and here lived these people. ...you also put into a context that, okay, that it was this place.

This signage and local history associations are commonplace in the contemporary Swedish landscape. In their narratives, participants refer to *hembyggsföreningar* (local history associations) as places to turn to for help in their family history research. Edda, while also reflecting on the continuation of the landscape of Sweden, points out that her ancestral home still stands in a prominent location in the middle of the town’s square. In contrast to the other contestants, she notes that her family did not suffer nor were poor. Instead, Edda reports her disappointment of only finding the banal, “there are no, no special things, [the course leader] told me [I would find] thieves and murderers and all sorts of things, [but] nothing like that I have found.”

Historical significance for participants is found not only in the extremes but also in the banal. Participants highlight events and people that they perceive have resulted in consequences and reveal continuations in the present (Peck & Seixas, 2008).

Conclusion

This study presents and discusses the narratives of participants from family history courses. Participants’ narratives reveal a complex and nuanced picture of family history as both highly significant for their understanding of self and historical culture but also as a means to satisfy banal desires of “something to do” during the winter or when the husband is playing golf. While the perception of family history as a hobby for those in the twilight years of their lives persists, a broader range of ages are interested in and impacted by family history. This stereotype may evolve with the increasing variety of consumer products offered.

Participants’ reflections on the past and their positioning within their narratives as learners, researchers, and part of a larger collective highlight the significance of their learning and cultural manifestation of historical consciousness (Gadamer, 2004; Shaw, 2017, 2021; Shaw & Donnelly, 2021a, 2021b). It highlights the role of family history narratives as dynamic cultural tools, used by participants to position and relate within and to a larger historical context, to make history “real” and foster empathy and consequential understandings (Jarvis, 2019; Karlsson, 2014; Nordgren, 2016).

Participants’ motivations, experiences during the course, and findings reflect that family history research is a spectrum of experiences. Not simply the effervescence that is life-changing, as seen through the examples of crying participants on family history television programmes. Nor is it only the banal labelled family photo on the fridge. It is both extremes and everything in between. While much research has highlighted the life-changing aspects of family history research, it is equally important to recognise and examine the banality. As Billig (1995) cautions, banality is not synonymous with harmless but reproduces embedded ways of thinking. This is demonstrated by the recurring tropes and binaries in narratives of the primitive past/modern

present, moral past/immoral present, life-changing significance/banal everyday, and collective/independent. These reveal a layer of complexity to family history narratives that includes both the nostalgic and a challenge to traditional views.

Participants' narratives demonstrated that participation in, and the significance of, family history research is not always the effervescent excitement that is portrayed by commercialised marketing of ancestral companies and media. But it can and is a part of the everyday—something to do when the weather is bad or when your husband is golfing, a nice hobby. Their narratives demonstrate that this banality is also perceptible in their research findings—they were born, lived, and died in the same place. They had four spoons. They were all farmers. They all starved. Or, as Edda reported, there were no murders or thieves.

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