

Historical perspective taking: A standardized measure for an aspect of students' historical thinking[☆]

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Abstract

Researchers widely agree that learning history should involve more than learning historical facts and should include competencies of historical thinking. Various models of historical thinking view students' competency to take historical perspectives as a standard in history education. In this study we introduce a standardized measure for historical perspective taking (HPT) consisting of a short scenario set in the German Weimar Republic. We assessed students' HPT by using rating scales; our data were obtained in grammar schools from 170 German 10th graders. Latent class analyses identified three types of students with similar profiles of HPT. One was present-oriented and two showed more or less contextualized historical thinking. Students' history grades were connected to their HPT competency. We discuss limitations of the study and argue for further research on measures assessing students' historical thinking.

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There is ample consensus today that students learning history should do more than simply increase their factual knowledge about historical events, people and processes (e.g. Dickinson, Gordon, & Lee, 2001). Working with historical documents, evaluating contradictory evidence or taking historical perspectives contribute to students' historical thinking, empowering them to encounter various historical accounts in school, in everyday life and in the media.

However, making historical thinking a standard in education is no simple matter, as Dickinson et al. (2001) have pointed out. Conceptually, research, policy and teachers have to agree on relevant competencies of historical thinking. In this study, we focus on a competency we call historical perspective taking (HPT). It means knowing that certain historical agents or groups had particular perspectives on their world, and being able to see how

that perspective would actually have affected actions in different situations (Lee & Ashby, 2001). Students who achieve this will not only benefit in terms of historical understanding but will also be better able to cope with the present world (Ashby & Lee, 1987). For these reasons HPT has become a standard in various models of historical thinking. In the United States, the National Standards for History in the Schools (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996) mention "appreciating historical perspectives" as one part of historical comprehension. In the UK, this competency can be found in History Standard 2 of the National Curriculum – "knowledge and understanding of events, people and changes in the past". In Germany, which is the context of the present study, taking historical perspectives is part of a taxonomy proposed by the Association of History Teachers (Sauer, 2006).

Setting up a standard like HPT requires measures to test whether large numbers of students meet it. Measures for students' historical competencies have to be different from merely fact-checking, multiple-choice items; they require theoretical elaboration combined with a sensible methodological approach. To date, reliable standardized tests are lacking. The aim of the present study is to introduce a measure for students' HPT competency.

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1. Theoretical background

Yeager and Foster (2001) conceptualize HPT as a complex process. They include an understanding of historical context and chronology, the analysis of historical evidence and interpretations, and the construction of a narrative framework in their definition of this competency. Portal (1987) conceptualizes historical empathy as a heuristic process which can stimulate other forms of historical thinking. He emphasizes the imaginative component of this concept. To Lee and Ashby (2001), who regard HPT or historical empathy as a predominantly cognitive task, it consists of knowing that certain historical agents or groups had particular perspectives on their world and of being able to see how that perspective would actually have affected actions in different situations. In our study, we apply their understanding of HPT.

A central theme in discussions on HPT has been the problem of presentism. Judging historical agents from only a present-oriented perspective is widely regarded as non-historical and thus as reflecting a low level of competency (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Barton, 1996). HPT is about escaping one's own views and opinions in order to understand past actions and events; however, some scholars have questioned this demand as being idealistic (VanSledright, 2001; Wineburg, 1999). Psychological phenomena like epistemic egocentrism (Royzman, Wright Cassidy, & Baron, 2003), the failure to set aside one's own privileged knowledge when thinking about others, imply that thinking in a present-oriented way could correspond to a general pattern of human behavior. Still, the goal remains for students to acquire contextual historical empathy as outlined in Ashby and Lee's (1987) taxonomy. Seixas (1996) argues that despite the fact that we can never be perfectly non-presentist, negotiating the tension between past and present is essential for sophisticated historical thinking.

Another component that is less clear in the research is thinking about the role of the historical agent. Nonetheless, it could function as an intermediate stage between presentism and contextualization. Students confronted with historical situations tend to assign roles to historical agents, often in a stereotypical way (e.g. Ashby & Lee, 1987; Bermúdez & Jaramillo, 2001; Lee & Ashby, 2001). In doing so, they are able to refer to roles or institutions they know from their own lives (e.g. the role of a father or that of a businessman); these they then use to explain thoughts and actions of people in the past. Such attempts do not entirely meet the demands of historically contextualized thinking, but could mark a step forward in decentring from one's own completely presentist view. Even though this phenomenon has been observed in the research, its exact role with respect to students' competencies remains unclear.

In our study we include present-oriented perspective taking (POP), the ability to show contextualized thinking (CONT), as well as the notion of thinking about the role of the historical agent (ROA) to measure students' HPT competency.

In search of a measure of students' HPT with respect to the aforementioned components, we have noticed a gap in research on historical thinking. Standardized instruments hardly exist. Most evidence relies on qualitative studies using interview techniques or group discussions to target HPT competency (e. g. Ashby & Lee, 1987; Shemilt, 1987; Voss & Wiley, 1997; Wineburg, 1991). While

these methods are well-suited for gathering in-depth information about students' thought processes, they are less adequate for gaining a representative picture of larger student samples required for standard-based assessments. Two measures using questionnaires are worthy of mention: Gehlbach's (2004a) draws on Ashby and Lee's (1987) stages of historical empathy. It contains statements (reflecting different stages) on why the Greeks divided themselves into social classes although they believed in a democratic government. Von Borries measured historical empathy as part of the Youth and History Study (Angvik & Von Borries, 1997). Students were asked to imagine themselves in the position of a teenager in the 15th century who was forced to marry someone he or she neither knew nor loved. The data displayed the constructs "obedience" and "resistance", but no actual historical empathy as the author concludes.

Our strategy in constructing a standardized measure for HPT was to draw on approaches from a related theoretical concept, namely that of social perspective taking (SPT). According to Johnson (1975), SPT is the ability to understand how a situation appears to another person and how that person will react cognitively and emotionally to the situation. In many respects SPT and HPT show similarities. Bermúdez and Jaramillo (2001) emphasize that in both cases students have to shift from a self-centred point of view to the other person's perspective and then coordinate both to build a mental representation of society. Gehlbach (2004b) considers SPT a situated construct whereby time is a constituent component. He argues that temporality (taking past, present or future perspectives) should influence students' outcome regarding this competency; however, empirical evidence on this aspect is still lacking. Selman (1980) proposed a developmental sequence of social perspective coordination starting with an undifferentiated and egocentric perspective (level 0) transforming into an in-depth and societal-symbolic perspective taking, in which personalities are conceptualized as systems with their own developmental histories (level 4). To connect this to historical thinking, taking the perspective of someone living in a different time inherently requires coordinating between past and present. In Selman's level 4 a societal dimension of perspective taking is addressed. Applied to historical contexts, perspective coordination should depend on the specific time period during which social interactions take place.

Despite the similarities between HPT and SPT, major differences do exist. HPT requires that one adopt the view of another person who acts in an entirely different situation, time and/or culture. This makes HPT even more challenging. Secondly, the types of coordination in SPT and HPT cannot be easily compared. While coordination in SPT happens within an interpersonal situation with the intent of improving communication and solving interpersonal conflict (Selman, 1980, 2003), the purpose of HPT is to provide a more plausible explanation of a historical situation. The perspective taker and the target person never meet; one is the subject, the other the object of historical investigation.

Still, the two concepts seem to share sufficient commonality to use ideas of SPT in constructing a standardized measure for HPT. Various measures have been developed to assess students' SPT. One strand consists of video measures to assess accuracy of

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