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The Social Creation of Grand Narratives\(^1\)

In my lecture today, I want to identify some of the raw material and observe some of the construction techniques employed, when a local community is building its own history by narrating it. My starting point will be the narrated individual life history; that is the kind of oral narrative you are likely to get when you put somebody in front of a tape-recorder and asks them: “tell me about your life”. I will look into some of the peculiarities we usually find in this kind of material and I will compare these genre specific qualities with those we are likely to meet in a society’s collective narratives about itself. After that I will give you some scattered examples of what kind of subjects are treated in the collective local history narratives, and, finally, I will say some words about what I think might be typical of these local history narratives, or, if you like, grand narratives or master narratives.

In doing this, I will continuously be referring to older folkloristic research, as well as to some ideas picked up from social linguistics, philosophy, sociology, and social psychology.

**Material**

The material I am using consists of some 40 tape-recorded life history narratives. The narrators were all retired citizens of my home town Visby, Sweden. The recordings were made during a concentrated collection period in the summer and fall of 1995, and the narrators were all living in Visby at the time of the interviews. Thus all these life histories were recounted from the same temporal and geographical point of view. The material has a clearly defined “here” and “now”. Furthermore, the narrators were all born between 1910 and 1930, thus representing more or less one and the same generation.

**Circular Stories**

The orally narrated life history is a cultural form with its own specific genre conventions. Its themes are typically the narrators’ chosen memories of their own lived experiences, but the form is seldom a merely chronological enumeration of facts. Structurally, the life narrative often moves between descriptive, evaluative, argumentative blocks and epical, dynamic chains of development – for most of the time with the same protagonist at the center. The British folklorist Gillian Bennett has notified the existence of “circular stories” that can be described as “clusters of events organized round some central idea” (Bennett 1984, 83) or, in other words, “stories structured in non-final, non-linear forms” (Bennett 1984, 83). These stories are different from “action narratives’ – that is, stories meant to impress, thrill, or entertain an audience” (Bennett 1984, 87). The circular stories, according to Bennett, “focus on detail and description rather than on the unfolding of a plot and they leave the end deliberately open for comment, interpretation and follow-up by the audience” (Bennett 1984, 86).

I believe that this might be a structure that can be found in both personal experience narratives and in grand narratives.

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\(^1\) Lecture at the Folklore Fellows’ Summer School at Lammi, Finland, 6 August 2010.
In verbally painting a panorama of her childhood neighborhood, one of my narrators gives an example of such a circular story. Notice how the account starts by mentioning the neighboring woman Liss Östlund and her pretty daughter Rosa. The gaze of the narrator then sweeps over houses and blocks, fixing persons and street addresses to them, mentioning professions and small enterprises. After a full round has been completed, the circular movement is dramatically broken by the pretty Rosa returning into the story, this time running naked through the streets. The narrative sequence ends by the aged Rosa borrowing a telephone to call the ambulance when her husband has just died.

Our neighbors were Liss Östlund and her daughter Rosa in the Klinten. She was so beautiful when she was a girl. Madam Pettersson had hired farm-hands and workers. She had cows and horses. We bought milk from her. We bought milk in a bowl. She had horses and cows and chickens. The chickens ran about in the square crying. Later they were not allowed to have chickens inside the city. Outside the city wall she kept pigs. She carried food to them with a yoke. In the front side of the house Klinttorget number 4 was the entrance to the backyard belonging to Östra Tullgränd. There was a gate leading to the back of the house. The next house belonged to the same yard. That’s where the painter Wigström lived. The house was owned by building contractor Hjalmar [last name not audible]. The name of the alley was Östra Tullgränd. Maria Wretberg lived on the first floor at Klinttorget number 1. She worked in horse-dealer Fridgren’s office outside the Eastern Gate. There was a horse stable there. Miss Wretberg had a dog that we children were scared of. The Ekengrens lived in the three-storey house across the alley. They had several children. Liss Östlund got married to a man from Dalecarlia and they had a daughter who was called Rosa in the Klinten. They said that once when it was cold outside, she came running and yelling along one of the streets downtown. A man had emptied a bucket of water over her and she came running naked as an ice statue. People had to take care of her. I think she is dead now. She had a son and a daughter. When Rosa’s husband died, he was suffocated, I remember she came in to us to borrow our telephone (Elsa Pettersson, b. 1915 in Visby).

The Self-Biographical Paradox

The essential element of all epic forms is action, in the meaning “change”. An existing situation is disturbed by some external factor, so that balance is lost, a change takes place, and as a result of this change a new situation, a new balance is established. Typically, narratives are built up of sequences of such pendulum movements between equilibrium and disequilibrium. Epics consist of changes, continuous movements forward from the initial state of affairs towards the inevitable end.

The persons in a life history can be either subjects or objects in relation to the narrated events, answering directly to the grammatical active and passive voice. As active subjects, they will play the role of agents who initiate changes and push the action forward. As passive objects, on the other hand, they will have the role of being carried away by other agents’ actions, as victims in the hands of ruthless villains or an inescapable fate. Handling such moments can sometimes be awkward for a narrator, since the narrating “I” is acting out a social role as the speaking subject in the narrative situation, while the experiencing narrated “I” fulfils a dramaturgical role as an object to exterior influences in the story. Narrators, who want to be true to their own experiences, cannot easily exclude those episodes of their lives where they
for one reason or another were out of control. In such instances, a tension might build up between the narrating “I” who is in control (at least theoretically) of the situation and the narrated “I” who is not (at least not all the time). We can call this the self-biographical paradox.

**Degrees of Collectivity**

From the individual’s point of view it does not seem to influence the narratives very much what the source of the external action is. External is external, passive is passive; if I did not start the action, somebody else did, who, when, and where does not seem to affect the individual’s life history in any remarkable way.

What does matter, however, is the degree of collectivity of the event in question. The more people involved in or aware of an event, the more likely it is that some kind of folklore will develop around it. We could imagine a gliding scale running from events with a very high degree of collectivity towards totally private experiences.

At a **national** or **regional** level we find events affecting many people or at least known to a substantive part of the population. Here is one example, referred in a student’s essay (which explains why it is told in the 3^rd^ person):

Kjell had started to study at Uppsala University and was going home to Gotland for summer vacation. On May 7 1945, he had visited a friend in Stockholm and was walking on Kungsgatan on his way to the Central Station. At that very moment, news was spread that the German forces had capitulated and peace had been proclaimed. Kungsgatan, at that time one of the leading commercial streets of Stockholm, immediately filled with happy people, walking arm in arm singing and shouting – all in the opposite direction from Kjell striving with his suitcases to catch his train. (Svensson 2002, 10).

Recurrent examples in my material are several other events related to World War II. Although Sweden did not take active part in the Second World War, of course everybody on Gotland, in the middle of the Baltic Sea, was affected by it. Consequences of the war can be heard in practically everybody’s life history. A war as such, however, is too huge and too complicated to be part of an individual life history. To tell the story of a war you need the overview of the historian and the space of a grand narrative.

At a lower level of collectivity, action is experienced by a **group** of people, for instance family, neighbors, friends, workmates, or different kinds of clubs or associations. Any number of people, from a handful up to several hundreds may be included in these kinds of events, and they are likely to appear in similar form in several narrated life histories.

At a **private** level, the experiencer is alone, although the action is initiated by another person or some other outside force. Examples from my material include receiving emotionally upsetting phone calls or reading letters that turn out to be decisive for the life paths chosen by the narrators. Dramatic as such experiences may be, they concern only one individual at a time and they are not likely to become the topic of any collective tradition.
Levels of Participation

Just as the experienced events can show higher or lower degrees of collectivity, the individual being the object of the action can be more or less involved in it. We might talk about higher or lower levels of involvement or participation. Several scholars have adopted the term “distancing” that was suggested by Georgina Smith. According to her, narrated events can be either incorporated, semi-incorporated or distanced or detached from the performer (Smith 1981, 168ff. Cf. Tangherlini 1990, 374 and Oring 2008, 133.). Using two terms borrowed from Alfred Schutz, Amy Shuman talks about mediate and immediate relationships in the storytelling situation, mainly referring to the distance between the narrated events and the narrative situation, or, to use Katharine Young’s terms, between taleworld and storyrealm (Shuman 1986, 55; Young 1987).

In my material I have found examples of at least three different levels of participation:

When the narrator was personally involved in the narrated event, we could talk about direct participation. With Georgina Smith’s terminology, the event is incorporated in the self presentation (Smith 1981, 169). One man told about how he, as a boy, was not allowed to visit the other children’s homes, because he had lice. Another man had, also as a boy, taken part in pushing a railway carriage up a hill and then riding it downhill again and again until a supervisor stopped the boys and the whole area was fenced in by the railway company.

Such cases where the narrator was an eyewitness or in one way or another was affected by the event without taking part in it we might speak of in terms of indirect participation, or semi-incorporated events (Smith 1981, 169). One woman told about the rough swimming school instructors of her childhood. One of them had thrown her friend into the water so carelessly that the girl’s hip was seriously injured. Another woman had a father who suffered from Parkinson’s disease and alcoholism. On his way to a hospital in Stockholm, he jumped off the boat and drowned himself.

At the third level, the narrator has information about the event, often by word of mouth, but was not directly involved in it, nor affected by it. The narrator is distanced or detached from the narrated event (Smith 1981, 169). We could name this level awareness. Here are two examples from my material:

    Between Visby and Roma, the train went so slowly that people used to step off and walk beside it, picking flowers.
    The workers in the lime stone quarries used dynamite to kill pike in the river.

To imagine my suggested model graphically, we could picture the narrated event as sliding along a horizontal scale between the end poles “private” and “collective”. Around the narrated event, we could figure a series of concentric circles, running from the innermost “participant” over the middle “eyewitness” to the peripheral “word of mouth”.

Both the quality of the narrative and the credibility of the narrator are influenced by narrators’ classifying the experienced event as having higher or lower degrees of collectivity and their positioning of the narrated “I” at higher or lower levels of participation in relation to the narrated event. An event with a low degree of collectivity can be narrated with high authenticity and credibility, if the narrator was closely involved in or affected by the event. Take as an example the sad story about the boy who was forbidden to play with his friends.
because he had lice, when it is told by himself. The story would lose in presence and directness, if told by somebody who had only heard about it.

Narratives about events with a high degree of collectivity are subject to qualitatively different rules than more private ones. If you were on the Estonia when it sank, if you survived the 2004 tsunami, or if you saw the World Trade Center towers in New York City collapsing, your narrative will certainly be loaded with authenticity and credibility. Although far from everybody in the world was there, events of this class are known to a substantial part of the world’s inhabitants; in a way they belong to all of us and we all have some right to tell our version of them.

And, equally important, those who actually were there are not totally free to tell memory stories that deviate too radically from the officially accepted ones. In August 2009, at the Nordic conference for ethnology and folklore in Helsinki, I heard my Norwegian colleague Professor Anne Eriksen relate the example about the sole survivor of the 1902 Martinique earthquake (who survived because he was locked into a subterranean prison vault), who constructed ever more fantastic stories about the catastrophe the more times he told about it, because there was nobody alive who could object to them.

In her excellent study “Storytelling Rights”, which I already mentioned, Amy Shuman suggested the terms storyability as a quality in events that are possible to render in narrative form and tellability to indicate the (sometimes disputed) rights of an individual to tell about a certain event (Shuman 1986, 55f). The American sociolinguist William Labov uses tellability as a synonym to reportability, referring to events that are so interesting that recounting them automatically gives the narrator the right to hold the floor longer than normal. Labov also forwards the argument that personal experience narratives essentially are built around what he calls “most reportable events”, meaning unusual experiences that can be expected to arouse interest in the audience (Labov 1997, 6f). Labov further more points to the fact that reportability “is inversely correlated with credibility” (Labov 1997, 9), implicating that the more surprising the content of the narrative is, “the more effort the narrator must devote to establishing credibility” (Labov 1997).

**Tradition Dominants in Local History**

There are also instances were the narrated “I” seems to be in perfect control, acting as a subject, but all the same the story line sometimes is hit by an external factor from local history that has to be taken into consideration.

In narrated individual life histories it is not surprising to encounter elements of local or regional – or even national and international – history. After all, most narrated events making up individuals’ life histories have actually taken place in physical locations where many other people’s lives have also been enacted, as well as different kinds of public events. Some such events, more or less external to the individual life history narrator, seem to possess an extraordinary significance which makes it likely that they are referred to in one way or another when a life history enters a certain place at a certain time (cf. Tangherlini 1990, 377f; Palmenfelt 2009).

The Swedish folklorist Albert Eskeröd proposed the term tradition dominant to indicate prevailing phenomena (primarily supernatural beings) in local traditions, or in his own words:
As the concept motif appears to be more appropriate within folk narrative research, it seems proper to identify those various phenomena that dominate a local tradition by the word *tradition dominants*. By tradition dominants thus will be understood such elements that in the common folk tradition dominate different groups within it (Eskeröd 1947, 81. My translation).

Obviously we can find elements in life histories that possess a similar capacity to dominate local traditions, but these are seldom supernatural beings. Instead the dominant units can be points of time, places, events, values, ideas or accepted emotional attitudes that all have become so firmly established in people’s minds that they possess an agency to demand dominant positions in all historical narratives.

These dominant units can be regarded as verbal expressions of an ongoing interplay between collective ideas and individually expressed narrative forms. They represent different phases in the process of acquiring solid form. By positioning themselves in relationship to these dominant units, narrators inscribe themselves in the collective body or emphasize that they are declining such membership. Dominant units that are repeated often increase in collectivity, gain in volume and importance, which, in turn, makes it ever more difficult for future narrators not to relate to them, which, consequently, strengthens their attractive potential even more.

**Narrated Memories**

A limiting factor for what is possible to recount can be represented by the chain: experience – memory – retold memory. We do not remember everything that we have experienced and we are unable to verbalize some of that which we do remember. Only some memories are suitable to convey in narrative form.

Classifying a personal experience narrative as a memory is a strong keying (Goffman 1986, 43 ff) that allows the narrator to make use of certain possibilities and informs the audience of how to interpret it. Well known keying formulae are: “I can remember...”, “I have a strong memory of...”, “As far as I remember...” This keying bestows that which is remembered first with a distinct quality of being something that is selected and thus important, simply by not belonging to the sad category of forgotten experiences. And as we all know there is a constant process of exchange between the two groups: we forget what we once remembered and we come to remember what had been forgotten and we remember vaguely or we forget in part (cf Ricoeur 2005, 109, 190). Memories presuppose the existence of forgotten experiences.

Second, memories are very personal. We are often astonished of how differently our minds operate, when comparing what we remember of a certain event with other persons’ remembrances of the same situation. This shared experience allows every memory narrator to be extremely personal and subjective when deciding what to tell and how to present it.

As individuals we mold pieces of our personal memories into consistent stories, and so do groups, communities and nations. The formation of collective stories is an attempt to create meaning in our existence at a level above the individual; it is our common endeavor to define ourselves as a group. In collectively created and distributed grand narratives groups formulate, explore, question, and communicate what they have in common. Distinct – and group separate – qualities like class, gender, generation, religion, and political affiliation become visible at different levels. Individual experience narratives – like those of groups –
can confirm or contradict grand narratives about the same events at a higher level on the micro-macro scale.

The molding of collectively accepted “truths” should not be regarded as simple accumulative processes, but as the results of complicated patterns of negotiation. Groups of different sizes compose the life history of their specific association that helps them to define themselves, both internally and externally. Historical events are retold by people concerned by them (and by others as well) again and again, until one (or two, or several) accepted, more or less fixed version(s) has (have) been formulated.

**Narrated history**

In the following I will share with you an artificial reconstruction of some physical and mental life conditions in Visby during the 20th century as I hear the narrators describe them. This is the collectively acknowledged cognitive universe into which the individual narrators’ taleworlds are located, making up a frame of reference for their thought, and an arena into which they have to fit their narrated worlds.

Each narrator has to relate to this template, which *per se* does not have to be anything else than a mental construct, never formulated verbally and never outspoken. Being an insider you will have developed a sense for what choice of episodes is appropriate, what categories are fitting, which persons, houses and streets would be the proper building stones of the narrative construction, in which modes these elements can be narrated, and equally important – who and what is never mentioned (Shuman uses the concept of “familiarity”. Shuman 1986, 194). When many individuals apply these templates they are successively reinforced and a collectively acknowledged picture is gradually established. This narrated reality will come to be regarded as the genuine, “true” version of local history.

I will take a closer look at some examples that I have chosen because they show some of the stereotypical traits that are common to many of the narratives. Naturally, I cannot say that these stereotypes are false and that the narrators are consciously manipulating reality. The narrators certainly made their experiences in the “real” world, but fitting them into narrative form, decontextualizes them (or the memories of them) by re-presenting them in a taleworld (a narrative enclave. Young 1987.).

To a certain degree this is actually what life was like in 20th century Visby. But, on the other hand the narratives cover a time span of roughly 75 years during which substantial social changes took place, and, even if the narrators represent different social population strata, they are only 40 voices among several tens of thousands of Visby citizens who are not heard in my material.

What I can say is that certain facts, formulations and values are repeated so often that they can be considered to be traditional, in the sense that they have become part of a collective mind.

**Childhood**

Unlike most families we had a father who did not drink. He was orderly, so we really had a good childhood, I guess. There were parents who drank and the children had a hard time.

We had a free life and ran and played in the streets and alleys. We used to pick berries in fall, on Sundays that is, for on Saturdays you had to work. Even if
times were scarce, we had a good life. I don’t think that we had to go to bed hungry even once. We had a household pig, as they called it, that was slaughtered in December. My mother didn’t have a job, for the wives were always at home, so she sewed clothes and patched and mended. We used to have macaroni with the pork and sometimes a fisherman came and sold herring. We ate a lot of salted herring. In the garden we grew spinach that was stewed. There was a lot of baking done at home, round loaves of rye that were dried on a pole. My dentist often says that I was born in those days when children used to munch hard bread and that was good for the teeth (Henning Nilsson, born 1922 in Eskilstuna).

This short account contains several stereotypical features. Unmarried men were supposed to drink alcohol, play cards and fight (although fighting in those days was honest). When they married, some vague fate seems to have determined whether they would stop drinking or not.

As a matter of fact several women were actually working professionally, but the stereotypical picture is that married women were housewives. As such, they are often said to make some extra money to the family by selling eggs, preserved berries or mushrooms, or home-made socks or mittens.

There was no communal child care, so when children were not at school, they were normally outdoors playing. Many homes were small and there simply was not space enough for large groups of children to play indoors.

Family economies were generally strained and it was normal that you picked mushrooms and wild berries in fall. If you had a garden, you would sooner grow vegetables and berries in it, than entertaining a lawn and decorative bushes. Cages with chickens were common in everybody’s garden. Especially during the war years, many kept rabbits in their gardens, and there are many stories about people collecting grass for their rabbits in the fields outside the city wall. Normally you did not keep pigs within the city wall, but outside it there were plenty of economy buildings where people kept horses, cows and pigs.

**The Sinking of the Hansa**

Although Sweden had proclaimed itself neutral during the Second World War, the war events taking place all over the Baltic Sea naturally had a profound impact on everyday life on Gotland. On November 24, 1944 the Swedish passenger ship the Hansa, plying the trade between Visby and the Swedish mainland, sank outside Gotland and 84 people died. Hundreds of Gotlanders lost close relatives, but the majority of the inhabitants on Gotland suffered no personal losses. In spite of that, the incident had an overwhelming impact on the Gotland society as a whole. It is not difficult to imagine how the tragedy could be taken to be a violent and anonymous assault (not until much later was it proven that the ship had been hit by a Soviet torpedo) against all Gotlanders collectively. After six years of tension with belligerent actions constantly taking place in the very vicinity of the island, the sinking of the Hansa became a harsh reminder that war time brutalities were for real and could hit even civil citizens of a neutral country.

In three fourths of the life narratives I have studied here, the Hansa event is mentioned in one way or another. No other single item is close to appearing that often. Here is one example of
how the news of the disappearing of the ship entered everyday life, told by a woman who was 14 year old at the time.

I had been to school in the morning and I was on my way to work in the afternoon. I and my friend used to go to a café for a cup of hot chocolate and a bun before going to work. After that we made a walk through the streets and outside the newspaper’s office we saw the news bill announcing that the ship Hansa was missing. My friend, well, she had an uncle or whatever who worked on the boat. Then it started. When I arrived at my work, well, one of my workmates, her husband was on the boat. And wherever you went and whoever you met they had somebody onboard, you know. And we found that spooky. Later in the evening we went down to the harbor to have a look. And there was a raft, a wrecked raft I believe it was that they had found. Somebody had written with a pencil: ‘A final greet…’ and then it was only a line. Probably several more had been on it. Well, that was unpleasant. (Britt Kahn, b. 1930)

This young woman was emotionally troubled for a couple of hours, but she did not lose any relatives or friends in the calamity, and the sinking of the Hansa has no dramaturgical role to play in her life history. Still the potency of the event as a tradition dominant is strong enough to force itself into her life history.

**WW2 – A Family Trouble**

My next example shows another quality in narratives about war time events. In the life of this Visby family the war interfered rather brutally. One family member actually died and another one was suffering a nervous breakdown. The narrator labeled this as “some trouble in the family”. I do not believe that the somewhat euphemistic choice of expression should be interpreted as lack of empathy. Rather it could be seen as an example of how it is possible to represent a universal tragedy like a war in your individual life history. In this short narration, World War II does not have the function of a tradition dominant. The family in question was in fact struck by the war and in the narrative this is recounted in a low, matter-of-fact voice.

In 1939, we had some trouble in the family, when the war broke out. My grandfather was enrolled and his nerves couldn’t take it, so he committed suicide. It’s one of those things you do remember. My mother got weak nerves after that. Those things stick. So, from that point of view, war was difficult for us and for many other families. Several of his colleagues did the same thing. Probably they as officers were assigned some hard commitments. But they did not have the resources (Siv Jolby, b. 1920 in Visby).

**Values**

Many of the narratives contain an obvious element of evaluation. It is probably unrealistic to expect anybody to stick to the role of neutral observer when recounting her or his own life history. The evaluations normally take the form of generalized statements in first person plural: “we had a good time when we were children”; “we made no great demands on life”. The grammatical form is similar in many of them: my life has been (hard, poor and full of misfortunes), but still (good, rich, calm, free, harmonious). A typical example is this:

Life has been rich, I think. And now you are an old woman. And that is all right, too. They come and pick me up for lunch and dinner. On Tuesdays we do
gymnastics. The food is good and the personnel are nice. I am grateful for that. And I am grateful that my head is still clear. My oldest son is in America. I am rich to have children, grandchildren and great grandchildren (Fanny Lindström, b. 1911 in Visby).

The prevalent conclusions resonate of gratitude and satisfaction. Several declare that they would have chosen a similar life, if they were given a chance to start anew. My overall impression is that these people have reached a state of reconciliation, where they have ceased to worry about their own mistakes and pardoned others’ wrong-doings.

Many narrators were eager to emphasize the contrasts between values that they regarded as common to their generation and the morals and ethics that they saw as typical for the younger generations. Within the field of values, the complementary phrases of the imaginary dialogue often appeared in outspoken form. Here are some examples:

- I feel sorry for the young people today who cannot find any jobs.
- They have no belief in the future and they have nothing to do.
- Young people today never take any responsibility.
- The respect for other people is gone, especially for older people.
- Today young people are drunk and fight.
- One entire generation will be lost.
- Today’s society is no society to grow old in.
- Society today cannot handle the young.

To a certain extent the narrators’ accounts are definitely representations of original experiences. But it is also near at hand to consider them as examples of what in 1995 it was possible to narrate about facts and events earlier in 20th century Visby. These life histories can be regarded as the evaluations in hindsight made by one generation of Visby inhabitants of their own professional, social, and cultural contributions to local history.

The Emergence of Grand Narratives

I will stop here and remind you that these are examples of the building parts that together could make up one possible grand narrative about 20th century Visby. Several others could have been extrapolated from the materials that I have used, and the one recounted here could have been made both broader and deeper. However, there is no doubt that this mental image of 20th century Visby owns some kind of existence. Many people – both the interviewees and otherwise – refer to fragments of it and in many interactions among Visby citizens it is obvious that you are expected to be familiar with it and relate to it.

From my point of view it is not important to decide whether the facts presented in this grand narrative are historical or not, nor whether the events described have actually happened, nor whether the narrators really “believe” in what they are relating. To me as a folklorist it is enough to be able to show that there exists a fragmentary or embryonic grand narrative and that its mere existence demands that people relate to it. And to my mind, this is also the case with stories we use to call belief narratives, for instance folk legends. We know that they do exist (or did exist) and we know that people in one way or another had to relate to them. What and how much people actually did believe is more or less impossible for us to decide.

In the collective process of constructing grand narratives, established facts and agreements, narrative elements or motifs, customary expressions and formulations all function as
foundations upon which new stories – individual or collective – may be erected. In the individual life histories these may appear as intruding obstacles; in the construction of collective identities they are important building stones. Loading them with symbolic value, linking them together into coherent narratives, representing them to ourselves and to others are some of the constituent elements in the construction of narrated local history.

Taken as a whole, the individually recounted narrative worlds (together with several thousands of similar narratives not mentioned here) create a fairly consistent image of a universe with static as well as dynamic elements. The static parts, expressed in circular, non-final, non-linear forms, describe the physical environment with streets, buildings and institutions, but also a population with specific groups and individuals, recurrent traditions and accepted values. Among the fixed elements are furthermore points of time, dates and years, but also historical events in a reified form, often devoid of their dynamic aspects. Into this common narrative construction, it is the assignment of each individual to fit her or his personal narrated world.

These exercises open for complicated dialogues between the individual life histories possible to insert into the collectively narrated universe and the characteristic features of this universe resulting precisely from these negotiating dialogues.

While folk legends typically deal with the extraordinary, the deviant and the unexpected, both individual life histories and collective grand narratives are dedicated to normal, everyday, predictable matters. Maybe we could regard grand narratives as the smallest common denominator of local history, formulating the agreements that everybody subscribes to – while folk legends on the other hand explore the boundaries of normality, the almost unknown borderlands facing the backyards of the unbelievable.

Grand narratives lack the legends’ focal concentration on one single, dramatically charged chain of events. Largely, they consist of non-narrative, descriptive elements. That may be one reason why they seldom show the definite, fixed form of conventional folkloristic genres. Probably they are never narrated. They exist only as cultural abstractions; ever-present as collective frames of reference for what is considered to be normal and how it is accepted to talk about local history. Most grand narratives are never finished, but are constantly open to re-negotiation.

They have no obvious temporal extension, no clear line of development following a hero’s handling of a complication from its introduction to a satisfactory resolution. From the perspective of a single individual it is next to impossible to follow the long and slow developing processes of a society. That is why we perceive of the grand narratives as fragments of an indiscernible whole or as embryos that may once unite into a coherent entity. On the other hand the causal elements appear to be strong. The grand narratives obviously have a function to support cause and effect-explanations or as a common cultural standard with which you can compare your own experiences and values (cf Hyvärinen et al 2010).

What I want to do in the future is to find out more about the genre characteristics of the grand narratives. How do the epic and non-epic elements cooperate in circular forms and possibly other constellations? What kind of fragments or embryos of grand narratives are there? Do they have beginnings and endings or do they consist only of middles? Can we find more and less developed forms of grand narratives among different groups of different sizes or at different social levels in a society? What kinds of subjects are likely to appear in grand
narratives and what can we find out about the functions they have in a group or a society? And, finally, I am eager to find out more about the cultural rules governing the interplay between individual life histories and collective local histories.

**Literature**


