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Writing That Is Not Written: Clues, the Unconscious, the Indirect, and Traces; What Genealogy Can Learn from Microhistory

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Abstract: After reviewing recent genealogists' writings advocating that genealogy is a kind of microhistory, the article lists six characteristics of microhistory, and argues that genealogy is not microhistory though the two share a focus on small scale groups or people. However, genealogy may learn from microhistory's use of clues in reading some texts. What is revealed by studying clues is a form of indirect evidence. A discussion of the Freudian unconscious and its relevance to genealogy helps draw out the usefulness of clues in family history research. The article wraps up with a brief overview of traces in genealogical research.

Introduction

The primary objective of this article is to discuss some aspects of microhistory's methodology and approach that may be of value to genealogists. What microhistory is will be explained in this article, especially in the "Microhistory Characteristics" and "Microhistory Summary" sections. For now, it is a methodology or orientation of some historians that uses clues to understand beliefs, behaviors, and choices of minority groups underrepresented in the usual official documents and historical archives. Genealogy involves the tracking of ancestors, ancestral families, and descendants. The risk of giving a dictionary-type definition of genealogy, however, is that it distracts one from seeing what genealogy is in a deeper sense.[1] A related term, family history, takes a broader approach to lineage research. It is more interested in families, biographical details, and the place of ancestors in society and culture relevant to where and when they lived.

Genealogists can learn from microhistory's use of clues even when their research does not involve subaltern populations. As will be discussed, clues relate to what are usually considered insignificant details in texts. One practice cited by microhistorian and theorist Carlo Ginzburg that clarifies the concept of insignificant details is psychoanalysis. A central concept of psychoanalysis is the unconscious that this article will discuss and then show the relevance of for genealogical practice.

After outlining the historical background of microhistory, the article will summarize recent thoughts of some genealogists about microhistory. Most of these genealogists focus only on microhistory's approach to history on a microscopic scale related to individuals, small groups, or towns. This focus on a small scale that is common between microhistory and genealogy does not support concluding that genealogy is microhistory[2]

Genealogists have been taught to read and analyze relevant original and primary sources before drawing conclusions and writing about them. Those same guidelines apply to other kinds of research, for example, of microhistory. To learn about microhistory, it is helpful to read some practical examples of microhistory such as those by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie,[3] Carlo Ginzburg,[4] and Natalie Zemon Davis.[5] From the perspective of scale only, a precursor is Richard Gough's *History of Myddle*.[6] But it is more important to read and understand some theoretical writings of microhistorians such as those by Edoardo Grendi,[7] Giovanni Levi,[8] Carlo Ginzburg,[9] Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon,[10] Matti Peltonen,[11] István Szijártó,[12] and Simona Cerutti.[13] References to some of these theoretical writings will appear in the remainder of the article. Theory is necessary to firmly found methodologies and practical research. The article will attempt throughout to connect theory and genealogical practice which is the primary focus.

Historical Origins of Microhistory

Increasing doubts about the positive character of modernization and history as beneficial progress led some historians to question the direction of social sciences approaches to history. When coupled with Marxist critiques based on economic, political, and ethical grounds, some historians opted to turn away from purely macrohistorical research and writing. Among those influenced by this Marxist trend was E.P. Thompson whose *Making of the English Working Class*[14] focused on ordinary workers and their families. Another important work in the 1960s and 1970s was Braudel's *Structures of Everyday Life*[15] which was viewed favorably but had a narrow focus on material living conditions, downplaying social interactions, beliefs, and experiences. Other works of note that helped lay the groundwork for microhistory were those of social anthropologist Fredrik Barth who wrote about how social life consisted of social encounters.[16]

Microhistory arose out of this background. It too was interested in studying everyday life but with a broader scope to include social, cultural, political, religious, and other areas of life with a move away from centers of power to marginal so-called little people, the exploited, and the dominated.[17]

Recent Genealogists' Views of Microhistory

Several genealogists have written about the relation between genealogy and microhistory. Some comments written in the twenty-first century follow.

In 2003, Elizabeth Shown Mills wrote that genealogy is history in microcosm.[18] In 2004, she explained that not only is genealogy history, but it is also microhistory and historical biography.[19]

In 2012, Andy Kubrin took a similar stance, though he recognized two additional characteristics one of which distinguishes it from genealogy. Kubrin pointed out the difference in aims. The microhistorian attempts to connect the objects of study with broader historical trends, but the family historian typically does not try to connect them to a larger social context. He also pointed out that microhistorians focus on marginalized people.[20]

The same year, Anna Patterson Rodda wrote that microhistory as an approach and methodology is "perfectly suited to the genealogist." [21] She went further, stating that it is "the most useful historical research approach for the genealogist."[22] For her, microhistory is a method that studies a specific time and place, observes social interactions and relationships, scrutinizes different types of evidence, all to learn about behavior, choices, and experiences, and that it uses narrative to tell the story about research findings.[23] She thinks that genealogy focuses on outliers rather than statistically average people to learn about how they made choices, reacted to events, and formed associations.[24] Her discussion about this seems to confuse "outlier" (a term used by some microhistorians to refer to subaltern groups/classes whose hidden messages must be deciphered) with "ordinary" (synonymous with either "not famous" or not in the upper/ruling class). But to Rodda, for both the microhistorian and genealogist, it comes down to attitude and viewpoint.[25]

In 2013, Tony Proctor suggested that genealogy and microhistory should be placed under the microhistory umbrella, but that view is based on a dictionary definition. Microhistory is important to genealogists but they are not equivalent.[26]

In 2014, Janice M. Sellers wrote that microhistory is "focused on individuals, the type of research that genealogists do…macrohistory (or just history) is about the world around individuals."[27] That is often the case but does not make them equivalent.

Also in 2014, Hans Renders, a professor of history, distinguished between genealogy and biography.[28] Renders believed that genealogists seek verifiable family history but are not interested in story-telling. Biography aims to construct an interpretive narrative. Genealogy is solely determined by sources while biography is also determined by theoretical issues. Genealogists are oriented to individuals and families but usually are not focused on emotions or motives.

In 2016, Karen Mauer Jones, editor of the *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record*, wrote "if microhistory is the intensive study of a specific historical subject…then genealogists are microhistorians…we [genealogists] are all practicing microhistory."[29] The conditional "if" seems to indicate the incorrect assumption that microhistory is only about scale, and thus does not justify that conclusion.

In 2020, Joe Grandinetti stated that using good genealogical research practices causes "a natural drift into microhistory."[30] He values attention to the "why" and "how" of ancestors to gain perspective about family motives, and thus to use microhistorical research methods. He agrees with Rodda's approach to zoom in and out in terms of scale when doing family history research. He believes that learning about the times and places of ancestral residences increases an understanding of their transactions, actions, and interactions.

Kristi Kaiser writes (2020) that "as family historians we are using microhistory when we focused on researching a specific individual or family."[31] She relies on the definition of microhistory in Wikipedia that it is "a genre of history writing which focuses on small units of research, such as event, community, individual, or settlement."

Many of these comments exemplify what can go wrong if insufficient effort is made to understand theoretical concerns before applying methodology to practical tools of genealogy. Misunderstanding leads to invalid conclusions which in turn, leads to invalid application to genealogy and loss of opportunity to collaborate with other disciplines in academia. This article therefore takes the time to lay the theoretical groundwork before turning more specifically to the main goal of applying microhistory to the benefit of genealogical research.

Microhistory Characteristics

To gain a better perspective about what microhistory is to appreciate how it can best be used by genealogy, it will help to list some of the main characteristics of it. A commonly noted characteristic of microhistory is its focus on a small scale, a thought that applies not only to scope (an individual, a town, etc.) but also to distance (intensive study of relevant original record sources/documents of different types).[32,33,34,35,36,37,38,39] It is this characteristic to which genealogists who write about microhistory commonly call attention. Microhistorian Magnússon argues that large-scale quantitative studies distort reality[40] by neglecting to make ordinary people the subject of history.[41] It is necessary to emphasize small units to highlight the diversity of life.[42] There are oppositions between the discourses of individual groups and within a person[43] because people participate simultaneously in multiple contexts,[44,45] and because dominated people often speak in code to avoid punishment or worse.[46,47]

A second characteristic of microhistory is its aim to identify the origin of forms of behavior, choice, and solidarity within groups.[48] Achievement of this goal enables an understanding of behaviors, experiences, and group identities.[49,50,51.52]

A third characteristic of microhistory is that it most often focuses on marginalized people and often on the subaltern class.[53,54,55,56] Some think of this as "history from below,"[57,58,59,60,61] although the interest in "history from below" overlapped in time with microhistory. "History from below" is interested in ordinary people with no or little power, and marginalized people are often women, people of color, foreigners, or people with minority religious or other beliefs inconsistent with the majority in the broader culture in which they lived. Federici, Fuentes, and Scott are examples of scholars who illustrate a variety of approaches to write "history from below."[62,63,64] In this characteristic microhistory was influenced by the writings of Karl Marx who wrote about classes, domination, and the powerless, and also by Antonio Gramsci who wrote about subalternity.[65,66,67,68]

A fourth characteristic of microhistory is its writing about multiple contexts in people's lives, beliefs, choices, and behaviors, alluded to above.[69,70,71,72] People make decisions and act in their lives in multiple contexts, including political, economic, religious, social, and family. Some of these include multiple conflicting influences such as differing opinions among families or in social circles.

A fifth characteristic of microhistory is that it looks for clues, signs, and symptoms to understand microhistorical subjects and events. It looks for hidden clues in the text, that is, something that does not fit. In subaltern populations, odd gestures of refusal and silence help explain behaviors. Trivial details become important.[73,74,75,76,77,78,79,80,81,82] This will be explored further below.

A sixth characteristic of microhistory will also be explored in more detail. It is the notion of traces, and particularly, unintended traces.[83,84,85] Traces are of vital importance in the study of history and of genealogy.

Among microhistorians and scholars of microhistory, there are differences of opinion about what microhistory is. Some view it as a methodology,[86] while others view it as more of an orientation than a method.[87] Some view it as a historiographical practice.[88] Others emphasize it as a different version of microsocial reality.[89]

Microhistory summary

A summary will set the stage for a focus on clues and their value in genealogical research. Microhistory concentrates on life experiences of people in concrete situations.[90] With in-depth study of towns or groups of people that have some social or cultural characteristic in common, a microhistorian comes to understand aspects of the lives of real people in the past. Microhistory gives historians the ability to recover and reconstruct past events by connecting a wide range of sources to produce a contextual narrative in which real people shaped events.[91]

Microscopic observation may help to discover factors for behaviors previously unnoticed.[92] It searches for unforeseen meanings embedded in the small-scale people, places, and events that are analyzed in detail.[93]

One gains access to the past through clues and signs.[94] Clues sometimes relate to unconsciously and routinely performed actions.[95] Social action is a result of individuals' negotiations among diverse and often conflicting contexts and eventually coming to a decision.[96] Microhistory attempts to identify the origins of forms of behaviors, choices, and solidarity.[97] Social actions are how social reason and norms are built and legitimated.[98] They reveal how people interpreted/digested forms of behavior the social structure suggested.[99] Social structure is the outcome of interactions people have.[100]

Microhistory is not opposed to macrohistory. Rather, it explores a microcosm to better grasp the macro-level history.[101,102] Microanalysis enables the microhistorian to draw conclusions about macrohistory.[103]

Genealogy is not microhistory nor is it history.[104] However, genealogy can learn from microhistory. Some characteristics and features of microhistory are or should be part of genealogical practice. The next sections discuss microhistory's use of clues, the relation of the evidentiary paradigm to the unconscious, signs and symptoms, and the indirect. They also discuss microhistorical and historical traces. Microhistory is interested in relating the micro and the macro levels of history, and that is something genealogy can learn from[105] but that will be barely further discussed.

Clues

Clues are important for Carlo Ginzburg and others working in the domains of microhistorical research and historiography. That may be because in the places and eras in which Ginzburg's research studies have focused, as well as in most other places and eras, the dominant record sources were created by and preserved by those in power, virtually "drowning out" voices of the dominated or marginalized classes in which Ginzburg was interested. Ginzburg wrote that "in any society the conditions of access to the production of documentation are tied to a situation of power and thus create an inherent imbalance."[106,107,108,109] Mary D'Agostino argued that documents were biased in favor of the literate, were predominantly written by white males, and need to be read with awareness of intentional bias.[110]

While some historians suggest approaches to compensate for this such as reading against or with the grain of the archives and documents within them, Ginzburg's evidential paradigm leverages clues.[111] Clues may be odd things in texts, or things that do not fit the thinking, beliefs, and social actions of dominant classes. A clue is a sign that something is not what it seems, or it may be an indirect reference that to some readers is trivial, or insignificant. On the one hand, clues are exceptional in the sense that the researcher needs to find an exceptional document that displays them.[112] On the other hand, the documents of interest relate to the behavior and social group in which the documented individual appears, and thus are exemplary.[113]

Ginzburg draws four comparisons to clarify the concept of clues.[114,115] They are animal tracking, attribution of visual art pieces to specific artists, a detective investigating a crime, and psychoanalysis.

With respect to animal tracking, Ginzburg points to the thousands of years of humans hunting animals as a root of the conjectural model. Hunters located their quarry through footprints, droppings, hair and feathers, smells, and snapped twigs. These are all signs, or indirect clues that hunters learned about to succeed at hunting.

In the 1870s, Giovanni Morelli used a new method to attribute paintings of old masters to artists. While conspicuous characteristics and general styles could be used to correctly identify a school of painters, he urged examining trivial details to identify an individual artist. He chose details that he thought would be least influenced by mannerisms of the artist's school, and some of the things he paid most attention to were painted earlobes, fingernails, and shapes of toes, forms peculiar to the artist.[116] Morelli thought that the actual work of art was the only trustworthy evidence for identifying the specific artist.[117] The individual painter reveals himself in his singularity through these details.[118] Richard Wollheim refined Morelli's approach by stating that an artist's individual style was more likely unique if considered in terms of relations among the painting/human subject's features.[119] Interestingly, Freud wrote about Morelli's method and how it influenced him.[120]

Clues used by detectives were illustrated by Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Holmes used seemingly insignificant details to solve crimes. His close observation and careful listening skills were used to pick up clues to enable progress in his detective investigations. Freud admired Sherlock Holmes, according to one of his patients, the Wolf-Man.[121]

Sigmund Freud's method of psychoanalysis used what were often considered insignificant details to interpret psychological issues. He used slips of the tongue, dreams, accidental puns, and jokes as clues to uncover deep meanings of human behavior. Negligible details reveal important information about psychological phenomena.

Ginzburg looked for these kinds of trivial details to understand behaviors, beliefs, and social actions of individuals in the past, and particularly in lower classes, oppressed people, or social groups such as women. They are underrepresented in official sources that exist at various levels of government and in archives. And yet, their voices can be heard by looking for subtle clues, and by consulting archives of repression.[122,123] Ginzburg discusses witchcraft trials during the Inquisition,[124] documents of which reflect the drive of inquisitors to justify their version of the truth. Close examination of these documents finds clues about the beliefs of the accused that disagree with those of the inquisitors. Although under great psychological and sometimes physical pressure to agree with their accusers, "insignificant" trifles enable them to allude to their beliefs. In spite of various pressures on the defendants of the inquisition, what is on the surface a monologic echoing of inquisitors' questions by defendants can be detected as dialogic, in which the underlying responses by defendants reveal conflicting viewpoints, beliefs, and choices.[125] This requires viewing the clues as "a subtle interplay of threats and fears, of attacks and withdrawals. We must learn to disentangle the different threads which form the textual fabric of these dialogues."[126] The gaps between the inquisitors' questions and the answers of the accused are a clear mediation between evidence and reality that is overcome only by decoding the gaps as revealing an alternate culture through a separate set of beliefs, language, behaviors, resistances, and silences.[127]

Relevance of Clues to Genealogy: Direct and Indirect

Some have advocated for compensating for biases in archives by "reading along the grain" of archives' documents.[128,129,130] Another approach is to look for clues, which assumes a previous careful study of the dominant cultures of the era and place being examined.

The evidence signified by clues is a kind of indirect evidence. Indirect evidence, of course, is not direct evidence. Direct evidence answers a question asked by a genealogist without other evidence or reasoning. An example is a birth record of James G. Arnery that shows a birth date of 4 January 1911 that directly answers the question "on what date was James G. Arnery born?" If the birth record shows only January 1911, it is not direct evidence related to that question. But if the question were rephrased to "in what month and year was James G. Arnery born?" then it would be direct evidence.

Whether direct evidence exists depends on a lot of things, including whether a record was ever made with the complete answer, and if so, whether it still exists, and if so, whether the researcher located it. It depends on the questions the genealogist asks, including the reasonableness of the questions for the geography and time being researched. The more important issue is whether the direct evidence is correct, or trustworthy. Many beginning genealogists assume that it is, and especially if it agrees with information written in family papers or posted on the Internet. Experienced genealogists attempt to corroborate the answer through other records because one document with direct evidence may be untrustworthy. There are many reasons why direct evidence may be incorrect. The research subject may have made an error, the informant may have made an error, bureaucracy may have influenced what information was recorded, and the recorder may not have understood the person giving the information (perhaps because of language interference). Another reason is intentional misstatement by the research subject, informant, or bureaucrat.

Returning to the example of James G. Arnery, if a researcher finds one record that states he was born in January 1911, and another records that states he was born on 4 January, and both records are judged to be credible, then one can use simple logic to combine these two pieces of indirect evidence to answer the question "on what date was James G. Arnery born?"

However, in most cases, analyzing, evaluating, and combining indirect evidence is more complex. One kind of indirect evidence is discovered through clues. Clues, or special signs, may be found in any kind of record genealogists use—clues need to be looked for. Sometimes they will lead to an answer to a previously asked question, and in other cases they may reveal information of a kind not previously considered. Hidden clues or hidden textual allusions within texts are a special kind of indirect evidence. It is a double indirectness in that every written document of a past event is indirect because the text differs from that of which it gives evidence, and also because usually the author of the written text differs from any actor in the described event.[131,132,133] Texts are sources that refer to something else that is most often not a text. However, texts themselves are objects that may be examined by methods or disciplines such as diplomatics and sociology.[134,135] Historical sources not only report actions (what happened), but are themselves actions (productions) that by being written change the very relation between the text as a reporting and the action as reported. This thought calls for more reflection by genealogy but that is beyond the scope of this article. Related to this is Erwin Panofsky's distinction between a monument and a document. A monument is an object of investigation, whereas a document is an instrument of investigation (but can also be a monument because it itself may be studied).[136] Aleida Assmann notes that monuments and texts are addressed to posterity,[137] and John Guillory notes that every object studied by the humanities (for example, history and genealogy) has properties of both a monument and a document. A monument endures through time because of its materiality, while a document extends back in time because of its referentiality, and in this sense it is instrumental.[138]

Genealogists may benefit in unexpected ways by considering trifling details in the records they locate. Some may lead to information insights, others may be usable as indirect evidence, and yet others may raise or lower the assessment of credibility, or trustworthiness, of a record. The records may open up new avenues for research. Insignificant details may seem irrelevant to the reason a researcher found and is examining a record, but may be significant in answering traditional genealogical questions or reveal something about a personality, occupation, religion, politics, financial status, or other kinds of beliefs and interactions with others. Microhistory's reliance on clues is a valuable practice that may benefit genealogists.

A couple of simple cases in which clues enable solving genealogical problems follow. The first involved the age or implied age of a research subject, Simon Fought, who died in Columbus, Ohio in 1874. In many documents for which he was the apparent source, his age varies among the documents, and all understate his age. There are several approaches that might be used to solve the problem but using clues based on the unconscious (see next section), one can pick up on clues to resolve the dilemma. One ingredient to the solution was to find a document in which he unconsciously gave some information about his age. Two documents from 1836 help. The first is an insolvency file of one Joseph Barber listing Simon Fought as a creditor.[139] The second is an application for a tavern license by Simon Fought.[140] Both prove he was at least 21 at the time, and that he thus cannot have been born after 1814. This vital clue reveals that some later documents implying a birth year after 1814 were incorrect.

Second, no evidence could be found that John Wissinger and wife had a child early in their marriage in Maryland. However, a search of a deed book uncovered a clue unrelated to land that they had a child then. In a record documenting the sale of personal property, one of the possessions was a cradle, indicating the birth of or anticipated birth of a child.[141] This was then connected with other evidence to prove the migration of this family to Ohio.

The Freudian Unconscious

The unconscious was of central importance in Freud's thinking about psychology: "the division of the psychical into what is conscious and what is unconscious is the fundamental premise of psycho-analysis; and it alone makes it possible for psycho-analysis to understand the pathological processes in mental life."[142]

Freud detected the unconscious in various phenomena such as dreams, hypnosis, jokes, slips of the tongue, and unintentional puns.[143] From the perspective of genealogy, to those should be added slips of the pen. Symptoms are derivative of unconscious processes.[144] The impetus to construction of dreams is in the unconscious.[145] The concept of the unconscious comes from repression.[146] To regain or attain a conscious, healthy, psychical state requires removing the repressions (and therefore overcoming resistance) by bringing the unconscious to consciousness. The process of psychoanalysis can be viewed in a few ways: bringing the unconscious into consciousness, removing repressions, and filling gaps in memory.[147]

French psychoanalyst and thinker Jacques Lacan taught that the unconscious first appears to us as a discontinuity, or vacillation. When it manifests itself, it leads to the inescapable thought that the human subject is a *one* that is split, ruptured. Through the unconscious, a fundamental psychical lack, or absence, emerges: "the unconscious is always manifested as that which vacillates in a split in the subject, from which emerges a discovery that Freud compares with desire.[148] This gap, lack, absence, or desire is ultimately revealed in a symptom of deception—what does not readily appear because it is repressed in the unconscious is the "true" personal desire that is hidden and revealed through various kinds of images and actions (dreams, slips of the tongue, and other kinds of parapraxes).

The unconscious drives toward disappearance.[149] Whatever peeks through the gap disappears as the unconscious recloses. The reasons for some repetitive actions are hidden in the unconscious, and yet those actions are symptoms of a kind of deception. The resistance of the human subject to disclose the repressed unconscious may show itself in repeated acts.[150] That repetition is in relation to something always missed.[151] The unconscious is the effects of speech on the human subject in which the subject constitutes himself out of the effects of the signifier.

Setting aside the therapeutic aspects of psychoanalysis and the virtually impossible task of understanding the origins of repressions of deceased people, there remains at least one ingredient of the unconscious of import to genealogy. This shows in actions, to be sure, but of crucial importance, it shows in texts, or in a text. The speech is writing, the signifier is in the text, alluded to, hidden, but significant (in two ways) for genealogy. Fully recognizing this may lead to solving difficult genealogical challenges such as determining the age of an ancestor, reasons or motives for actions, or even a problem of identification or origin. But to leverage this requires understanding the textually documented action, behavior, or speech as deriving from the repressed unconscious.

Jean Laplanche, French psychoanalytical thinker, discussed Freud's distinction between a thing-presentation and a word-presentation, both of which were discussed at length in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*. Laplanche argues that the unconscious element is not a representation of an external thing whose trace it would be, but that in the passage from the conscious to the unconscious, it loses referentiality. In becoming unconscious, both presentations lose their status as presentations (that is, as signifiers) "in order to become a thing which no longer presents (signifies) anything other than itself."[152]

Unconscious: Relevance to Genealogy

In actions and words, people reveal truths without being aware of it. They do so unconsciously. Those actions and words sometimes become documented, and indeed the documenting act done for other purposes may be an unconscious writing in which an obliquely inferred or referenced fact/truth is tied to a seemingly unrelated (but in reality, linked) conscious act or reason for documenting or having someone document a transaction or event. Teasing out the unconscious acts and words may yield indirect evidence that refutes or attests to direct evidence or other indirect evidence relevant to a genealogical problem. It may enable answering a question for which no other evidence exists. At times, it serves another purpose. If someone intentionally misstates a fact about himself or about another person, or forgetfully does so, the source giving direct evidence of the error can be found to be incorrect because of the indirect evidence that unconsciously gives or yields an accurate answer under close examination. When one is not thinking consciously about misstating or misrepresenting the truth, the truth unconsciously comes out or may come out either indirectly, or by contradicting or being inconsistent with the direct misstatement or misrepresentation.

Repression is a suppression of the truth into the unconscious. Genealogically speaking, the truth of a fact may be consciously (or unconsciously) misstated or misrepresented. In that case, the true statement or representation may be made indirectly in another context. The use of that context or source to ferret out the truth requires an analysis similar in methodology to psychoanalysis, criminal detective investigation, and an art historian's attribution of a painting to a specific artist. There may be clues in the document that repression is at work, in which case analyzing it may expose the truth without requiring another source.

However, there may be a kind of reverse parapraxis involved in misstating or misrepresenting a fact. A person misstating or miswriting his age may do so as an unconscious rejection (refusal to accept or admit) of his true age or birth date. He may unconsciously wish to be older or younger than he is. It may also be a conscious misrepresentation of his age to avoid embarrassment or to gain an advantage for himself for some reason.

Even aside from individual unconscious hiding of truth or inadvertent disclosure of truth, there are other underlying reasons why direct evidence may be inaccurate. The creating organization or eventual repository of the records in question may have motives, such as wielding power over others or promulgating a political or religious agenda, that affect the truth as genealogists conceive it. And of course, there are many examples of innocent errors and mistakes made while recording or copying source documents. In the non-innocent cases, clues of the truth or motives of subaltern populations may be detected in a careful study of the context of the production of the documents or in the line of interrogation or recording taken by those in charge of the bureaucratic organization responsible for eliciting answers or noting responses in information given.

Following Laplanche's argument, the unconscious deception about age does not represent anything in the external world. But a document that exposes the deception because it does not require a direct admission of age nevertheless is an uncovering of that unconscious deception.

Other Microhistory Tools Genealogists May Use

The main thrust of this article has been that genealogy may leverage microhistory's use of clues in its own research. That required establishing some theoretical bases for the discussion. However, there are other areas of microhistorical practice that may benefit genealogists as they research.

Careful and thorough research of an ancestor or ancestral family, and of the society as it existed where and when the family lived may lead to further understanding of behaviors and beliefs. This may help narrow a search for motives or reasons for actions such as occupation change or residential moves. Looking at multiple contexts leads to increased understanding of an ancestor. This may include religious, political, military, and organizational aspects of their lives. There are many reasons to study microhistory to benefit genealogical research even though microhistory is not favored as greatly now as it once was.

A Few Thoughts about Traces

Traces are fundamental to historical and genealogical research. However, it is a challenge to discover any substantial genealogical discussion about what a trace is.[153]

A trace may be thought of as a material remnant of the past. That statement needs to be unpacked. First, the creation, or production, of the trace occurred in the past and is (or at least was) in existence in the present. This brings to light the separation of the past from the present. In philosophical terms, one can state that a trace is evidence of an aporia in time. That time (in terms of history) can be different enough from the present that to understand the significance, role, or function of the trace as material object may be difficult without careful learning about that past and its contexts. The same applies to the places of production and its current location.

Second, the trace is material, or at least, physical. That implies that a trace is spatial. That means that the temporal gap signified by the trace is spatialized. Time is displaced into space.

Third, there is a string of epistemological moves implicit in this conception of a trace. To understand this, consider a document as a trace. In research, one proceeds from an archive, then to a document within it, then to a trace, and then to a past event. These are all documental and representative issues implying epistemological presuppositions.[154] It imagines a real occurrence in the past (let us call this history) is the true event, and that the trace as document is that truth's evidence. Historical fact is then proved by documented material traces.

French philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote that the trace is visible here and now as a vestige, or mark. The trace indicates pastness.[155] The trace remains though the passage of time no longer is.

Moreover, the functionality of the object that is now trace may no longer serve in the present (there are exceptions). As Ricoeur put it, the works outlive their workings. As German philosopher Martin Heidegger put it, the world within which the remains were no longer is, and so the trace, the remains, no longer serves equipmentally.[156]

The relation between the marking object and the marked object is one of significance, that is, of signifying. A trace is a sign-effect and a subclass of cause-effect of meaning. The sign-effect is the relation of the vestige to the passage.[157]

Time is left in space though it itself disappears. Space relates to the pastness of time.

What must one do with the trace to apply its signifying/significance to the past? One must *re-trace* it. That requires deciphering the stretching of time in space.[158] The significance of the spatial trace is reconstituted into time. That is because the essence of the trace is to disarrange itself, to assert its out-of-placeness in terms of temporality.[159]

Conclusion

Understanding the theoretical and methodological bases microhistory established for the use of clues in solving difficult historical problems leads to how clues may benefit genealogists in their research. Clues can be useful not only in cases of criminal and civil case analyses, but also to break through misleading information in common legal and business transactions, censuses, and other documents commonly used by genealogists.

Genealogists may also learn from microhistory in how to detect larger patterns of behavior and choices to better comprehend why ancestors migrated or held certain political beliefs. Microhistory can teach genealogy to use a comprehensive approach to various document types to improve understanding of decisions and everyday life. A study of microhistory is worth the effort by genealogists to make use of microhistory's orientation or methods. Along the way, grasping the theoretical and methodological foundations raises the prospects of quality genealogical research, of grounding genealogy more firmly, of enabling an interdisciplinary engagement with academic disciplines, and of gaining respect for our research practice. Even if genealogy is not microhistory, there is much for genealogy to learn and use from it.

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