The Media Construction of Family History: an analysis of “Who Do You Think You Are?”

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Abstract

Genealogy, once a specialised research practice, is increasingly a common social practice enabled by digitization and cultural intermediaries that enable the construction of family histories. The idea of finding out about oneself through an exploration of the character and lives of ancestors is a growing social practice reflected in popular culture. Tracing one’s personal traits through past family members and extending the sense of family and identity back in time potentially enrich personal identity and link personal, social and cultural memory. In this paper, an episode of the BBC popular TV programme Who Do You Think You Are? is presented in which, it is argued, the celebrity guest embarks on a quest to construct a personalised history of the present as a way of resolving personal problems and understanding the basis of their celebrity. The implications of this analysis are drawn out for understanding the media representations of genealogy as a social practice and the media representation of the relation between history and memory.

Introduction

In episodes of the BBC TV programme Who Do You Think You Are? (WDYTYA) celebrities explore their family histories and reflect on the character and social contexts of their ancestors’ lives. In this paper, I offer an analysis of the programmes as a narrative form that combines personal, social and cultural memory in the construction of a personalised history of the present. As a genre, the programme is shown to be a hybrid mix of storytelling, documentary, reality TV and travel programme. In each episode, the celebrity guest is central, providing the motivations for the narrative quest, appearing in every scene initially accompanied by those who have living memories of the family and then by a variety of experts and commentators who unravel the deeper history of the family. The celebrity provides the rationale for the programme as a search for the origins of their own character and an explanation of their celebrity status, which is complemented by commentary and analysis provided by a narrator and a variety of experts. A variety of implications of this analysis are explored for understanding the media representation of social
practice and of memory and history and for the relation between media representation and the sociology of the family.

There has been a burgeoning of interest in popular genealogy as a cultural activity in which individuals construct their family history as a way of reflecting on their sense of self as embodied in their family which also reflects social class position and historical transformation (Bottero, 2012;2015; Kramer, 2011a&b). Constructing family histories is enabled by the increasing availability of digital archives including historical and public records and the emergence of online cultural intermediaries both private (e.g. ancestry.com) and public libraries (Barnwell, 2015). Digitization affords the opportunity for people to engage in practices that previously required specific knowhow, expertise and technical resources (Bottero, 2015). The growth of popular genealogy is reflected in popular culture through a variety of television programmes that explore the relation between memory, family history and broader historical events or periods (Holdsworth, 2011). In this paper, I offer an analysis of the BBC TV programme *Who Do You Think You Are?* (WDYTYA) as a representation of the practice of family history making.

Both popular cultural representations of family history making and the growing social practice of genealogy have been explored in cultural (Kramer, 2011a&b; Little, 2010) and sociological (Bottero, 2012; 2015) terms. Cultural analysts argue that programmes such as WDYTYA frame the practice of popular genealogy by modelling the resources and expertise available to support identity construction through the tracing of a family tree. Kramer (2011a,b) also argues that constructing family history is a cultural practice that expresses and consolidates kinship ties and the construction of autobiographical memory. Drawing on Bourdieu (1963), Bottero (2012; 2015), and Little (2010) argue that popular culture and everyday practices of family history are an extension of ritual practices such as the curation, display and viewing of family photographs that establish and maintain the imaginary of the social class position of family and family members (Thompson, 1995; Taylor, 2005).

WDYTYA is a fascinating mixture of personal reminiscence and reflection, social memory co-constructed by the celebrity guest with friends and family, and the construction of cultural memory through the display of archive film records, ‘expert’ analysis and historical documentary. In this paper, I examine the way these different knowledge constructions related to memory and history are woven into a narrative structure through the activities of the programme participants. These ideas problematize the distinction often made in the literature on media and memory between linear media and digital and social media in which the former are understood as linked to macro sociological modes of ceremonial and collective consciousness in contrast to digital media which is understood as embedded in social practice (van Dijck, 2007; Lohmeier & Pentzold, 2014). In contrast, the idea developed here is that WDYTYA constructs memory both as a complex of personal, social and cultural memory and as social practice rather than providing a ceremonial construction of collective memory (Couldry, 2003; Hepp, 2013; Dayan and Katz, 1992).

The paper also challenges, following Holdsworth (2011), the idea of the mediatization of memory in which social and cultural memory are transformed through a media logic of immediacy that engenders forgetting, the replacement of memory and history with nostalgia, and the commercial exploitation of history as
heritage (Niemeyer, 2014). In contrast, WDYTYA is analysed as contributing to a figuration of the role of memory and history through narratives of self, family and place (Roberts, 2012). This brings into play a further feature of the programme that arises from the guest celebrity participants being for the most part individuals who were children in the second half of the twentieth century. Consequently, family history reflects major historical events such as world war, holocaust, the end of empire and the associated displacement of peoples reflected in disjunctions in family life and long term sociological transformations of modernity such as urbanization, globalization and individualization through which the meaning of family has been transformed (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Guests’ reflections on family history are therefore more than personal memories of past events and identity construction as they encompass understanding of and reflections on social history (Fivush, 2008; Assman, 2010).

The Programme

Each episode of WDYTYA is a stand-alone programme in which a guest celebrity uses genealogy to search for past family members (Holdsworth, 2011). With a regular audience of over 4 million, peaking at 7 million for JK Rowling’s episode in 2011, the show was first aired in 2004 and completed its thirteenth series in 2016. The format has spread, especially to countries with UK connections including the US, Canada and Australia (Kramer, 2011a). During the programme, ancestors are discovered, details of their lives and characters are revealed and accounts of the social and historical context in which they lived are explored. Episodes take the form of a heroic quest narrative (Labov & Waletzky, 1997) following the celebrity through a series of encounters and visits to the places in which family members lived as the arc of the narrative travels through both space and time (Holdsworth, 2011). Temporally, episodes follow three broad phases. Starting in the present, episodes engage the guest celebrity’s personal memory of childhood and family life. Then, in collaboration relatives, neighbours, family friends and associates celebrity guests construct a social memory of the past as an imaginary of the family. The narrative then moves beyond living memory into historical time with the help of a variety of professionals such as archivists, historians and librarians who help the celebrity to construct and interpret longer family history. Place plays a central role in episodes as celebrities visit the homes and locales inhabited by their ancestors. The celebrity is the ‘star of the show’, appearing in almost every scene and the show is presented partly through their experience of people and places, through their reflections and through their emotional reactions. The guests are accompanied, however, by an almost equally present, although unseen narrator whose voice over contextualises and explains the social context of the lives of ancestors and the work of various experts who support the genealogical quest.

In the next section of the paper I present an interpretation of the representation and reflection on family, history and identity in WDYTYA using one episode as a case study supplemented by observations from other episodes across the different series. The programme I have chosen to take as my case study is the
first programme in the first BBC series on Bill Oddie. Oddie is a musician, comedian, scriptwriter and conservationist who since the 1970s has had a successful television career first as part of the comedy trio *The Goodies* and as a comedy scriptwriter and in recent decades fronting programmes on environmental issues. In addition to comedy sketch writing, Oddie wrote several songs that were hits for *The Goodies* in the mid 1970s. He is typical of guests on *WDYTYA*, celebrities who are well known and established but not in the first rank of international stars.

**The home and a problematization**

Episodes of *WDYTYA* often start in the home of the celebrity with other family members or friends present signalling that the programme is not focussed primarily on their public lives but on their personal lives embedded in their family histories. In the opening scene of Bill Oddie’s episode he is sitting in his living room, on his own, playing the harmonica and thinking aloud. Bill reflects on his motivations for engaging in a mediated quest to construct his family history. He feels the lack of family connections: “I’ve always whinged a bit that I don’t have much of a family” “No brothers, no sisters, no cousins, nothing like that … no extended family”. Oddie also reflects on the role of family secrets in his feeling of disconnection: “And I sort of sense that I didn’t know the truth, even about the people that I do remember.” The scene switches to the garden where his daughter and her two young children, his grandchildren, join him. Bill is playing with one of the children and the other is held in the arms of his daughter. In his commentary on this scene Bill presents a further motive for the quest of wanting to be able to provide his daughter and grandchildren with an account of family history. Such opening scenes root the episodes in the present and in the private lives of very public figures. The setting in the home, amongst relatives or friends reflects both the symbolic and material grounding of the family in the family home. Starting in a place also symbolizes that the narrative is a journey that sets out from the security of home to venture out across time and space.

After the opening credits, Bill gives some more personal reasons for participating in the programme. He recounts that during treatment for depression he confronted feelings of abandonment as a child and the realization that he had few memories of his mother so that “this isn’t curiosity, this journey, it’s self-help”. Bill’s reason giving, in common with other guests on *WDYTYA* is part of the performance of family history on *WDYTYA*. The reasons are presented as disruptions to present feelings of security in identity and family in keeping with the quest narrative in which the hero sets out to deal with disruption through the quest. These problematizations of the present provide the starting point for a personalized history of the present (Foucault, 1977; Garland, 2014), in which the traits of the celebrity and their personal problems are traced back to family traits and myths and explained through analysis of historical conditions of emergence of self, family and place. In Bill Oddie’s case, two lines of problematization are interlinked: his mental health and his sense of detachment from family. The journey of discovery to trace family history, the deployment of genealogical methods and historical analysis are constructed as potentially finding answers to these problems.
The Quest Begins

The quest is constructed as a series of encounters or tasks in which various protagonists appear to help or hinder the hero and commonly, several such scenes are acted out before resolution is achieved and the hero returns home. Bill travels from his home in London to his childhood family home as described by the narrator: “Bill is heading for the Birmingham suburb of Quinton... [images are presented from the car window of the journey arriving at a suburban district with semi-detached houses] ... This is the first time he has been back to his childhood home in forty years”. Such interludes are important to the narrative structure of episodes representing the distance travelled in both time and space during the quest and providing moments for reflection by the guest celebrity and opportunities for the narrator to comment on the last encounter and frame the next, to provide background details on family history and broader historical commentary. This interlude is accompanied by a screening of a montage of photographs representing Bill’s personal memory. The stills are examples of the kind of photographs that often appear in family albums. Here they are used as episodic images representing memories of childhood and appear as disorganized, disconnected, without sound and voice; fragments. The quest aims to bring coherence to these partial and fragmented personal memories. Bill is shown walking on the street of his childhood home which he has not returned to for many years. A moment of nostalgia (Niemeyer, 2014) follows as Bill recalls playing cricket in the street outside his house. He is next shown in the hallway of the family home. He walks and talks around the house remembering that it was a mess; a ‘tip’, reinforcing the idea of a neglected childhood. Bill remembers that his father allowed his grandmother to dominate the house turning it into “… an old ladies house”. Bill recounts a memory of his mother as a “funny isolated picture of her” of going into the bathroom and finding her sitting, naked in the bath. These scenes are strongly evocative of the links between place and memory (Holdsworth, 2011) and reflect another important theme as we follow Bill’s emotional reactions to emergent memories and places.

Early encounters in episodes of WDYTYA commonly explore the period of ‘living memory’ through the reminiscences of family members, neighbours, friends and associates who have been witnesses to family life. These early encounters are a dramatization of the practice of families looking at the family photograph album or displaying family photographs in the home (Bourdieu, 1963). Through these practices family memories and myths are co-constructed as social memories. Standing in the street outside the family home is Trevor, a childhood friend and neighbour who recalls that Bill’s mother was a talented pianist. Bill has no memory of his mother playing the piano; he has forgotten an important characteristic of his mother’s life that links to his celebrity as a musician. Trevor also recalls, which Bill also appears to have forgotten, that his mother had home visits from hospital at the weekends. This is Bill’s first encounter with a person who helps him with his task by reminiscing with him about his mother’s life (Holdsworth, 2014). Through his conversation with Trevor, Bill moves beyond his partial, forgetful memories which are supplemented by social memory constructed by people together through reminiscence.
Encounters with people and other creatures are a common feature of hero quest narratives and, indeed, Trevor appears like a character in a hero legend; he is just ‘there’, waiting in a place that the hero passes through. Of course, the production team has planned the whole thing, diaries have been checked and Trevor will probably have spoken to a researcher about his memories. A key feature of WDYTYA is that planning and research, including much of the genealogical research, are kept in the background brought forward at appropriate moments in the narrative. In contrast, to traditional hero narratives in which encounters involve both those that help and those that attempt to disrupt the quest, or even kill the hero. In WDYTYA there are only helpers.

In the narrative script of WDYTYA, encounters are followed by commentary and reflection before the hero dashes off to the next encounter. After Bill’s encounter with Trevor the narrator explains that Bill’s mother was an inmate in a psychiatric hospital over black and white photographs of hospital buildings. The narrator contextualizes the personal story in a general account of psychiatric hospitals in the 1950s in the UK. We are informed that that at that time there were approximately 180,000 inpatients in psychiatric hospitals in the UK; more than ten times the number today. The shift in mental health policy is exemplified by the fact that the one attended by Bill’s mother was closed in 1995. Bill approaches the site of the old hospital buildings, now a housing estate, and pronounces: “Thus are memories totally obliterated”. This scene and these sentiments represent a key theme of WDYTYA that broad social and cultural shifts and major historical events create ruptures in the continuity of family history and memory. Also, this example links Bill’s identity (feelings of neglect), to his family circumstances (mother in mental hospital) which in turn is linked to a broader, social historical accounts with the help of the narrator and various onscreen experts. In this example, the medicalization of mental illness and the policy of large scale incarceration of mental patients in the mid twentieth century provides the background to Bill’s feelings of abandonment as a child.

We transition to the next encounter in a car park on the site of the former mental hospital, where two elderly women are introduced who “remember looking after Lillian (Bill’s mother) when she was here”. They are retired nurses and describe Bill’s mother as “jolly ... always happy... and she used to sing”. This is the second reference to music following Trevor’s account of Bill’s Mother played the piano reflecting Bill’s musical talent that is part of his celebrity. The references to music and to his mother’s madness are examples of the way that a history of the present traces traits of individuals in the present to the past, in this case suggesting a genetic basis for Bill’s musical skill. In the development of his genealogical method Foucault (1977, 1984) discusses the history of the present as a tracing of the decent of traits or concepts through a myriad of events over time complemented by analyses of the contingencies that allow the emergence of the present out of the past. Bill recounts the family memory of his mother as “violent and schizophrenic”. The ex-nurses deny and contradict this recounting that Lilian wasn’t violent and that “she wasn’t a schizophrenic; she was a manic depressive”. This challenging of family memories as myths is a common feature of episodes of WDYTYA.

Bill asks how his mother would have been treated and the nurses discuss medication and ECG (Electro-Convulsive Therapy). In addition to complementing
aspects of family history, the encounter with the nurses illustrates the importance that revelation plays in the narrative arising from the way in which information is researched and collated behind the scenes and ‘served up’ to the celebrity in front of the camera to record his or her emotional reactions and thoughts. In broader cultural terms, such ‘moments of revelation’ are common in other infotainment genres and reality TV (Grindstaff, 2002; Lunt and Stenner, 2005). The moment of revelation is followed by a ‘documentary’ segment that abstracts from Lilian’s experience as a mental patient in which the narrator explains ECG with accompanying graphic live shot material in black and white. We hear that ECG was introduced in the 1950s and 1960s as a “radical therapy for people with manic depression and schizophrenia. Patients received a series of electrical shocks aimed at improving the chemical balance of the brain. The side effects included severe memory loss”. The history lesson is illustrated by Bill’s only memory of visiting the hospital at around 15 years of age. His account is presented as a voice over to black and white and slightly out of focus stock live shot material of hospital corridors. This section of the programme uses visual conventions from film often used to represent dreaming and contrasts with the acuity of the previous documentary section. He recounts that “this lady was sitting in a chair there and he [the doctor] said ‘this is your mother’” [cut to pictures of individuals on a psychiatric hospital ward and a photograph of Bill’s Mother]. “Not at any stage did she register any recognition of me what so ever…”. This section combines personal and documentary history in an intriguing way. The thread of Bill’s story is woven into the construction of a brief documentary of clinical practice in mental hospitals. The history is not presented as episodic memories of events but as film archive of the times and commentary that provides the context for Lilian’s story. In his reflections, Bill suggests that he is coming to understand that he was neglected because his mother was hospitalized for long periods of his childhood and that she bequeathed him both his musical ability and a legacy of mental health problems.

The narrative unfolds through further cycles of travel, encounter, revelation, reflection and commentary. In the next cycle, Bill follows up a suggestion from a discussion with his aunt and gets official confirmation that he had a sister who died at five days old. To explore her life, and the circumstances of her early death he travels to his grandparents’ home town of Rochdale in the industrial north West of England. From this point on the episode shifts from meetings with relatives and those who knew relatives to meetings with those who can assist Bill’s genealogical encounter with the historical record; archivists, librarians, clerks in town halls, local and national historians. Bill’s sister’s death certificate records the cause of death as ‘inanition’. In the next scene, Bill is talking to a hospital consultant who explains that inanition is not a medical diagnosis as such but a reference to the conditions of malnutrition and dehydration which can lead to various dangerous medical outcomes for a baby. This is a poignant moment in the reconstruction of the family history referencing both Bill’s sense of having been in a small family, an only child, and the idea of family secrets. This cycle in the narrative continues and does interesting work in relation to the personal history of the present. The family tree in time is an exploration of descent focusing on tracing traits of the celebrity to those of past family members and weaving the concepts that were critical to the family myth. For each person ‘discovered’ and examined for these trait continuities, a
complementary interpretation of their lives is developed in the programme relating the place of historical events as an analysis of the “surface of emergence” (Foucault, 1977; 1984) that seeks to explain the social conditions of past lives. The conditions of emergence for Bill’s family in the two generations before him are shown to be industrialization and urbanization which led to the movement and displacement of peoples, industrial working conditions. These themes are taken up in the remainder of the episode.

Characteristically, the genealogy is selective in WDYTYA, not mapping the whole family tree but tracing back specific branches and connections that reveal either interesting characters or traits or qualities in individuals that reflect those of the quest celebrity. There is one last testimonial to take, as Bill meets a niece of Emily, his paternal grandmother who had come to look after him when his mother was hospitalized. The family tree is presented to include Emily’s siblings born from the 1870s to the 1890s. Emily’s niece, Marjorie explains that they “were not very communicative – distant – not a close family”. Bill discovers that Emily was a child labourer in a mill in Rochdale. It was typical for children from the age of eleven to work in the mill in the mornings and go to school in the afternoons. I have commented on the way that WDYTYA is constructed as an overall narrative framework with sections that borrow from popular cultural and factual broadcasting genres such as reality TV and documentary. These are now supplemented by a further form; that of the travel programme with links to the heritage industry. In this case presenting the glories of Rochdale including the imposing Victorian Architecture of the Town Hall and the Arrow Mill. A microfiche picture of the 1870 census confirms Marjorie’s story as Emily is listed as working at the Mill at the age of thirteen. The narrator explains that Emily was one of over 100,000 child labourers in the northwest of England at that time. Accompanied by photographs of child mill workers, we hear that very young children would work six hours a day in the Mill from eleven years to fourteen years from when they would work full time. Details of Emily’s life emerge. She married at 30, comparatively late for the time. Bill now seeks “to find out who her husband was; a man he knows little about”, as he was excluded from the family conversations. It transpires that Bill’s grandfather died of a heart attack following an operation to remove a tumor from his mouth. At this point the narrator presents another mini documentary while Bill is shown searching for records of his grandfather’s death at the local library. He finds a record in copies of the local newspaper from the time. Bill now becomes a heritage tourist, visiting a local working mill museum and finding out about the dangers that cotton workers experienced from breathing in fibres that could lead to mouth and lung diseases. Bill has discovered an understanding of the hardship endured by his family members, in common with many people who worked in the industrial mills of the North West. This provides a context in which Bill’s family are understood as having been shaped by hardship and as a typical mid twentieth century nuclear family, dissociated from broader family ties.

In the final cycle, Bill encounters a surviving but remote relative, a member of the Oddie family who had responded to a report of the making of Bill’s programme in the local newspaper. Neil Oddie, who Bill now meets, is an amateur genealogist who arrives with an extended family tree and a research file on the Oddie family. The narrator reminds us of part of the original problematization of the programme in
which Bill bemoaned his small family: “The man who thought he didn’t have much of a family can now identify over thirty living relatives”. Bill learns that his branch of the family were weavers in the Lancashire countryside before moving into the town to work in the mills, a familiar effect of the industrialization of weaving which had been a cottage industry. However, not all the Oddie family moved in the great urbanization of the 19th century, one branch stayed in the village of Grindleton where many descendants remain, some still in farming. We now get a final tracing of a trait related to Bill’s celebrity because after his early career as a comedian and musician Oddie has campaigned and broadcast on the natural environment and this is now revealed as descended from this branch of the family. Oddie reaches back over the nuclear family and industrialization to his extended family, ‘returning’ to the countryside as a branch of his family are farmers making sense of his interest in the countryside is now shown to connect to the lives of his ancestors.

In the closing sequence, Bill is shown walking in the Hills reflecting that he has come to a reappraisal of his parents, valuing his father’s encouragement and gaining an understanding of the difficulties of his mother’s life: “that’s sad… that’s sad”. He returns home to London by train having resolved many of the problematics that led him on his quest; he now understands his mother’s ‘neglect’ of him, the reasons why his childhood was dominated by his grandmother, the origins of his family in the industrial north and the emergence of the small, nuclear family in his parents’ generation. He understands where some of his personal traits, related to his celebrity ‘come from’ and he now has an historical account of his family for his daughter and grandchildren. Bill has returned home.

Conclusions

In this paper, I have interpreted the form and content of WDYTYA as a popular cultural genre in which memory, family and history are linked together through a narrative construction of family history performed by a guest celebrity. Personal memory is presented as partial, affective, embodied and open to reconstruction through the practice of popular genealogy (Jones and Garde-Hansen, 2012). Social memory is also practically accomplished through reminiscence and joint storytelling alongside reflections on family myths. Cultural memory is represented through narration, film archive material and expert commentary. History too takes subtle forms as the programme begins with problematizations of memory and identity so that the quest is realised as a personalised history of the present tracing traits and locating ancestors in broader historical planes of emergence. WDYTYA constructs a nuanced conception of memory and uses a range of methods to depict personal, social and cultural memory combining oral history, media representations and expert commentary.

As a programme form WDYTYA is a heroic quest narrative with an identifiable structure of disruption, cycles of encounter and resolution. The quest begins in the present before exploring the sphere of personal memory through a process of reminiscence and reflection and then broadening out into a practice of social memory in which people with a living memory of the family co-construct family memory by interrogating myths and reflecting on what is missing or forgotten. The programme then goes beyond living memory, conducting a genealogy of the family
tree alongside an historical analysis of the conditions of life of past family members. The programme ends in a resolution in which the celebrity guest gains insight into themselves, their family and history by reflecting on what the programme has revealed. In between opening disruption and closing resolution, the programme follows repeated cycles of travel, encounter, revelation, reflection and commentary. The sequencing of these episodes travels back in time through selective branches of the family tree; the selection being guided by the initial problematization and tracing ancestors with traits that anticipate the guest’s celebrity, reflections of personal problems or afford the exploration family memory.

The celebrity guest is central to the programmes as the protagonist and major source of programme content and commentator. The celebrity also provides the reasons for the quest: to find out about themselves through their past, to make sense of their lives, to reflect on the origins of their celebrity and their sense of self. The celebrity is on camera through most of the scenes; the focus is on them, their personality and traits characteristic of their celebrity. During the main body of the programme their quizzical desire to learn about the past and their emotional reactions to the unfolding of information about their family’s past are all key to the programme. Their performance is bodily, collaborative, affective and bound to place as they travel to where past family members lived, and through their emotional reactions to the revelation of aspects of the lives of their ancestors.

In combining narrative and the history of the present, the programme constructs a complex configuration of memory that links self, family and history. Memory takes various forms at different moments of the programme; personal reflection and reminiscence, social memory through conversations with relatives and family friends and associates and cultural memory mainly provided through a combination of BBC film archive and expert historical analysis. In this the programme reflects the idea that memory is not a passive store of knowledge waiting to be discovered but that it is shaped by present problematization, and brought into being through the social practice of genealogy as a form of memory work (Kuhn, 1995; 2010). In this an important distinction is represented by what is disclosed in the programme through personal reflection and reminiscence, social interactions in a process of co-construction of memory and engagements with experts who offer social and historical analysis of the broader conditions of life encountered by past family members. The contrast between social and cultural memory in the programme constructs a distinction between experientially based reflection and reminiscence (personal and social memory) and various forms of official history (cultural memory). The official history is often presented using the resources of the BBC’s film archives in which a common cultural history as a social imaginary is constructed as a way of contextualising the unfolding family history. The great events of the twentieth century provide a context including World Wars, genocide and anti-Semitism, the shift from colonialism to post-colonialism typically represented by archive film material. However, this is presented to the audience mediated by the celebrity guest’s reactions to and reflections on the revelations of social memory of participants and commentary on cultural memory in the form of the expert interpretation of the social record. The audience are simultaneously presented with archival film material, expert historical analysis as provided by the narrator and the personal reactions of the guest celebrity. In contrast to Landsberg’s
account of the suturing of personal memory into the portrayal of historical events, what is presented in WDYTYA is the contextualization of the former in the later. The audience are consequently distantiated from both personal experience and cultural memory in something akin to a reflexive account of the synergies and gaps between personal, social and cultural memory. This is partly because the programme reflects the BBC’s obligations as a public service broadcaster that combines popular education and a reflection of British identity as a complex, plural society with diverse cultural origins grounded in its history of modernization and empire.

The programme provides reflections on the changing practices and structures of the family. When Bill contemplates his mother’s mental illness, treatment and the effects on her family and on him, he is confronting the complex relation between personal problems and traits and the changing character of the family. Concentric circles of meaning are drawn first around the celebrity’s, in this case Bill’s, sense of self (feelings of being neglected and isolated), family life (the way his family managed his mother’s mental health, for example through secrecy), social history (an exploration of the height of the medicalization of mental illness in the mid twentieth century alongside the emergence of the nuclear family because of urbanization and industrialization). These concentric circles constitute cultural memory in a particular form not dissimilar to Geertz’ (2005) account of the cultural cosmology of Balinese rituals. The programmes combine a reflection on the historical transformation of the family with an ethical intervention in the lives of celebrities as people separated from their pasts. Along with historically unfolding sociological metaprocesses the historical background is also characterised by major historical events. The events, at the level of the family, are presented as sources of rupture and separation and the programme seeks to suture the wound, to reform the family and to answer the question for the individual; who am I? This the programme does not through ceremonial but through ritual practice (Durkheim, 1995; Couldry, 2003).

The quest of the celebrity in WDYTYA, I have argued, is represented as a narrative resolution of problematics that frame the programmes as personalised histories of the present. However, the engagement with social history and cultural memory, the use of archival film materials and expert commentary reflect a broader claim about cultural history as a history of the present. The individual motivation to reach back to rediscover the past, to reflect on and understand oneself and to create an understanding of family to pass on to the next generation is a personalization of a major problematic of our time. The guest celebrity stands for us in confronting the potential of diminished meaning because of the lack of grounding in the past and the inability to provide a safe place from which to go confidently into the future.

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