

# An existential view of biography and history: Synchronic and diachronic narratives

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*Narrative psychologists have increasingly sought to understand how cultural, collective narratives relate to individual life narratives. Two promising approaches are the study of how cultural master narratives influence personal narratives, and the study of generativity. These developments need to be extended through analysis of the 'politics of storytelling' – the ways in which life and collective narratives are implicated in the sociopolitical milieu. We draw on Sartre's late work on the interrelationship between biography and history. Sartre suggests an individual life can incarnate history either diachronically – when a person narrates their life with a focus on individual temporal development – or synchronically – when a person narrates their life with a focus on power relations between groups in society. We discuss the political implications of each form of narrative; how they relate the individual to history, im/mortality, and generativity; and how they involve forms of false or liberated consciousness.*

**Keywords:** Master narratives; history; phenomenology; existentialism; mortality; false consciousness; generativity.

**A**FUNDAMENTAL issue for the psychology of narratives is the relationship between biography and history: how the story of an individual life relates to a larger story of the collective(s) in which that individual is immersed. Within narrative psychology, this question has largely been addressed in one of two ways. Some have emphasised the entwinement of narrative and culture in human experience, and documented how life stories are developed in relation to, and largely derived from, cultural scripts (Bruner, 1986; Hammack, 2011). Others have focused on the role of *generativity* in human life, the need individuals feel to impact the life stories of future generations, indeed to impact history itself (McAdams & Logan, 2004).

Despite the advances made by many narrative psychologists to interrelate biography and history, the majority of work in this area maintains a certain individualistic and present-oriented (vs. historical) aspect, characteristic also of the psychoanalytic, early existentialist, and humanistic theories from which narrative psychology has taken

inspiration. Perhaps this is inevitable to an extent in a sub-discipline known as 'narrative psychology' – after all, life stories are the stories of individual lives, and psychology is typically understood as the study of the individual mind. Yet we propose that there are theoretical resources available in late existential thought that allow us to approach biography and history in a different way. For example, the relation of these entities lies at the heart of what Michael Jackson (2013) calls the 'politics of storytelling.' It is also the relation to which Jean-Paul Sartre turned in his late writings on the prospect of existential biography (see Caws, 1985; Dobson, 1993).

For Sartre, the central issue is to understand how history both shapes and contours the individual life, and yet each individual life constitutes history. He (Sartre, 1968, 2004) proposes that the proper analytic approach to this entanglement of individual and collective narrative is a *progressive-regressive* method, involving both the sociological elucidation of recurring structural forms in human society (regressive) and the historical-narrative elucidation of the individual life course (progressive).

sive; see Klockars, 1998). Only by studying both the broad historical-social context from which the individual emerges, and simultaneously how the pattern of the individual life incarnates and carries that context forward, can we fully understand how the individual's phenomenological horizon is situated against a backdrop of collective narrative (Steinbock, 1995).

This is a critical and under-recognised intervention for the social psychology of narrative. Perhaps the most relevant efforts in this field to date have stressed that culture provides *master narratives*: hegemonic scripts for identity and development to which the individual must either adapt, compare themselves, or reject in the embrace of *alternative narratives* (McLean & Syed, 2015). This work is very important insofar as it belies a naively humanistic valorisation of the individual's 'freedom' to write the self 'authentically' in opposition to cultural categories, and grounds investigations of how particular ideologies have narratively constrained or excluded marginalised group members. Yet this perspective remains limited insofar as it foregrounds the (culturally derived) form of a life narrative and its implications for psychological adjustment, without exploring in-depth a narrative's socio-political and historical consequences, or the generation of alternate narratives of resistance (see Jackson, 2013). While we are beginning to understand the role that history plays in writing individual biography, there is much left to be said about how individual biographies constitute history – as Mishler and Squire (2020) note, most work in narrative psychology still prioritises the 'micro-social' and the ability of narratives to transform individual lives, as opposed to collective life.<sup>1</sup> Understanding this relationship requires a thoroughgoing analysis of power in society. Critically, it is not only a question of understanding the constrained options for

narrative generativity that are available to members of socially disadvantaged groups – although that is important. It is also an issue of recognising that the freedom to write generative lives enjoyed by the privileged has been historically bought at great cost to these many 'others'; as if the historical record of generativity and immortality were like the Book of Souls in Christian symbolism.

### **The phenomenology of collective narrative and false consciousness**

Before presenting a novel Sartrean theory of the biographical-historical relation, it is important to briefly overview other promising approaches to this issue in narrative psychology. Scholars have recently begun to empirically examine the extent to which personal narratives are constructed against the backdrop of master narratives, which often exert functions of social control and even oppression of the individual (McLean & Syed, 2015). For example, the redemptive story is a dominant cultural script in contemporary US culture, but one which often requires certain resources to attain: Individuals who have fewer temporal and spatial constraints are more readily able to change their lifestyles in order to overcome adversity. Accordingly, recent work is uncovering that individuals from less privileged backgrounds may actually suffer distress from their failure to live up to the standards of a master narrative of redemption (Breen & McLean, 2017).

In many ways, study of the relationship between master and personal narratives raises perennial questions about the nature of *false consciousness*. Commonly understood as the embrace of ideologies which conflict with the objective interests of one's social group or class, we believe false consciousness should also be defined as a defective mode of social cognition, characterized by a reduction of complex, socio-historically

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<sup>1</sup> This is not to discount important work that has been done in the area of psychobiography (e.g. Erikson, 1975; Winter, 2005). However, these studies have (understandably) focused on prominent individuals who are seen as having singularly contributed to historical change. We will focus to a much greater extent on how individual life stories can contribute to *collective* narratives, which in turn can influence the course of history.

determined phenomena to immediately concrete, affectively laden stimuli (e.g. economic downturns are reduced to the alleged movement of a particular immigrant population; Adorno, 2019; Gabel, 1975; Jost, 2020; Thompson, 2015).

False consciousness as perpetuated by cultural master narratives has clearly played an important role in maintaining relations of social dominance throughout history. When and why life stories have constituted an alienated and oppressive – as opposed to a radically transforming and emancipatory – social history would seem to be crucial questions for narrative psychology. Yet since its origins in existential and humanistic theories, the study of life narratives has prioritised phenomenological experience over probing the origins of that experience in power relations. For instance, Ludwig Binswanger (1965) documented in detail the lives of mentally distressed patients plagued by distorted experiences of space and time and obsessions with their body or the threat of social persecution. We believe that the approach Binswanger pioneered, and existential phenomenology more broadly, has considerable potential for advancing the narrative study of false and liberated consciousness. False consciousness is not so much a constant individual defect or psychopathology, but rather a socially, interpersonally and linguistically constructed pattern of bad faith (Augoustinos, 1999; Billig, 2004). If false consciousness is a socially constructed pathology, a distortion of social cognition away from complex social oppression toward immediate symbols of danger, then narrative-phenomenological analysis of temporal-spatial distortions should offer access to ideology. In the stories people tell of their sources and moments of crisis and danger, false consciousness lurks in the symbols employed and the delusions experienced, in what is said and unsaid. Yet to distinguish false from liberated consciousness requires

an analysis that goes beyond the limits of mere phenomenology and relates individual experience to broader sociohistorical forces.<sup>2</sup>

These issues speak to a need in narrative psychology to complicate analyses of individual-social or individual-cultural mediation, such as those of master, alternative, and personal narratives. To the extent that these analyses occur, they tend to focus on how hegemonic cultural elements influence the narration of individual lives. Yet we must bear in mind the existential question posed by Sartre: how is it that history is *actually constituted* by individual lives? How do collective narratives arise from individual narratives? To address such questions, we must further probe what McLean and Syed (2015) call ‘structural master narratives’ – hegemonic constructs about the shape and form of a life narrative. We must also attend to the very structure of collective narratives themselves, the ways in which individuals situate themselves in, internalise and critically appropriate history.

Gary S. Gregg (1991) proposed an innovative approach to the narrative study of lives that fully incorporated the analysis of social power and internalised false consciousness.

*A reality exists outside of the narratives: a reality of social/political inequality into which each individual is ‘thrown’ and in which each individual constructs a self as an ideological tool with which to struggle for power and a semblance of personal dignity... To the extent that narrative psychology leads to the social constitution of the self, to the innermost generative kernel that is the outermost macrosocial structure of inequality, it becomes a study of ideology (p.199).*

In a manner consistent with the existential phenomenology of Binswanger, Gregg detailed the spatial and temporal themes and distortions of his participants’ lives, particularly as they pertained to experiences of

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<sup>2</sup> Despite their clear significance, Binswanger consistently failed to interpret his patient’s persecutory delusions and obsessions in terms of gender, class, and racial factors (Bray, 2001; Gabel, 1975).

suffering and distress. Yet he did so in order to understand how these themes and distortions were shaped by ideological master narratives. By re-examining Sartre's late work on existential biography, we can further consider the ways in which biographical themes either chime with the status quo progression of history, or potentially radically alter it by fostering collective *narrative resistance* (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020). We will do so by considering the form and structure of life and collective narratives, and how they relate to divergent political aims.

### **Synchronic and diachronic narratives; Finite and infinite politics**

In Sartre's (2006) late work, the embeddedness of biography in history means that individual and political narratives are fundamentally entangled. He endeavored to analytically grasp the nature of the historical plane that surrounds humanity by querying how we situate ourselves in relation to this unfinished and enveloping process (see Flynn, 1997). In a few key passages, Sartre identified two primary ways in which this entanglement and envelopment occurs. We will refer to these contrasting patterns as *synchronic* and *diachronic* narratives. These patterns connote different ways of narrating the self in relation to time and space, to political and collective life, and to the limit/border situation of mortality.

In his biography of Flaubert, Sartre (1972/1993) identifies two ways in which history can be narratively 'incarnated' in the temporary existence of an individual or small group:

*Even as synchronically... the macrocosm can become incarnate in a microcosm, thereby becoming a signifier-signified... so diachronically a comprehensible temporalization – the general movement of a society structured one way or another by events that express it and become those structures – can and must become incarnate in the microtemporalizations it produces (p.401).*

He invokes the classic Saussurean terms 'synchronic' and 'diachronic' to make this distinction.<sup>3</sup> Following Saussure (see Stawarska, 2015), we believe the most straightforward way to grasp this distinction is via an analogy to chess. When one narrates events synchronically, one focuses on what and where the chess pieces are at a given point in the game (during a single move), revealing the spatial and hierarchical relationships between them. Thus, in a synchronic narrative, the macrocosm of society at a given moment in history is incarnated in the present microcosm of relations between forces in a local environment. However, diachronic narration is a narrowing of focus to the sequential unfolding of the game across time, isolating the part played by each piece, their past moves and future fate. Thus, in a diachronic narrative, the forward progress of social history is incarnated in the 'microtemporalisation' of the forward movement of an individual life – an individual piece moving on the board.

Sartre's distinction between synchronic and diachronic incarnations parallels one made earlier (in his unfinished *Notebooks for an Ethics*, 1948/1992) between two different

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<sup>3</sup> It is worth commenting that Gregg (1991), with a complex analogy between life narratives and music, also employs the categories of synchronic and diachronic in his study of how lives are shaped by ideology. These categories are also either explicitly or indirectly touched upon in various versions of *dialogical* narrative analysis (e.g. Marková, 2003). These approaches tend to: (1) primarily focus on the individual's infiltration by or appropriation of ideology and social representation; (2) use the concepts of synchrony and diachrony to represent contrasting methodological perspectives or moments. While Sartre does employ the concepts in this second sense, in distinction from the first he also utilises the categories to map the bidirectional relationship between biography and history. Here, we will *primarily* use the categories to demarcate different narrative strategies employed by individuals and groups. Nevertheless, the parallels with these other uses in narrative psychology are suggestive, and could be developed into an even more comprehensive framework for moving from 'local' and individual to global and historical analyses. The concluding section to this paper is a minor step in such a direction.

forms of politics. One form emphasises themes of universality and future orientation:

*There are actions whose maxim presupposes the universal and, consequently, that refer to a virtual humanity...action whose original myth is based on the infinity of the future... Infinite-leaning politics [aim to] Create a peaceful humanity, take away the process of 'war' from the infinite succession of generations... [Infinite politics represents] the universal as mystification (sacrifice of the real to the virtual) (pp.426–427).*

The other political form emphasises the local, the particular, and the historical present:

*There are other [actions] whose goal is strictly finite – such as those that aim at a particular improvement of a situation: a strike by the subway workers... Politics that emphasize finitude try to prevent the coming war by leaving to subsequent generations the concern for preventing their wars (pp.426–427).*

By intercalating these categories with Sartre's later work on historical biography, we can more clearly discern the political implications of divergent forms of narrative and generative concern. A diachronic narrative focused on the individual life course connects readily with an 'infinite politics,' grounded in a reflexive *historicity*, a post-Enlightenment and individualist view of history as the common, singular narrative of humanity (Koselleck, 2004). The 'universal' view of infinite politics is related to what contemporary social scientists often call *cosmopolitanism* (Hammack, 2011). By contrast, a synchronic narrative is grounded in the bounded generativity of the individual's social group. Synchronic narrators invoke a 'finite politics' which casts light on power relations between conflicting social forces, particularly those external, exploitative forces that threaten the very survival and perpetuity of their own group.

As an initial example, consider two types of narrative in ethnographies of two very

different communities in Ireland. Feldman (1991) interviewed men who had been Provisional Irish Republican Army prisoners in the Long Kesh ('Maze') prison near Belfast in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Feldman's analysis, these men experienced their time of imprisonment through the lens of a synchronic narrative, whereby the macrocosm of Irish struggle against foreign rule – recurring and unresolved nearly since time immemorial – was rendered incarnate in the microcosm of the prisoners' mistreatment at the hands of the guards. Through a series of rebellious protests (e.g. hunger strikes), the prisoners' attempted to call international attention to their struggle, even sometimes in conflict with the aims of their paramilitary organisation outside the prison. Thus, they engaged in a finite politics oriented toward their own survival and dignity. Decades later, Rodgers (2018) interviewed a series of gay men who had grown into adulthood in Ireland in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In his analysis, Rodgers identified as recurrent themes the ways in which social stigma had been internalised as self-doubt and criticism by many of the narrators in their youth. However, as Ireland moved toward a more progressive and accepting culture, the maturing men experienced (in a chronological-autobiographical sense) positive development and personal liberation, speaking of the security derived from coming out to family and the meaning derived from activism. These are diachronic narratives in which a personal struggle for redemption is connected to a collective narrative of progress, opening out into the dimension of the future and the infinite political space beyond traditional Ireland and the Catholic Church.

These narrative patterns represent different construals of the unfolding relationship between self and world. At a basic level, they can be summarised thus: 'human experience vacillates between a sense of ourselves as subjects *and* as objects; in effect, making us feel sometimes that we are world-makers, sometimes that we are merely made by the

world' (Jackson, 1996, p.21). An implication is that these divergent narrative patterns are grounded in and afforded by disparate forms of social structure and capital. Only those with a certain level of power and security have the 'luxury' of fully shaping their life from a diachronic perspective. The experience of individual self-creation seems associated with an attitude of historical reflexivity, the belief that as an individual one emerges from history but can shape it in the light of a future horizon (Koselleck, 2004). By contrast, the 'anonymous masses' who cannot afford their next meal, let alone a diachronic legacy, often feel crushed by the weight of world history (Fanon, 1963). For those with fewer resources and capital, narrative resistance resides in the ability to synchronically illuminate the proximal and distal sources of their oppression, the historically grounded and spatially solidified lines of power that are obscured by diachronic ideologies of progress.<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, both of these narrative patterns are important and legitimate in certain respects, yet incomplete in others. They represent tendencies to engage in what Sartre (1956) calls bad faith by prioritising certain dimensions of human life at the expense of downplaying others, e.g. prioritising temporality versus spatiality, the horizon of personal versus that of group existence, responsibility to present versus future forms of life, and so on. The remainder of this essay will explore these patterns in greater detail, what they accomplish and what they obscure, and for whom. Finally, we will consider the prospect of reconciling these patterns in a more complete and humane view of individuality, history, and generativity.

### **Diachronic generativity: Monumental history and death as 'inner limit'**

Ultimately, different forms of political narrative relate to struggles to employ history in the service of individual and collective immortality-striving. Nietzsche (1874/1997) proposed that healthy cultures and individuals achieve a balance of remembrance and forgetting – in other words, history must be selectively narrated such that it retains symbolic and practical efficacy for present existence. Building on a similar tradition of existential thought (e.g. Brown, 1959), Bauman (1992) argued that the narration of history achieves the human need for immortality in the face of death anxiety. However, the writing and preservation of records is an enterprise backed by social capital; money and prestige often determine the uses of history, what is remembered and what is forgotten. 'Political economy of immortality, under closer scrutiny, proves to be just another policy of stratification... The rulers' *biographies* become *history*' (Bauman, 1992, pp.53–58).

Thus cultural, financial, and political elites possess the economic and symbolic resources to pursue primarily diachronic narratives of personal immortality. They actively shape their own life trajectories, bidding to influence the course of history and be singled out for individual fame. Individuals from advantaged social groups pursue what Nietzsche (1874/1997) called the *monumental* vision of history:

*That the great moments in the struggle of the human individual constitute a chain, that this chain unites mankind across the millennia like a range of human mountain peaks, that the summit of such a long-ago*

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<sup>4</sup> Our use of the term 'narrative resistance' is therefore more specific than that of Hochman and Spector-Mersel (2020), or the broader term 'alternative narrative' employed by McLean and Syed (2015). As will be elaborated, in our usage, narrative resistance is a strategy employed by disadvantaged group members to tell life stories that are directly counter to master narratives. However, in our usage, these narratives are not just different in content, but in form, from master narratives, which tend to have a more diachronic structure. Whereas privileged individuals often promote narratives of personal or collective progress along a temporal trajectory, the disadvantaged can resist the coercive or obscuring power of such narratives by speaking to the spatial and hierarchical – i.e. synchronic – disparities which impact them.

*moment shall be for me still living, bright and great – that is the fundamental idea of the faith in humanity which finds expression in the demand for a monumental history... One thing will live, the monogram of their most essential being, a work, an act, a piece of rare enlightenment, a creation: it will live because posterity cannot do without it... [through] the belief in the solidarity and continuity of the greatness of all ages and a protest against the passing away of generations and the transitoriness of things (pp.68–69).*

Empowered individuals with a monumental view of history are thus endorsing an infinite politics. They see their life's work as part of the 'chain of human peaks' that unites people across all places and times. Infinite politics draws on a history of role models, of great individuals who inspire one to rise above facticity and act in service of humanity (cf. Richardson, 1996). In this regard, as Carr (2014) suggested, when individuals construe their life narratives diachronically, they potentially overcome the barriers separating ingroups and outgroups, ancestors and descendants. If spatiality is the dimension of group cohesion and tribalism *par excellence*, then temporality might be considered the unifying dimension of common human experience (Carr, 2014, pp.177–178).

Presented in such terms, this form of immortality-striving seems grandiose. However, expressed more simply, the themes of monumental history and infinite politics are quite common in the life narratives of relatively advantaged (but otherwise 'commonplace') US or European residents. Any time that a US resident asked about the meaning of life indicates that they take inspiration from great historical figures (e.g. Benjamin Franklin's autobiography), and that they want to 'give something back' to 'the children' or 'future generations', they are implicitly drawing on these ideas – namely, that each person's obligation is to follow a calling in order to make a unique offering, according with their talents, to future humanity. And indeed, participants

in psychological studies of generativity in the US frequently draw on this kind of language (e.g. Colby & Damon, 1992; McAdams et al., 1997). Typical is the following statement from a civically active participant in Bellah et al. (1985): 'I want to see the have-nots have power that reflects their numbers, and I want to protect the future of my children and my grandchildren. I feel a historical family responsibility for continuing to work for progressive causes' (p.160). This language blends the particular and the universal – both personal family and 'the human family' – and a temporal focus on the future. The individual life course (maturity and generativity through children) is linked to the historical trajectory of an amorphous human society in a diachronic narrative.

Pursuing monumental history, the individual works 'against death' and seeks 'survival through the work' (Sartre, 1972/1993, p.404). 'The wish comes down to this alone: that an indefinitely prolonged public should reawaken the work by serving it (by using it)' (Sartre, 1972/1993, p.405). This view of the solitary individual working against death was fundamental to early existentialism. According to Heidegger (1962), human *Dasein* is the form of being for which its own being is an issue and a question, and as such, we are fundamentally characterised by anticipation and openness. For Heidegger, we only become active narrators of our own lives if we embrace an authentic mode of Being-toward-death, an orientation in angst and care toward the prospect of our personal mortality; and, viewed from the opposite direction, it is the awareness of death that compels us to author our life story, a task which otherwise would be indefinite and possess no urgency (Carr, 1991).

This classically existentialist conception views death from within the immanence of the individual lifespan, as an *inner limit* that is vital to the construction of the self's diachronic narrative. When death is viewed as an inner and ultimate limit to the self, it emerges as the motivational stimulus driving each person to narrate their lives,

to extract a sense of coherence from the events of their lives and craft a storied legacy (Becker, 1973; Brown, 1959). The fact of one's imminent death, Heidegger (1962) asserts, is what ultimately individualises each of us on an isolated, future-oriented temporal trajectory.

In the culturally individualist echelons of privileged modern society, generativity is the ability to seek monumental history by contributing to infinite politics. Measures of generativity used by psychologists reflect this with items emphasising personal work and immortality: 'I have made and created things that have had an impact on other people', 'Others would say that I have made unique contributions to society', 'I feel as though my contributions will exist after I die' (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992, p.1015). Positive scores on such measures are highly predictive of political involvement and psychological adjustment in the US (McAdams & Logan, 2004). The narratives of these generative individualists express linear and spiraling senses of time (Brockmeier, 2000), in which the individual's horizons, accomplishments, and trajectory ideally expand in continuous forward and positive movement (McAdams, 2013).

The individual authentically motivated by knowledge of their own death, in looking to their own futural possibilities, endeavours to bend history, however slightly, to their will. They glimpse what is lacking in contemporary society and seek to go beyond facticity toward those possibilities, to draw on a personal future in order to act in and alter the collective present.

Many individuals in contemporary elite circles of society lack this generative vision of infinite politics. In a global society of post-modern materialism, it is in fact increasingly difficult to marshal such a vision for the self, rather than lose it in the endless asceticism of overwork, or in the tranquilising narcissism of consumer behavior, luxury, and addiction (Bauman, 1992; Bellah et al., 1991). The individual who exists inauthentically – as Heidegger would say – denies their capacity

and responsibility to alter factual givens, and their self is fragmented across a space of fleeting, disconnected moments (Brockmeier, 2000). The life narrative loses coherence and a relationship to human history.

However much existential thought may laud the authentic individuals who can overcome this fragmentation, it is critical to note that monumental history, personal immortality-striving, and infinite politics are all afforded by social capital and the historic and ongoing exploitation of the larger part of the world's population (who have been to a considerable extent excluded from these existential and narrative modes). In the last half-millennium, diachronic narratives have both supported and been supported by the processes of colonialism and capitalism. The 'annihilation of space by time', which provides the structural nexus against which individual diachronic narratives can develop, has been a complex historical process of increasing spatial mobility and temporal control for elites (Butler, 2012; Lefebvre, 1992). This process has resulted in space and locality having less determinative significance for the identity of advantaged individuals, who instead seek immortality in the temporal dimension and ideologies of universal humanism. What is routinely overlooked in narrative psychology is the extent to which this temporal freedom for the few is bought by forms of spatial exploitation, dependence, and servitude for the many (Maldonado-Torres, 2004, 2008). For those who have been blocked from the centers of social power that grant access to monumental history, different modes of generativity and politics must be sought.

### **Synchronic generativity: Antiquarian and critical modes**

Despite the seemingly prosaic nature of diachronic narratives about 'giving back' and 'doing good', if Bauman (1992) is correct then this kind of life story is not afforded for the majority of people. Given that contemporary history has largely ceded to the control of major nation-states (primarily the



Euro-American and Asian colonising powers of the Global North), the advantaged individuals who foster diachronic narratives (such as many of the participants in the foregoing studies of generativity) largely stem from these power centers. For those on the periphery, or those in the center who lack social capital, there have been alternative forms of narrative and relation to history available.

In smaller-scale 'societies without a state' (Clastres, 1987) prior to or still remote from imperial influence, generative people were also largely able to craft narratives of their personal merge with a historical tradition (e.g. Radin, 1927). However, these narratives were much more spatialised – pertaining to local people and places – and past-oriented than the historically reflexive narratives of contemporary advantaged individuals (e.g. Stürzenhofecker, 1998; Tinker, 2004). Diachronic narratives assume a world of constant flux, in which the knowledge of one generation is likely obsolete by the time the next generation comes of age (Bell, 1976). Hence the stress in these narratives on making a personal 'contribution' to history: the diachronic narrator oriented toward death as an inner limit

*...confuses the finitude of the enterprise and that of his own life... he tends to imagine the significations of his project only insofar as he produces them himself, in his lifetime, and to consider as non-sense whatever will happen after his death, a constellation of transformations in which he knows he will not recognize himself and for which he does not take responsibility (Sartre, 1972/1993, p.406).*

By contrast, synchronic narratives in smaller-scale societies connect group identity to a delimited place, a homeworld, and simultaneously orient the individual toward the past in a manner that fuses the idea of the homeworld with the notion of accumulated and continuous experience. People conceive of the life story not so much as the diachronic emergence of an individual, but rather as the interlocking presences of multiple generations, individuals at different stages of life (or

afterlife), synchronically co-existing in webs of interdependence (Spencer, 2003; Yamada, 2004). For example, in the Dreaming stories that are handed across generations among some indigenous Australians, an experiential knowledge of Outback terrain is transmitted in the form of personally significant stories about one's ancestors and relation to the more-than-human world (Jackson, 1995). 'The presence of the past is distinct from the presence of the future. It makes sense to say that experience based on the past is spatial since it is assembled into a totality, within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present, without, however, providing any indication of the before and after' (Koselleck, 2004, p.260).

Nietzsche's (1997) category of *antiquarian* history sums up well the interrelationship between a sense of past and a sense of place that inheres in the attachment of identity to a synchronic, collective narrative.

*The history of his city becomes for him the history of himself; he reads its walls, its towered gate, its rules and regulations, its holidays, like an illuminated diary of his youth and in all this he finds again himself, his force, his industry, his joy, his judgment, his folly and vices. Here we lived, he says to himself, for here we are living; and here we shall live, for we are tough and not to be ruined overnight. Thus with the aid of this 'we' he looks beyond his own individual transitory existence and feels himself to be the spirit of his house, his race, his city (p.73).*

Given their focus on relationships between people in local environments – including the hierarchical relationships of interdependence between people and debts owed to ancestors who continue to exert influence in the present – these 'antiquarian' narratives of smaller-scale or rural communities have a strong synchronic element, superimposing spatial onto temporal relations (Eliade, 1959; Gauchet, 1997).

As Bauman (1992) contended, with the rise of both internal (class-based) and external (imperial) processes of colonisation, Nietzsche's antiquarian mode of

history became important in a different sense. To control the masses of people within their expanding borders, nation- and economy-building elites of the 'modern' era mobilised ideologies of nationalism to provide symbolic immortality to the disadvantaged. Nationalism and modern ethnocentrism – with symbolic emphasis on 'the people' threatened by external 'others' – are also highly synchronic and connected to finite politics (Gabel, 1975; Sartre, 1948/1992), but these are synchronic narratives of false consciousness, largely exported to the masses by elites. Interestingly, the notion of indebtedness to and glorification of the past returns in 'modern antiquarian' narratives of false consciousness, but often now as a story of decline, of the destruction of community by contemporary cultural values (e.g. Bell, 2016). Practicing finite politics, the ethnocentrist is primarily concerned with maintaining or resurrecting the ingroup's dominance in the face of such threats, without a comprehensive vision for how their actions may determine humanity's future. And rather than illuminating lines of objective exploitation running from power centers to the lives of the peripheral masses, false consciousness obscures these relations by amplifying subjective experiences of the profaning Other (e.g. Morelock & Narita, 2018).

Yet beyond the traditionalist and ethnocentrist forms of antiquarian history, there is an alternate narrative road for the embattled peoples of the postcolonial world and the disadvantaged group members of the Global North. This is a mode of synchronic

narrative and finite politics connected to what Nietzsche (1997) called *critical* history. In this emancipatory form of narrative resistance, members of perennially marginalized groups re-claim the right to make their own history by drawing critical attention to uneven lines of power running from social centers to the periphery. This impulse to liberated consciousness lies behind movements such as Marxism and decolonialism. It lies behind various contemporary forms of spatial politics (Butler, 2012; Castells, 1983; Lefebvre, 1992), in which the disenfranchised creatively utilise the marginal spaces that have been relegated to them, while also calling attention (e.g. via protests) to the ways in which environments have been policed, polluted, and racialised. It lies behind attempts to revitalise an indigent theology that can address radical environmental calamities by re-orienting social policy toward spatial over temporal categories (Deloria, 1999; Tinker, 2004). Those whose future has been stolen must practice finite politics.

Synchronic narratives of resistance arise when members of historically oppressed groups combine Nietzsche's categories of the antiquarian and critical historical modes to interpret their experiences of suffering. In more psychological terms, narrative resistance is more likely among individuals who both have a strong sense of fused identity with a persecuted group, *and* a critical-historical consciousness of their group's oppression.<sup>5</sup> In modern (post-)industrial society, antiquarian without critical history typically engenders false consciousness and ethnocentrism; whereas critical without anti-

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<sup>5</sup> It is beyond the scope of the present article to develop a detailed account of how individuals (particularly those from marginalised groups) can develop both the sense of identity fusion and the critical consciousness necessary for synchronic narratives of resistance, but this is an important area for research. Suffice it to say this is not a common combination. Indeed, given the pervasive but also socially constructed nature of false consciousness, what is probably most common among members of disadvantaged groups is significant internalisation of master narratives combined with ambivalence and occasional moments of critical insight or resistance (e.g. Atkinson, 2010; Parish, 1996; Snyder, 2016). To identify the development of a combined antiquarian-critical sense, one must account for the role of social capital in various forms (e.g. McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001), as well as the interplay of countervailing social forces (e.g. Gaventa, 2018). Media and ideology largely act to suppress historical consciousness and group identity (Jackman, 1994). On the other hand, activism, cultural movements, and education are some of the most common and important routes of consciousness-raising, and many resources in this area have been developed by feminist, critical race, and indigenous theorists (e.g. Coulthard, 2014; hooks, 1994).

quarian history leads to egocentric *cynical reason* (Sloterdijk, 1987). This speaks to the importance of a balanced historical sense for disadvantaged group members (Nietzsche, 1874/1997).

For individuals crafting synchronic narratives with critical-historical aims, mortality takes on a different phenomenological guise. Experiences of violence and suffering can be incarnating of broader systemic forces (Sartre, 2006); synchronic narratives connect an individual's experience of personal chaos and abjection via a web of symbols to the recurrent historical experience of their social group (as when a Christian cancer patient likens their pain to that of Christ on the cross). A primary purpose of a synchronic narrative of resistance is to illuminate sources of what Sartre (2004) would call *apocalyptic* suffering. This is suffering inflicted on group members by external forces *because* they are group members, suffering which therefore ultimately threatens the extinction of the group (any group member could be the next victim). Obviously, this occurs in historic circumstances of ethnic conflict or attempted genocide, but it can also take place more spontaneously; e.g. a threatened group may be formed when police state forces surround and enclose a particular neighborhood to quash a protest. The threat of such suffering – whether materially present in the moment or retold in a collective narrative – thrusts group members into an apocalyptic phenomenological state, in which the death of a fellow group member is experienced in a profoundly *relational* way; not as an inner limit to the self's transcendence, but as an *outer limit* to the group. Each death of a member reduces the group's numeric strength and capacity for solidarity, and signals to the surviving individuals that any one of them could be next. Each death is a reminder that historical and material processes, in the relentless march of time, threaten to eventually overwhelm and dissolve the group.

*History reveals itself to warring individuals and groups as riddled with holes... [Each group member death] manifests itself as a cessation of History, even – or above all – if it is the historical struggle that has provoked it... The deep meaning of the event is lived by the masses themselves as a non-transcendable, shocking inner fault of History* (Sartre, 2006, pp.313–314).

It is through the witnessing and remembrance of group member deaths catalysed by external forces that surviving members become deeply aware of the fragility of the group. Synchronic narratives of apocalyptic suffering arise when individuals' attempts to pursue generativity in the diachronic mode are blocked by oppression. Under such circumstances, one no longer looks ahead toward the end of the chess game, but rather looks from side to side at the empty spaces where one's fellow pieces once stood. A synchronic narrative facilitated by the critical mode of history reveals how these deaths incarnate obscured connections between centers of power and exploited peripheries, and how the past has shaped the present.

As in the case of diachronic narratives, the synchronic mode is simple but compelling when enacted in the everyday language of living, suffering people. A straightforward example can be found in Kosek's (2004) work with people of Hispanic heritage in Northern New Mexico, some of whom struggle with the symptoms (poverty, drug trade) of historic dispossession by the U.S. government of land and ways of life. Some of the people with whom Kosek spoke and lived placed great significance on their belief that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo guaranteed them rights to land that the US government had subsequently stolen. One of Kosek's informants told him of

*...sites and events [that] are no longer entirely visible on the landscape, but [which] form part of her vision...Some of these memories are her own, like those of the intersection in which she witnessed her cousin killed by a car in the*

*1970s, or those of the forest being carved into sharply delineated squares for logging, still visible on the mesa to which she points, thirty years later still not regenerated. Others are memories she inherited... of her ancestors who in the 1700s were granted rights to the land where she now lives – and to the forest and waters of what is now Forest Service land... She believes that 'our [Hispanos'] future is based on the past. If we forget the past we have no future... without the [land grant afforded by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo] we are just another group of poor people. With the grant we are different... we have a history that's older than this country and older than the Anglos' [history] here' (pp.329–330).*

Synchronic narratives of the historically dispossessed envision the local landscape as 'riddled with holes', the graves of ancestors and contemporaries struck down by the whims of exploitative forces. They ground a finite politics that does not seek immortality in the self's contributions to the human drama so much as restitution, recognition, and survival for one's group.

One problematic for such narratives lies in the question of how they may be re-connected to a sense of open human connection, possibility, and futurity, rather than becoming ensnared by fatalism and parochialism. The danger of an apocalyptic synchronic narrative is that the persecuted group member may become fixated to the origin story of their group's suffering, and see in the future only an eternal recurrence of the same persecution. Practicing a finite politics that prioritises the preservation and liberation of their group, the individual's life project may become 'a preservation that fossilises the enterprise' until 'the moment when the times will cease to support it, when it will be prolonged by inertia without being nourished by social life as temporalisation and so necessarily doomed to sclerosis, to repetition, to stereotype' (Sartre, 1972/1993, pp.402, 406).

A crucial issue for politics, then, is the balancing of finite and infinite modes – making concrete interventions in the

present, sensitive to extant lines of social power, without neglecting a sense of historical responsibility and orientation toward a future humankind. A related issue for scholars is that of combining synchronic and diachronic perspectives to attain a total understanding of the motives for generativity and immortality in narrative.

### **Combining the synchronic and the diachronic**

We have arrived at two kinds of narrative that differ in the way they relate the individual to death and history. But these could also be understood as two different sides of the same narrative, or two different narrative-phenomenological methodologies. Given that individual life narratives constitute, and are embedded in, collective narratives, one could say that when we focus on the view from within the individual lifespan – with the self's imminent death as an inner limit – we are practicing classic *genetic* phenomenology. However, if we approach the same life story from an 'external' phenomenological view – that of groups and generations situated in history, with the death of each member experienced as an outer limit of the collective – we transition to a *generative* phenomenology, concerned with the continuity and change of experience across lifespans (Steinbock, 1995). To a considerable extent, this distinction also maps onto Sartre's progressive-regressive method, which sought to combine a sociological understanding of the patterning of groups and institutions with a historical understanding of how individual and collective acts propel society onward into the future.

We propose an analyst needs to adopt different approaches to understand both of these aspects of a given event. Any act is part of both an individual's life narrative, and the collective narrative(s) of the group(s) to which they belong. Both the genetic and the generative phenomenology of a given act are necessary for comprehension of social history, and so alternating focus between the diachronic and synchronic is also neces-

sary. Depending on the perspective we take, either the individual's capacity for transcendent self-creation or their grounded facticity in social structures will appear as prominent and defining. For this reason, Sartre (1968) came to assert that 'we must conceive of possibility as doubly determined' (p.94). From the vantage of the acting individual, possibility is 'the presence of the future as *that which is lacking* and that which, by its very absence, reveals reality.' And yet, 'On the other hand, [possibility] is the real and permanent future which the collectivity forever maintains and transforms.' For example, the individual's capacity for self-creation inheres largely in their vision of the possible selves that are available to them in the future. Medical positions not yet filled 'constitute for certain people a real, concrete, and *possible* future. These persons *can* go into medicine.' Yet the contours of an individual's limiting facticity are shaped by (inequitable) social structures, which dictate the number of impossible selves that are seemingly unattainable. 'Every man is defined negatively by the sum total of possibles which are impossible for him; that is, by a future more or less blocked off. For the underprivileged classes, each cultural, technical or material enrichment of society represents a diminution, an impoverishment' (p.95).

Building on these observations in *Search for a Method*, Sartre (1968) presented an example of how human life unfolds in the interrelation of personal and collective narratives. Specifically, he gives the case of a black Englishman serving on an air base choosing to commandeer a plane in defiance of segregation laws, fly it across the Channel, and crash it. From the perspective of the individual man, the prejudiced law that prevents him from serving as a pilot 'becomes for him a *subjective* impoverishment... [which] he lives as a personal obsession; aviation becomes *his* possibility as a *clandestine future*' (pp.95–96). But as he transcends historical facticity in the act of flying the stolen plane, 'this denied future reflects to him the fate of

his "race" and the racism of the English. The *general* revolt on the part of [black people] against colonialists is expressed *in him* by his particular refusal of this prohibition. He affirms that a future *possible for whites is possible for everyone*' (pp.95–96). According to Sartre, to fully comprehend the meaning of this act, we must approach it both as a moment of diachronic transcendence in a life narrative *and* as a reality shaping the synchronic boundaries of a social group. We must envision the duality of the man's death in the crash as an inner limit to his own life *and* an outer limit of the group for any black Englishman who learns of it.

*We must understand... the complex relation between the collective revolt and the individual obsession... It is impossible, then, to separate these two significations or to reduce one to the other; they are two inseparable faces of a single object. And here is a third: the relation to death, that is, the refusal and assumption, both together, of a forbidden future. This death expresses at the same time the impossible revolt of his people, hence his actual relation with the colonizers, the radical totality of his hate and refusal, and finally the inward project of this man – his choice of a brief, dazzling freedom, of a freedom to die. These various aspects of the relation to death are in turn united and are irreducible to one another* (Sartre, 1968, p.109).

To address the question of how the black pilot's biography relates to the history of his social group is to crucially examine how an individual life incarnates broader historic and systemic forces (Caws, 1985; Sartre, 1972/1993). From a methodological standpoint, this can only be accomplished through multilevel analysis – intensive documentation and synthesis of both the narrative material of individual lives, and the structural material of society at a given moment in history. Although this kind of work is rare and difficult, it is not unprecedented – for instance, Sartre performed such efforts in his biography of Flaubert, and a more

recent (and disciplinarily conventional) example can be seen in Hammack's (2011) work on the relation between master and personal narratives in contemporary Israel. From a philosophical standpoint, narrative researchers must be willing and able to practice both a 'hermeneutics of restoration' which accepts an individual's diachronic life narrative on its own terms, and a 'hermeneutics of demystification' which facilitates critical, synchronic deconstruction.

*Demystification thus may serve the analysis of the structuralization of the past while a hermeneutics of restoration captures the representation of the future. Both forms of interpretation tenuously meet in an effort to understand the ever-shifting present* (Josselson, 2004, p.21).

We propose that narrative psychology, reflecting the individualistic imperatives of contemporary 'Western' culture, has largely focused on the diachronic and future-oriented, and downplayed the synchronic, aspects of this problem. Indeed, marginalised group members have been compelled to formulate their experiences via synchronic narratives largely as a compensatory response to widespread cultural failures to scrutinise spatial and hierarchical interdependencies and exploitations from a critical-historical lens. Recognition of the distorted and harmful spatial relationships produced by capitalism and (post-)colonialism is essential to expose the workings of 'slow' and 'structural' forms of violence in the contemporary world (Galtung, 1969; Nixon, 2011), and the ways in which

the personal life *trajectories* of the disenfranchised have been impacted by the restricted *temporal landscapes* in which they must live (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). One way to seek greater awareness of these phenomena is by critically examining and contrasting life narratives produced by a range of individuals from a variety of advantaged and disadvantaged social groups, and to consider ways in which those narratives have political consequences, contributing to the reproduction or disruption of extant social categories and structures. Critically, as Sartre would argue, this approach does *not* entail ignorance of the role of diachronic striving for personal immortality in the lives of the disadvantaged. Every life story must be understood – from a certain viewpoint – as a temporal trajectory bounded by the inner limit of death, and contributing to the endless mosaic of universal history. But from another point of view, each life is also bound to space, and each death is a local cataclysm in the environment of survivors. The weight of death and space is felt more heavily by some.

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