

UCLA

Theory and Research in Comparative Social Analysis

Title

The Historicity of Individuals

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0zj4d90d>

Author

Abbott, Andrew

Publication Date

2004-01-15

THE HISTORICALITY OF INDIVIDUALS

Andrew Abbott

Presidential Address, SSHA

I wish to argue this afternoon that we should reinstate individuals as an important force in history. By this I do not mean a return to great-man history, or great-woman history for that matter. To be sure, social structure can and sometimes does confer on particular individuals extraordinary power to shape the future. But the crucial explanatory question in such cases is not the quality or actions of that individual, interesting as these might be. Rather it is the conditions under which such social structures emerge and stabilize. The real question, for example, is not why it was that Elizabeth Tudor chose not to marry, but rather how it came to be that there was a social structure in which her refusal to marry could have such enduring political consequences. In this sense, great-person history is merely an empirically defined sub-branch of the history of social structures in general. It is not really about individuals qua individuals or even about individuals taken as a group or type, but rather about the conditions that make particular individuals particularly important. So it is not to the great-person mode of thinking about individuals that I urge our return today.

Nor will I urge us to turn to what we usually call "the life course perspective," although some of my own past work on careers (e.g., Abbott and

Hrycak 1990) is certainly cognate with that perspective, at least in methodological terms. In life course approaches, as is well known, we seek the meaning of events not by looking across cases, as we do in variables-based social science. Rather, we look along the cases, along the trajectories, finding the meaning of this or that event by its relation to the unfolding of an individual's experience. This is the same whether we take a narrative view and study the "story" of an individual life with textual methods or we take an analytic view and study an ordered sequence of some variable's values over an individual life using time series methods, sequence analysis, or some other such formal approach. Either way we are interested in the sequential unfolding of the outcomes of a person's life.

This relatively strong focus on outcomes seriously limits the life course approach. The social process doesn't have outcomes. It just keeps on going. Individuals don't have outcomes either, except the invariant one that we must all expect in Keynes's long run. So the implicit analytic focus of life course studies on individual outcomes creates important problems, which we can see by looking at the concept of careers - the central life course concept of my own substantive field, the study of work and occupations. In our study of careers, we often see the individual as a kind of analytically final slate on which the outcomes of social processes are written. Analytically, that is, most studies of careers presuppose a world in which large social forces push little individuals around, placing successive marks on individuals' work experience, which is then taken as the final explanandum. Translating this presupposition

into more substantive language, we might say that big exogenous changes in technology, division of labor, markets, and legal institutions dictate the successive experience of the working individuals caught within them.

But of course the individuals who experience the various intermediate outcomes that make up a career take action in the meantime, while their careers are still in process. And these actions constitute further outcomes of those experiences. One way out of the analytical cul de sac implicit in the life course approach is therefore to focus our attention on those further outcomes - the interpretations and actions through which workers come to respond (usually collectively) to the larger social forces pressing on them. There is of course a literature that does this, our long and distinguished inquiry into the social movements through which workers respond to the larger changes of capitalism. These social movements are precisely the larger social structures that have emerged among workers to respond to the individual pressures placed on them by the larger social structures of the capitalists and, indeed, by aspects of the general social structure that are beyond the capitalists' control, by what we might call the conjuncture.

But this literature also ignores a central fact about individuals. That fact is what I shall call the historicity of individuals. And I will insist that this historicity of individuals is a central force in determining most historical processes. In brief, I shall argue that the sheer mass of the experience that individuals carry forward in time - what we might think of in demographic terms as the present residue of past cohort experience - is an

immense social force. It is all too easy to ignore this force, for we fall into that ignorance almost inevitably when we take up periodized historical thinking as we so often do when we work at the group level. But the vast continuity of individuals over time in fact forbids periodic analysis, however convenient it may be. In short, individuals are central to history because it is they who are the prime reservoir of historical connection from past to present. This is what I mean by the historicity of individuals.

Let me start by saying in a little more detail what I mean by historicity. In the first instance, I mean continuity over time. And I argue that individuals have continuity over time to a degree that social structures do not. Note that we assume this relative dominance of individual continuity whenever we make the common (and somewhat questionable) remark that social change is getting faster and faster. This assertion involves the assumption that individuals last longer than social structures; for only then do they have to endure the changes in the latter and hence come to realize the rapidity of its change. In a world of which it can be said that social change in it is happening faster and faster, that is, it must be the historical continuity of individuals that provides the sinews linking past and present. It is the historicity of individuals that enables us, even forces us to know social change.

Now the belief that social change is happening faster and faster also entails a belief that the imbalance between individual and social structural continuity used to be less. Thus, while some might wish to take it as

axiomatic that individuals have more continuity over time than do social structures, the actual relation between individual and social structural continuity is probably an empirical matter, varying with time and place. Now I agree wholeheartedly that we ought to think about degree of historical continuity as an empirical variable. But for convenience of exposition, I shall here somewhat arbitrarily ground my theory in a stylized understanding of contemporary society. In that stylized understanding, it seems to me, we take it for granted that individuals "last longer" than do most social structures.

This "lasting longer" can involve different kinds of things. There seem at first glance to be at least three principal dimensions to historicity. The first of these is biological. Individuals have bodies that are in some sense physically continuous over time. Although the cells of our bodies are continuously renewed, this renewal is clearly something more precise than is the analogous renewal of, say, a formal organization by gradual replacement of its members. Bodies carry forward records of the past in quite literal ways. They retain disease organisms. They retain an implicit record of past nutrition. They retain the marks of past behavior - of occupation, of exercise, of drug abuse, of unprotected sex. Their immune systems retain a record of past exposure and non-exposure to various pathogens.

Few of these things are retained so exactly by any social structure. Marriage is perhaps the social structure that most closely resembles the individual in this biological sense of historicity, for the various

practices of marriage - sexual, hygienic, residential, dietary, and so on - undoubtedly lead to a pooling of much of this biological heritage. In that literal sense, husband and wife do indeed become one flesh. And marriage like any other dyadic social structure also depends in a quite literal way on the biological life of the two individuals involved. It dies with either one, and hence, it, too, is always dead in the long run. So marriage is somewhat like individuals in its biological historicity.

But beyond relations like marriage, most social structures have nothing like this physical continuity. Members change. Social relations come and go. Even the social structures that are more or less built around biological commonality or common biological history - the genders, kinship structures, lobbying associations for various diseases, and so on - do not have the relatively extensive but at the same time focused biological continuity that characterizes an individual.

Thus the historicity of the individual is in its first sense biological. Biological individuals carry forward with themselves a huge mass of historical experience, written quite literally in and on their bodies. The historicity of individuals is in its second sense memorial. It arises in the peculiar concentration of memory in biological individuals. By this I don't necessarily mean that social structures can't remember anything. I have no problem with thinking that my memories of SSHA meetings long past are SSHA's memories as well as mine. What is different is that the memory of individual humans is concentrated in their biological selves in a way that the memory of

social structures is not. A sizable plurality - perhaps even a majority - of the world's existing memories of Andrew Abbott are concentrated in my head. To be sure, hundreds of thousands of such memories exist elsewhere - in the minds of my parents, teachers, classmates, colleagues, friends, students, relatives, insurance salesmen, even perhaps in the mind of the conductor who punched my ticket on the train Thursday. It is crucial for social theory to remember that the self, in this sense, is strewn all over the social landscape, not absolutely concentrated in one biological locale.

All this granted, however, the individual memorial self is nowhere near as diaphanous as are the memorial selves of social structures. A fairly sizable fraction of the total body of memory relating to Andrew Abbott is in my one head. By contrast, the memories of social structures like SSHA are uniformly scattered in the brains of thousands of members and former members and readers of SSH and hotel staff and so on. There is no sensorium where anything like a majority of sizable plurality of this memory is located. Even Erik Austin - our most excellent Executive Officer - commands only a miniscule fraction of the world's total recollection of SSHA. This distribution of memory, let me repeat, does not mean that SSHA doesn't have a memory. Quite the contrary. As I have found in the last year every time some policy issue arises that involves organizational precedents, there is a very extensive SSHA memory out there, sometimes mutually supporting, sometimes mutually contradictory, sometimes brighter, sometimes fainter, but always distributed to many different people. But this memory, although extensive, is quite widely

and relatively uniformly distributed. Memories of individuals, by contrast, are relatively highly concentrated. This makes the impact of their continuity much greater.

One might note that the memory of SSHA is widely distributed also in the sense that it is contained in a widespread body of records. These records constitute a third zone of historicity, for their whole purpose is the literal recording - and thereby the historicizing - of a social or individual entity. It is somewhat more difficult to make the case that the recorded historicity of individuals exceeds that of social structures. Persons as legal beings have roughly the same historical endurance as do corporations, which are after all *personae fictae*. Thus, there is a legal being who is me, loosely constructed from documents that record my birth, marriage, property, liabilities, contractual obligations, military service, credit record, citizenship rights and obligations, and so on. But this legal being is roughly equivalent to a corporation's legal being, encoded in similar documents concerning foundation, merger, property, liabilities, contractual obligations, and so on. But while corporations thus have a legal historicity similar to that of individuals to some extent, that legal historicity can be truncated and limited in arbitrary ways that a natural person's legal historicity cannot. So even corporations lack the legal historicity of natural individuals.

And the vast majority of social structures are not corporations or even formal organizations. They are things like neighborhoods, occupations,

newspaper readerships, church congregations, social classes, ethnicities, technological communities, and consumption groups: often disorganized or unorganized but nonetheless consequential as social structures. These often do not have formal records. If they do, these records are often of diverse kind, changing rapidly over time. And even their non-recorded memories are scattered through diverse people having diverse relations to them. Only a few members of them have more than a miniscule connection with whole body of those memories. Such social structures have quite diaphanous historicality. Their vast riot of memories is embodied in neither a few persons nor a legal being. Because their memories are widely distributed and their records often weak, such structures can change quickly and easily. There is little to keep them coherent over time. My discipline of sociology, for example, has been something like a social reality for about a century. In that period it has drifted quite rapidly from being a progressive and fairly religious common interest group of do-gooders, reformers, and political academics to a group of highly professionalized social scientists with an exclusive disciplinary association that aims to produce college teachers. Much of the reason for this change lies in the sheer ease with which the discipline can forget its past - a past that is expiring as I speak in decent silence in the minds of emeritus colleagues.

To a first approximation, then, historicality consists in biological, memorial, and recorded continuity. I hope then to have persuaded you that there is at least a possible case to be made that the historicality of individuals, at present, is greater than that of all but a fairly small

handful of social structures. What are the consequences of this? The first consequence is that "larger social forces" no longer tower over the individual in the social process. They tower over particular individuals, as we all know at first hand. But they do not tower over the great mass of individual historicity. For while a single individual is easily erased by death, the large mass of individuals is not. And it contains an enormous reservoir of continuity with the past. This continuity confronts the "large social forces" of our arguments - the division of labor, the technological conjuncture, the coming of capitalism - with a huge, recalcitrant weight of quite particular human material that severely limits what those large forces can in fact accomplish.

This continuity means, for example, that we cannot write a history of periods. We customarily write the history of a population in terms of periods: the Jazz Age, the Depression, the 1960s, the Reagan years, and so on. This makes the historical "selves" of a social structure like "The U. S." seem to be a succession of snapshots. But most of the people involved in the adjacent snapshots of this sequence are of course the same. Of the population who experienced the depths of depression as workers - the people at least 15 in 1930 - about three-quarters were at least 15 in 1920. That is, most people who lived and worked in the depression had also lived and worked in the Jazz Age. (In fact, by this definition about half of them had been workers by 1910, although not necessarily in this country, to be sure.) The depression, that is, largely fell on people who had experienced periods of real prosperity.

This fact is obvious but nonetheless important. The experience of the depression cannot be understood without it.

As the population ages, this reservoir of memory grows deeper and deeper. The median age has risen from 23 to 36 over the last century, and the 75th age percentile has risen from about 39 to 51. We are now 30 years past the great turning point of 1973 - the year that saw the end of Vietnam, the end of the Bretton Woods agreements, the first oil shock, and the Watergate hearings. But 43% of today's population was at least 10 years old by 1973 and can remember the prior era, the moment the French call *les trentes glorieuses*, the thirty glorious years of economic growth and equalization after the war. By contrast, thirty years after the American Civil War, only 24% of those alive were at least ten when it ended. The reservoir of continuity is now almost twice as large. Thus, the historical continuity of closed groups like the population is very much a function of their vital statistics. And maybe the reason we think social change is so much faster is that more of us are around for longer to see the changes.

This may seem like a trivial example. Of course we know this, you say. But we do not write as if we knew this. For instance, my argument about the importance of historicity also implies that there really is no such thing as a population survey with independent waves. All surveys repeated at regular intervals are to a large extent surveys of implicit panels. It was this that Paul Lazarsfeld had in mind when he said once that "the population votes in the same election but not on it," meaning that many voters were using their

current vote to respond to political concerns that arose much earlier and that may have driven their votes in several prior elections. This statement is worth quoting at length here:

For example, the tendencies operating in 1948 electoral decisions not only were built up in the New Deal and Fair Deal era but also dated back to parental and grandparental loyalties, to religious and ethnic cleavages of a past era, and to moribund sectional and community conflicts. Thus in a very real sense any particular election is a composite of various elections and various political and social events. People vote for a President on a given November day, but their choice is made not simply on the basis of what has happened in the preceding months or even four years; in 1948 some people were in effect voting on the internationalism issue of 1940, others on the depression issues of 1932 and some, indeed, on the slavery issues of 1860. (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954:315-6)

Note that these compositional implications will be straightforward only on the assumption of perfect memory. This in turn suggests that we ought to devote serious research to the question of when, how, and why the depth and accuracy of this kind of memory changes. In practice, however, this is not how election research developed. One implication of this immense historicality of individuals was that a relatively small number of people change position from election to election, and hence election research, which was often driven by the pragmatic aim to elect people, focused on change at the margin - the celebrated "floating voter" - rather than on the immense average stability of the system and on the historical mechanisms that produced that stability.

Note also that the impact of this memory and continuity - of historicality - can vary greatly for those events that occur only rarely in the typical life course. Votes occur with great regularity. But for events that occur rarely in life, it turns out that the later in the life course a

given event typically occurs, the shorter the shadow it casts in the overall population memory and the more it is impacted by the shifting age of the population. The American population forgot about a world without Medicare very quickly, because only 9% of the population was in its mid-sixties by 1964 and hence had experienced the earlier world of being old without Medicare. These few disappeared quickly, and so Medicare became an assumed "entitlement" very quickly. By contrast, the draft, which ended only ten years later (in 1973) is still clear in the minds of 28% of America's male population today - thirty years later - because the draft is something that affects young people and so 28% of men still alive thirty years later were subject to it at one point. So reinstating the draft might be easier than eradicating Medicare because more people are around who can remember the draft and so might see a precedent for it. Of course, as this example makes clear, they could also more strongly oppose it because they had had experience of it. The direction of historicity's impact is not given ex ante. What is given is simply the fact that memory will play a much bigger role in any discussion of a draft than it will in a discussion of medicare.

In my examples so far - the case of voting or political positions - we are dealing with the memory of individuals quite literally. But the labor force provides us examples of a much more general form of historicity. This is not the descriptive historicity of memories and records, but a substantive historicity like that of the body.

Let me begin with an example. The workers retiring in the period 2000-

2005 are not just an arbitrary group who happen to be retiring. On the contrary, they bring with them to the moment of the retirement decision quite specific historical baggage. Some of this baggage they can shed, like their educational level; it is not particularly consequential that they are on average considerably less educated than the current labor force. But some of their historical baggage is very consequential. It matters very much that about half the male workers in this retiring cohort are veterans, with a variety of special benefits available to them. It matters very much that during their early work life the union wage and benefit premium was at peak values (peak values from which then senior union workers did very well) but that it then declined rapidly at that point in their careers when they should have been stockpiling retirement money. The financial and practical resources this cohort brings to retirement are thus decisively shaped by their historical labor experience; their past is "encoded" into their present. Because of this encoding, these fourteen million people (the retiring segment of the 55-64 cohort in the American labor force, about 55% of them men) provide an enormous reservoir of continuity, of process and structure, underneath the changing surfaces of the work world of the United States in the last forty years. That continuity comprises personal memory, common social and political experiences and attitudes, common patterns of material resources, and a substantial amount of common labor force experience.

This mass of personal attributes and experience carried forward through time can be thought of as a fourth kind of historicity, which I shall call

substantive historicity. A familiar concept embodying it is the lifetime income concept, which has seen fitful use - more abroad than in the United States - as a measure of inequality. But to see it as a measure of inequality is to see it simply as an outcome, a thing-without-further-consequences, whose impact dies with the individual to whom it was attached. But the processual interest of lifetime income lies precisely in what its own further results are: the things it enables or prevents - an easy or difficult retirement, for example. Every such asset (like every liability) is carried forward through time and presents its possessor at any moment with a variety of possibilities and restrictions.

Taken across a whole cohort, the mass of this substantive historicity is at any moment a central determinant not only of that cohort's experience, but of the whole society around it. For example, the substantive historicity of retiring cohorts means that we cannot envision retirement in an abstract sense, even if we historicize by allowing that sense to change epochally. Every cohort will bring to retirement a varying set of assets and liabilities piled up by the history that they themselves have made and endured. Moreover, since retirement at any given moment involves several cohorts of potential retirees, even a period approach cannot capture the fact that the various cohort segments involved in retirement at any given moment bring a systematically diverse set of encoded experience to retirement, a diversity that will itself determine the politics of retirement in that instant.

What is true at the moment of retirement is true more generally. At any

given moment events and period changes are marking the experience of the various cohorts. Long trends, local fluctuations, idiosyncratic changes all these mark cohorts indelibly - with characteristic work trajectories, with skill and experience sets, with financial resources, with occupational and employment-specific advantage and disadvantage - and all of these marks are carried forward into the future by the simple historicity of individuals.

At any given moment, the sum total of these marks, of this encoded historical experience, constitutes a set of possibilities and constraints within which various actors must work in the present. Major period events - the "larger forces" of most models of work - are not exogenous to this system of historical structures. They are themselves enacted as part of it. For example, employers with new technical designs or bureaucratic conceptions can't hire specific kinds of workers if those kinds of workers don't exist. The encoded historicity of individuals at any given moment, that is, forces employers to respond to its constraints. While employers may make do with non-optimal workers in the short run, in the long run they must respond. They may transform the labor process to make use of existing labor and skill supply. They may force or facilitate migration or move production to new labor markets. They may support institutions to produce particular skills. But they have to respond somehow. Their history is not merely of their own making, nor merely of their making in contest with the social movements of working classes. The encoded mass of historicity is in fact their greatest constraint.

To this point, my argument may seem, if I can paraphrase it brutally, simply an argument that historical demography is too important to be left to the demographers. And we all know that in a thirty-minute talk you can make only one point. So I suppose that's my simple take-away point.

But I would like to leave in your minds the beginnings of two arguments that are related to this one progenitor, one of them a direct blood descendant, the other a marriage connection who brings with her a vast and imposing dowry.

The direct blood descendant argument involves moving beyond thinking about the historicity of individuals to thinking about the historicity of intermediate kinds of groups. I have talked about substantive historicity in the context of groups like the whole population and the labor force. These are large, inclusive groups, from which exit is generally by some straightforward and relatively uniform means - death in the first case and retirement or temporary labor force departure on the other. But when we start to invoke my concept of historicity in the case of, say, individual occupations, we enter a whole new realm. To conceive of the historicity of an individual occupation over time is obviously the first step in any general theory of the history of occupations, but it is extremely difficult. Such a concept must involve all the threads of individual substantive historicity weaving in and out of the occupation through the normal demographic processes of occupational entry, internal mobility, and exit. At the same time such a concept must also involve the more traditional "history" of occupations - the internal story of

the succession of occupational tasks and occupational organizations over time. And it must also involve the contextual history of an occupation's often radically-changing position in a division of labor, the ecological level that was the focus of my own first work on professions (Abbott 1988).

It is this reinsertion of the individual historicity of individuals into the macro- and ecological-level analysis of occupations - analyses that we already have, to a large extent - that is my first cadet argument. Indeed, I had hoped to elaborate it today, using the development of American occupational therapy as an example, but was prevented by the recalcitrance of sources.

The second argument related to my main point about the importance of the historicity of individuals - the argument related by marriage - is a little more elusive. It is this. Once we have used the concept of encoding to recognize the ways in which large amounts of past history are brought into the present - as assets and liabilities and constraints and so on that arise when we remember the historicity of individuals en masse - we then must go on to see how it is that structural rearrangement takes place in the present moment. That is, we must see that is, how encoding moves forward to the next moment, in the process potentially rearranging the whole of social structure.

The utility of the idea of encoding is that it gets us out of the trap presented by the fact that the past is well and truly gone, the fact that there can be no effect at a historical distance. The concepts of historicity and encoding get us out of that trap by reminding us that certain parts of the

past are continuously (re)encoded into the present synchronic social structure. In that moment to moment relation, however, everything in the social structure is at risk, everything can change - even the "big structures." At the same time, something about the process and nature of encoding produces the illusion that there are "big historical structures" which somehow reach over long periods, producing an illusion of long, enduring historicality for certain kinds of social structures. We need to figure out how this illusioning process works. Undoubtedly it involves not only direct synchronic determination of the "causal" sort, but also conceptual reorganization of the kind now often called "cultural." This is this dowry that my argument-by-marriage brings. By recognizing that encoding involves a synchronic phase of rearrangement of things, we open the process of encoding to cognitive and more broadly cultural reorganization. (FN 1)

In summary, then, I have one big point and two cadets. The main point is that historical demography is indeed too important to leave to the demographers, because none of us can ignore the implications of the historicality of individuals. The first cadet argument is that taking historicality seriously gets even harder when you look at intermediate social groups like occupations, social movements, and so on. The second cadet argument is that figuring out the details of how the historicality of individuals and social groups is actually encoded moment to moment will inevitably involve us in thinking about cultural as well as behavioral determination.

The Executive Secretary tells me that when I sit down I cease to be president of the SSHA. Let me then again thank you for selecting me for this honor and avail myself of my option to retire.

FOOTNOTE

1. My argument is thus somewhat more dynamic than that of Norman Ryder, whose classic paper on cohorts and social change focuses mainly on the impact of encoded differences on lives in cohorts ("intercohort temporal differentiation in the various parameters that may be used to characterize these aggregate histories" Ryder 1965:861). The structural consequences envisioned by Ryder are principally stable or statically dynamic ones: for example, static conflict between generations or simple articulation of social change by cohort turnover. He does however recognize the more dynamic implications of cohorts that are emphasized here. His remark that "[a]lthough the stimulus for innovation is most likely to come from the employers, the feasibility of new directions depends in part on how well they have been anticipated by the educational system" (Ryder 1965:848) clearly indicates a recognition of the macrostructural implications of past cohort experience when taken as a present historical mass.

REFERENCES

Abbott, A. 1988. *The System of Professions*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Abbott, A., and A. Hrycak. 1990. "Measuring Resemblance in Sequence Data."

American Journal of Sociology 96:144-185.

Berelson, B., P. F. Lazarsfeld, and N. M. McPhee. 1954. *Voting*.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ryder, N. B. 1965. "The Cohort as a Concept in the Study of Social Change."

American Sociological Review 30:843-861.