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Historical interpretation as the foundational concept for history education

La Interpretación Histórica como concepto fundamental de la Educación Histórica

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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by reviewing the range of ways in which historical thinking concepts are modelled in contemporary Anglophone history education discourse, and identifies a focus on historical accounts and historical interpretations as being characteristic of English history education traditions. Arguments are advanced for the importance and priority of an understanding of historical accounts and interpretations in the understanding of all historical thinking concepts. A model of how historical accounts and interpretations work is then presented and elaborated, showing how the considerations advanced play a central role in a wide range of ways of making sense of the past. The paper concludes by arguing for the centrality of understandings of accounts and interpretations to history education in our contemporary multi-storied contexts, where appreciating the plurality of ways of making sense of history is vital in a number of senses.

Keywords: History, History education, Historical thinking, Historical interpretation and accounts.

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RESUMEN

Este artículo comienza revisando la gama de formas en que los conceptos del pensamiento histórico se modelan en el discurso de la educación histórica anglófona contemporánea, e identifica un enfoque en los relatos históricos y las interpretaciones históricas como características de las tradiciones de la educación histórica inglesa. Se presentan argumentos a favor de la importancia y prioridad de la comprensión de los relatos e interpretaciones históricas en el análisis de todos los conceptos del pensamiento histórico. Luego se presenta y elabora un modelo de cómo funcionan los relatos e interpretaciones históricas, mostrando cómo las consideraciones adelantadas juegan un papel central en una amplia gama de formas de dar sentido al pasado. El artículo concluye defendiendo la centralidad de la comprensión de los relatos y las interpretaciones para la educación histórica en nuestros contextos contemporáneos de múltiples historias, donde apreciar la pluralidad de formas de dar sentido a la historia es vital en varios sentidos.

Palabras clave: Historia, Educación Histórica, Pensamiento histórico, Interpretación y relatos históricos.

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Introduction: History and Meta-history

Anglophone history education has come, over the last fifty years, to be increasingly structured around what are variously but not exhaustively referred to as 'second-order concepts,'[1] 'historical thinking concepts,'[2] 'syntactical concepts,'[3] 'meta-historical concepts,'[4] and 'disciplinary concepts.'[5] This approach to parsing the disciplinary element of knowing history has become increasingly influential internationally.[6] These concepts and their relation to more traditional aspects of historical knowing can be explained through a simple opposition between the 'historical' and the 'meta-historical' (Figure 1).

[1] Peter Lee, «Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History», in *How Students Learn: History in the Classroom,* ed. for Suzanne Donovan and John Bransford (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2005), 31-77.

[2] Peter Seixas and Tom Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education Ltd, 2013).

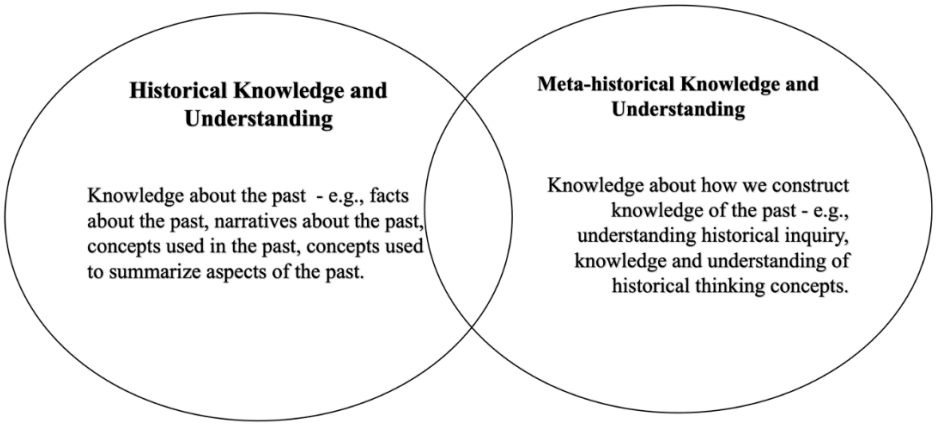
[3] Bruce VanSledright, *The Challenge of Rethinking History Education: On Practices, Theories and Policy* (New York and London. Routledge, 2011).

[4] Lee, «Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History», 31-77.

[5] Ofsted, *Research Review Series: History,* 2021, accessed 17 November 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history.

[6] Carla van Boxtel and Jannet van Drie, «Historical Reasoning: Conceptualizations and Educational Applications», in *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning*, ed. for Scott Alan Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 149–76; Stéphane Lévesque and Penney Clark, «Historical Thinking: Definitions and Educational Applications», in *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning*, ed. for Scott Alan Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris (New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2018),119-49.

Figure 1. Historical and Meta-historical Aspects of Learning History[7]



Source: self-made

Framing history education around meta-historical concepts usually takes place within the context of a 'disciplinary' modelling of what school history should be, based on the assumption that school history should model itself, analogously and at an appropriate level of sophistication for the age groups involved, on the processes of enquiry, reasoning and narrative typical of the academic discipline of history – an assumption that I have defended in the past and that I will at least partially challenge in what follows below.[8]

These concepts vary in number and composition in different models of historical learning. In England, the Schools History Project (SHP)[9] differentiated between the following 'concepts crucial to the historical enterprise' of 'historical enquiry:'

> 'evidence,' 'empathetic reconstruction,' 'motivation,' 'causation,' 'change,' 'the connectedness of past and present,' and the idea of History as an 'explanation-seeking' as well as a descriptive discipline.[10]

[7] The intersection in the Venn diagram might include such things as knowledge and understanding of traditions of historical inquiry – in other words, knowledge about the history of meta-history.

[8] This is an approach explained and defended in, for example, Arthur Chapman, «Introduction: Historical Knowing and the "Knowledge Turn"», *Knowing History in Schools*: *Powerful Knowledge and the Powers of Knowledge*, ed. for Artur Chapman (London: UCL Press, 2021), 1-31. Although influential, this approach is not without its critics - see, for example, the arguments made for a framing of history explicitly around democratic citizenship and deliberative democracy in Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates., 2004). My arguments here are intended to qualify and revise arguments I have made elsewhere.

[9] Schools History Project, *A New Look At History: Schools History 13-16 Project* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1976), accessed 28.02.2023, http://www.schoolshistoryproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/NewLookAtHistory.pdf. The SHP was originally known as the Schools Council History Project (SCHP).

[10] Denis Shemilt, *History 13-16 Evaluation Study* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1980), 7.

The research project Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches (CHATA), conducted at the Institute of Education, University of London between 1991-1996, led to a reformulation of original SHP concepts, under the term 'second-order' concepts,[11] to include:

> *time*, *change*, *empathy* (roughly, understanding people in the past), and *cause*, as well as *evidence* and *accounts*.[12]

The influential Canadian 'historical thinking concepts' approach, developed at the University of British Columbia in the first decade of the twenty-first century, identified a 'Big Six' list of historical thinking concepts, presented as 'strategies historians use' in the context of inquiry into the past, and in order to:

> establish historical significance… use primary source evidence… examine continuity and change… analyse cause and consequence… take historical perspectives… [and] attempt to understand the ethical dimension of history.[13]

As Table 1 shows, these various constructions of what is involved in thinking about history in history classrooms differ in some striking ways. Of these three examples, it is only in the Canadian model that the notion that school history might involve thinking about ethical aspects of the past is present explicitly. The concept of 'accounts' is only present explicitly in the CHATA paradigm of school history's conceptual structure and not present in the other two models.

Table 1. Comparisons of meta-concepts in the SHP, CHATA and the Big Six models

Shemilt, 1980	Lee, 2005	Seixas and Morton, 2013
	Accounts	
Causation	Cause	Cause and consequence
Change	Change	Continuity and change
Connectedness of past and present		
Empathetic reconstruction	Empathy	Historical perspectives[14]
		Ethical dimension
Evidence	Evidence	Evidence
History as an 'explanation-seeking' discipline		Historical significance
Motivation		
	Time	

[11] First-order concepts referring us to knowledge of the past, and second-order concepts referring us to the discipline of knowing the past.

[12] Lee, «Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History», 41.

[13] Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts…,* 5–6.

[14] The definition of 'perspective' makes it clear that it is equivalent to empathy. To take an historical perspective is to 'attempt to see through the eyes of the people of the past by making evidence-based inferences about what they thought and believed'. Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concepts…,* 6.

'Accounts' are also known as 'interpretations' in English history education – the process of constructing 'accounts' of the past becoming the process of constructing 'interpretations' of the past, and the accounts that result from such processes (history books, historical documentaries, and so on) becoming 'interpretations of history.' [15] 'Accounts' and 'interpretations' will be used interchangeably in this paper, therefore, with a preference given to 'interpretations,' as the term is more prominent in English history education discourse.

It should be noted that the absence of a focus on accounts or interpretations in Anglophone history education traditions outside England, and in the SHP tradition prior to Project CHATA, has already been identified and criticized.[16] It should also be noted that recent work in both Canada[17] and the United States[18] indicates that a focus on interpretations – or what Marczyk, Jay and Reisman call 'historiographic thinking' – is growing in these history education contexts, albeit largely only in interpretations understood in a restricted disciplinary sense, and not more widely so as to include non-disciplinary representations of the past.[19]

What are Interpretations?

An historical interpretation is a product. It is a text constructed in the present with, amongst other functions, the intention that it stand for, denote or connote one or more aspect of the past.[20] Like texts more generally, interpretations are of many types, including, for example, statues,[21] history documentaries or fiction films about historical persons, themes, processes or

[15] Key English history education literature on 'Interpretation' includes, for example, Arthur Chapman, «Historical Interpretations», in *Debates in History Teaching,* ed. Ian Davies (London & New York: Routledge, 2017), 100–112; Ofsted, *Research Review Series: History…*; Christine Counsell, «Disciplinary Knowledge for All, the Secondary History Curriculum and History Teachers' Achievement», *The Curriculum Journal* 22, № 2 (2011): 201–25; Historical Association, «What's the Wisdom on Interpretations of the Past», *Teaching History*, 177 (2019): 22–27.

[16] Denis Shemilt, «What Are Second-Order Concepts? And Why Do They Hurt?», unpublished conference paper presented at the Developing Historical Understanding workshop, Goethe Institute, Fulbright Centre, Ledra Palace Buffer Zone (Nicosia, October, 2010); Peter Seixas, «Translation and Its Discontents: Key Concepts in English and German History Education», *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 48, № 4 (2016): 427–39.

[17] D. Kevin O'Neill, Sheeryl Guloy, Fiona MacKellar and Dale Martelli, «Development and Validation of a Practical Classroom Assessment of Students' Conceptions about Differing Historical Accounts», *Historical Encounters* 9, № 1 (2022): 56–75.

[18] Agnieszka Aya Marczyk, Lightning Jay, and Abby Reisman, «Entering the Historiographic Problem Space: Scaffolding Student Analysis and Evaluation of Historical Interpretations in Secondary Source Material», *Cognition and Instruction* 40, № 4 (2022): 517–39.

[19] Ibidem, 535. In England we tended, until relatively recently, to understand interpretations broadly to include representations of the past beyond historiography. It seems to me that we have begun to narrow our thinking in the last decade - as I argue in Arthur Chapman, «Narrowing Interpretations», *Public History Weekly* 8, № 7 (2020): 1-2. This narrowing is something that I hope to contribute to reversing through this article and other publications.

[20] I am using 'text' here in a broad sense, to denote any semiotic artefact capable of conveying meaning and not solely to denote a written text.

[21] Alex von Tunzelmann, *Fallen Idols: Twelve Statues That Made History* (London: Headline Publishing Group, Ltd, 2021).

events,[22] monographs or academic histories,[23] theme parks,[24] novels with historic themes,[25] and so on.[26] What they all have in common is the fact that they aim to make an aspect of the past 'present' in the present, albeit in textual not actual form. Historical interpretations differ, of course, in their aims or purposes. One can strive to make the past present for many different purposes – for political purposes, for aesthetic purposes, for analytical purposes, and so on.[27] An historical interpretation is also a process, or set of processes. It is an activity, in the present - of person or group of persons working in particular traditions and contexts - through which past-referencing interpretations are constructed, using keystrokes, brushstrokes, song or poetic lyrics, the action of a hammer and chisel on stone, of light on a camera-lens, and so on.

The Aims of this Paper

Accounts of second-order concepts typically do not establish a clear hierarchy between these concepts. Seixas and Morton frame their 'Big Six' concepts as in the service of the wider project of historical inquiry or historical problem solving.[28] Lee presents the concepts as working together to 'give shape to the discipline of history.[29] In a paper reviewing historical concepts, however, Shemilt has argued for the priority of 'accounts' as a concept.[30] My aim, in this paper, is three-fold. First, building on and extending Shemilt's argument, I aim to make the case for the centrality and foundational role of 'accounts' and 'interpretations' in history education. Second, I aim to expand how they are typically understood, extending my previous work on accounts heuristics,[31] and arguing for an inclusive concept of historical interpretation and history making.[32]

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[22] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film / Marnie Hughes-Warrington* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[23] John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

[24] Constantin Goschler, «Reenactment Special: Enterprise Reichspark», *Public History Weekly* 5 (2017): 1-2.

[25] Perry Anderson, «From Progress to Catastrophe», *London Review of Books*, 28 July 2011, accessed 19 February 2023, https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe.

[26] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory, Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 1994).

[27] Herman Paul, *Key Ideas in Historical Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

[28] Seixas and Morton, *The Big Six Historical Thinking Concept…*, 9.

[29] Lee, «Putting Principles into Practice: Understanding History», 41.

[30] Shemilt, «What Are Second-Order Concepts? And Why Do They Hurt?», 1.

[31] Arthur Chapman, *Towards an Interpretations Heuristic: A Case Study Exploration of 16-19 Year Old Students' Ideas about Explaining Variations in Historical Accounts*, unpublished EdD Thesis, Institute of Education, (University of London, 2009), 182–85; Arthur Chapman, «But It Might Just Be Their Political Views': Using Jörn Rüsen's "Disciplinary Matrix" to Develop Understandings of Historical Interpretation», *Caderno de Pesquisa: Pensamento Educacional* 9, Nº 21 (2014): 67–85.

[32] Although I do not have space to engage with it fully here, I should acknowledge the importance of a recent history of Australian history making in influencing my current thinking on these issues - Anna Clark's, *Making Australian History* (Sydney: Random House Australia, 2022). I adopt the term 'history making,' pioneered by Marnie Hughes-Warrington, from Clark's account of it in that book.

The paper will also argue that we can use the same concepts to make sense of and compare interpretations of history framed in 'disciplinary' terms, and interpretations constructed in a wide range of non-disciplinary modes of interpretation, and that it is helpful for history education to do this if we want to equip students with concepts that will help them to compare different interpretations of the past systematically, and that will help them appreciate the specific and distinctive features of different ways of approaching the past. On the basis of this modelling of how we can make sense of interpretations, the paper concludes by arguing for a broadening of the focus of history education, such that it becomes much more concerned with helping children navigate competing accounts and types of knowledge claim about the past. This aim - understanding the many and various ways of history making present in our societies - seems to be to be a vital and central rationale for learning about history in our times.

The Analytical Priority of Interpretation as the Foundational Second-order Concept

Drawing on pioneering work evaluating the Schools History Project and on work arising from Project CHATA to produce a systematic account of second-order concepts and the challenges involved in learning them in 2010, Shemilt acknowledged that the failure of the SHP 'to distinguish' accounts from the concepts 'source and evidence' was 'a major sin of omission.'[33] This was so, Shemilt argued, because 'the second-order concept of accounts is super-ordinate to those of source and evidence,' and that this was the case because:

> the assumptions students make about *historical accounts* determine how they construe (a) the relationship between 'the real past' and 'the past as it is represented in the present'; (b) the ontological status of the real past; and (c) the epistemological status of academic accounts of the past in absolute terms and relative to representations in memory and folklore, official propaganda and journalism, media documentaries and fiction.[34]

In other words, having a concept of accounts means coming to make a distinction between, first, the past itself – which is gone and forever beyond retrieval, and, therefore, not available for present inspection and analysis – and the representations of the past that are constructed in the present which are called historical accounts. It is only when one has this insight – into the categorical and ontological difference between the absent past and our present representations of it – that one can meaningfully grasp what an historical source is, namely a trace of the absent past remaining in the present. And, finally, it is only when one has a concept of these things that history can begin make sense as an epistemic activity, namely, the activity, in the present, of enquiring into the absent past, by interrogating its traces and advancing arguments about it in

[33] Shemilt, «What Are Second-Order Concepts? And Why Do They Hurt?» 21 and page 26 note xii.
[34] Ibidem, 21.

the form of narratives and descriptions of past states of affairs, events, developments and individuals.

Studies of progression in children's thinking about accounts / interpretations,[35] and studies of progression in other aspects of historical thinking,[36]support these claims. Studies of progression in understandings of historical accounts / interpretations suggest that a major transition in the progression of children's thinking occurs when they come to see that historical accounts are not 'copies of the past' with a 'one-to-one relationship with the past' but that they are, rather, 'organised from a personal viewpoint,' and, therefore, legitimately shaped by decisions that the authors of accounts make about 'viewpoint and selection.' Students who come to think like this can, for example, see that one representation of the past might differ from another because of 'partisan' differences between the authors, but, also, for legitimate reasons related to the nature of enquiry, for example, because an 'historian may… answer a question about housing or about work and education,' and that another historian's account will differ because it is driven by some other question. Further progression in understanding may follow when students come to see that differences 'in accounts are not just a matter of authors deciding to make choices' but rather inherent in the very nature of historical accounts which could never be total and final, but which must always be 'necessarily selective… necessarily constructed for

[35] Arthur Chapman, *Accounting for Interpretations / Interpreting Accounts,* unpublished Institution Focused Study, Institute of Education, (London: University of London, 2001); Chapman, *Towards an Interpretations Heuristic*; Suhaimi Afandi, *Conceptions about the Nature of Accounts in History: An Exploratory Study of Students' Ideas and Teachers' Assumptions about Students' Understandings in Singapore*, unpublished PhD thesis, (London: University of London Institute of Education, 2012); Maria K. Georgiou, *17-18 Year-Old Greek-Cypriot Students' Understandings of Differing Historical Accounts: An Exploratory Study of How Students Engage with History in the Republic of Cyprus*, unpublished doctoral thesis, (London: University College London, 2020); Arthur Chapman and Maria Georgiou, «Powerful Knowledge Building and Conceptual Change Research: Learning from Research on "Historical Accounts" in England and Cyprus», in *Knowing History in Schools,* ed. for Arthur Chapman (London: UCL Press, 2021), 72–96; Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, «"I Just Wish We Could Go Back in the Past and Find out What Really Happened": Progression in Understanding about Historical Accounts'», *Teaching History* 117 (2004): 25–31.

[36] Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, «A Scaffold, Not a Cage: Progression and Progression Models in History», *Teaching History* 113 (2003): 13–23; Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, «Is Any Explanation Better than None? Over-Determined Narratives, Senseless Agencies and One-Way Streets in Students' Learning about Cause and Consequence in History», *Teaching History* 137 (2009): 42–49; Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, «The Concept That Dares Not Speak Its Name: Should Empathy Come out of the Closet?», *Teaching History* 143 (2011): 39–49; Frances Blow, «'Everything Flows and Nothing Stays': How Students Make Sense of the Historical Concepts of Change, Continuity and Development'», *Teaching History* 145 (2011): 47–55; Rosalyn Ashby, «Understanding Historical Evidence: Teaching and Learning Challenges», in *Debates in History Teaching*, ed. for Ian Davies (London and New York: Routledge, 2017), 144-154 ; Frances Blow, Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, «Time and Chronology: Conjoined Twins or Distant Cousins? », *Teaching History* 147 (2012): 26–35.

particular themes and timescales' and when students come to see that the 'past is (re-) constructed in answer to questions and according to criteria.'[37]

To take one concept as an example, progression in understanding causal explanation. Lee and Shemilt have argued that progression in understanding of explanation can be characterised in terms of coming to see that historical occurrences can be explained in various ways, for example, in terms of 'agents and actions,' 'causal chains and / or networks,' or 'contexts as well as conditions.' However, progression to the highest level of historical thinking about explanation depends, they contend, upon coming to see that 'causal concepts are theoretical constructs,' or, in other words, coming to see that the 'validity of every explanation is relative to questions posed as well as to what is known about the past,' that we 'have criteria that set limits to what is explicable and for judging the quality of explanations,' that we 'also use models of how and why things happen in human affairs that are both general and period-specific.' [38]

The understanding that histories must always be interpretations produced by people making decisions about what questions to ask, and about how to pursue those questions and develop answers, is fundamental to making progress in understanding history as a process of making sense of the past. Understanding accounts can help us grasp, then, that histories are limited things – they can never be total (answering all questions and presenting all aspects of the past), they can never be final (since new questions can arise). They are always authored (produced by individual history-makers, working in traditions of history-making). Histories are always made, in other words, they are never found, and the makers of histories have agency and must make decisions to do their work - decisions about which questions to ask, what archives to use, how to interrogate those archives, and so on – as we shall see further, below.

We may attend to history-making, as many traditions of history education do, by helping children explore questions about why things happen in the past (causation), about what is important in the past (significance) about how we know the past (evidence) and about developments over time in the past (change and continuity). These are all matters of interpretation – each of them entails asking questions about the past and creating accounts /interpretations of the past in the form of synchronic representations of past states of affairs or people, or diachronic representations of historical events, actions, developments and / or processes. Historical interpretation, then, is foundational for all these other activities as, by their very nature, they are all forms of historical interpretation or account-making. Interpretation has priority over other historical thinking concepts, then, since those concepts can only be brought into play through the construction of accounts. To reason about change is to create an account

[37] Lee and Shemilt, «"I Just Wish We Could Go Back in the Past and Find out What Really Happened": Progression in Understanding about Historical Accounts», 30.

[38] Lee and Shemilt, «Is Any Explanation Better than None? Over-Determined Narratives, Senseless Agencies and One-Way Streets in Students' Learning about Cause and Consequence in History». 46–47.

of change, to reason about explanation is to create an explanatory account, to argue about the significance of an historical event is to create an account of its significance, and so on. Historical interpretation is foundational in a further sense, also, however, since, as we have seen, research on progression in understanding in other second-order aspects of historical learning shows, that coming to sophisticated understandings of causation, of change, of significance - and so on - involves coming to understand what historical accounts / interpretations are, coming to understand that they are made, and coming to understand how they are made. Not only is interpretation the basic matrix of all history making, therefore, understanding interpretation is also vital to progressing in understanding what histories are and how they work.

Understanding Interpretation

> Histories come in all shapes and sizes. They can be written, uploaded, filmed, drawn, mapped and even acted. They can be about one person or about the universe. They can be expressed in a few words or across multiple volumes. Histories vary because they are decisions. These decisions reflect the beliefs history makers have about how the past ought to be understood by its audiences.[39]

Hughes-Warrington's focus on 'decision' when defining histories points to two vital considerations relevant to defining what 'accounts' or 'interpretations' involve. There are numerous dimensions to consider when analysing processes of historical interpretation, relating a wide range of tacit or explicit choices that must be made during their construction. These dimensions, I will argue, are applicable to the many and various forms that historical interpretation can take, and they comprehend both academic and disciplinary history. Understanding these dimensions of historical interpretation, therefore, can form the basis of model of history education that aims to encompass the exploration of many and various forms of history making. Figure 2 schematically represents a number of inter-related aspects of this process.

[39] Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (London: Routledge, 2014), xi.

Figure 2. Aspects and Dimensions of Variation in Historical Interpretation[40]

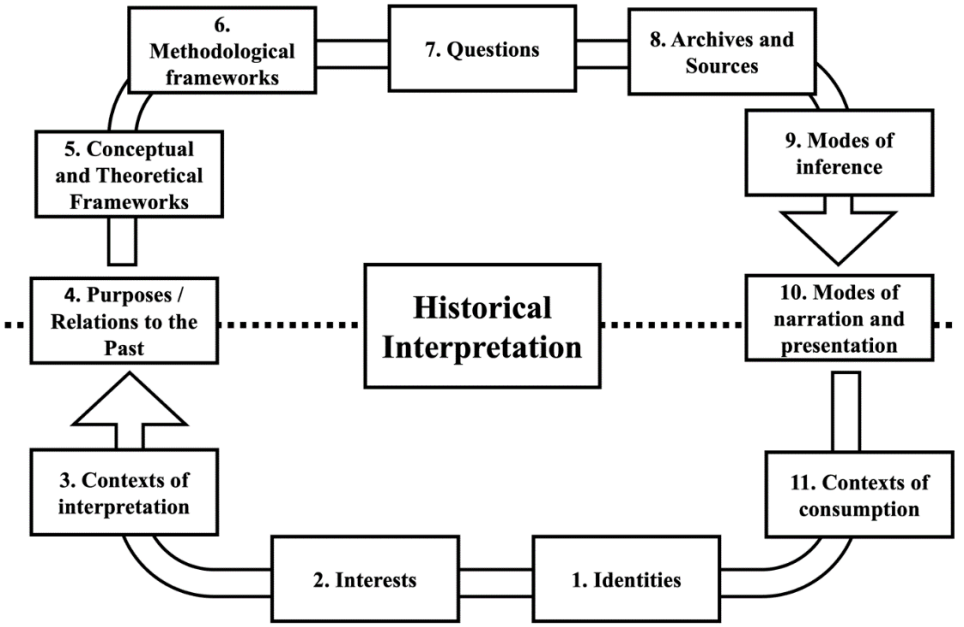

Figure 2 modifies, develops, and extends Rüsen's 'disciplinary matrix' for historical studies,[41] building on work to interpret the matrix begun in my doctoral studies.[42] Like Rüsen's matrix, it models a process, starting with a beginning (point 1 in the diagram) and moving through to an end (point 11), which feeds back to point 1 again, potentially. As with Rüsen's model, it begins with the 'identities' of an interpreter and moves through a range of considerations, including considerations relating to research, before moving to considerations relevant to representation. The number of stages, explained below, is increased from Rüsen's 5, to 11. Like Rüsen's model, and explications of it by Lee and others,[43] this model is divided horizontally into a sphere of practical life activity, below the line and in the bottom half of the diagram, and a sphere of

[40] This figure draws on, extends and develops the use I made of Jörn Rüsen's 'disciplinary matrix as a heuristic for modelling historical interpretation in Chapman, *Towards an Interpretations Heuristic*…,182-185, and in Chapman, «'But It Might Just Be Their Political Views' : Using Jörn Rüsen's "Disciplinary Matrix" to Develop Understandings of Historical Interpretation», 69. I drew on the version of the matrix presented in Jörn Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005), and on Lee's elaboration of it in Peter Lee, «"Walking Backwards into Tomorrow" Historical Consciousness and Understanding History», *History Education Research Journal* 4, № 1 (2004): 1-46.

[41] Rüsen, *History: Narration, Interpretation, Orientation*….

[42] Chapman, *Towards and Interpretations Heuristic*….

[43] Lee, «"Walking Backwards into Tomorrow" Historical Consciousness and Understanding History», 1-46; Peter Lee, «Historical Literacy: Theory and Research», *History Education Research Journal* 5, № 1 (2005): 29–40.

theoretical considerations concerned with knowledge construction, in the top half of the diagram. I understand this difference as essentially analytical – something that can be drawn in theoretical reflection but that is likely to be very hard to define in practice, since, in reality, theory and practice are often intertwined.

All history makers are people, living in time in particular contexts and with particular interests, defined by what is common to them as people (e.g., finitude) and also by what separates them as particular people living, working, and making meaning about the past in differing social and cultural contexts (points 1-3 in the diagram). A graphic artist, for example, like an historian, is a human being and, by that fact, engaged in reflection on limitations imposed by singularity – we are all embodied and spatio-temporally and culturally located. Contexts, interests, and identities, however, are all plural, reflecting the fact that interpretations can be formed in multiple locations, serving multiple purposes and in the expression of multiple identities. Artists and historians differ in their professional contexts, and in the kinds of interest that those contexts generate. Although historians are, of course, individuals, and therefore subjective to a degree in the decisions that they make when representing the past, they are constrained by their professional contexts – by, for example, peer-review.[44] This disciplinary constraint, generative of objective constraints on subjectivity, is not unique to historians, however – journalists and film-researchers are also constrained by the critiques of their peers and by other factors, such as legal processes, and all social representation of the past is subject to interpersonal constraints, created by tradition, by audiences, and so on. It is also the case, however, that constraints on subjectivity in representation are a defining characteristic of disciplinary practices, such as academic history, where epistemic warrant is expected for all claims.[45]

The first three elements in the model will impact how interpreters engage with the past and they already begin to account for something of the range and diversity in historical interpretation. However, there are many further considerations to introduce. We can all engage with the past in many different ways, analysed by Day and Paul as 'relations to the past' and by Levstik and Barton in terms of 'analytic' and 'identification' stances.[46] Disciplinary history is usually characterised in terms of what Paul calls an 'epistemic' mode of relation to the past – concerned with knowledge-building questions such as 'What can we claim to do know about X and how do we know this?', or explanatory questions such as 'How can we explain why X happened as it did?'. However, there are many other ways in which we can relate to the past.

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[44] Thomas L. Haskell, *Objectivity Is Not Neutrality: Explanatory Schemes in History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (London: Granta Books, 1997).

[45] Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge / Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[46] Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*; Mark Andrew Day, «Our Relations with the Past», *Philosophia* 36, № 4 (2008): 417–27; Paul, *Key Ideas in Historical Theory*….

We might, for example, relate to it in 'moral' ways, using the past, as an opportunity to reflect on human nature and its forms, possibilities and limitations.[47] We might also use history to reflect on past actors in morally evaluative ways, drawing on Nietzsche's 'monumental' or 'critical' modes of historical sense making, and judging past figures in positive and negative ways.[48] Other relations to the past analysed by Paul include the 'aesthetic' and the 'material' relations – the latter starting from our own materiality (we are bodies and bodies develop in time) and our locatedness in concrete places and spaces, and in particular traditions and ways of being that shape how we experience and apprehend the past. We can apprehend the past in ways that are primarily aesthetic and with aesthetic experiential aims – much of the experience of visiting historic sites could, no doubt, be accounted for in these ways. One can also approach the past with a primary focus on identity-construction and affirmation – looking for confirmation of identity and belonging, for example, through practices such as the commemoration of the dead, that aim to link lives in the present to lives that have gone before through discourses of transcendence. An opposite approach, affirming identity through negation, approaches those who have come before with the aim of distancing the present from the past and with the aim of clearing a space for new ways of living to be defined. There are modes of relating to the past and purposes in approaching the past, then, and some modes may be said to characterise some activities and practices more than others – the 'epistemic' mode, for example, being much more characteristic of academic history than of politicised uses of history focused explicitly on identity-building or identity-negating. Relations to the past are plural in another sense: we can live more than one of them, and often simultaneously. An historian, whose professional relation to a particular past might be epistemic and disciplinary, might also relate to the same past politically, morally, and so on, and different contexts might bring differing relations to the fore. They might engage, in other words, in what Gottlieb and Wineburg call 'epistemic switching,' shifting their approach, depending on which aspects of their identity had most salience at any particular moment in time.[49]

Items 5 through to 9 in Figure 2 refer to what might, most conventionally, be understood as discipline-specific aspects of historical interpretation. Indeed, many of the items here are staples in handbooks of social science methodology more generally and seem, therefore, sequestered from ordinary life.[50] Historians who wish to interrogate the record of the past, and to model and

[47] I have explored this issue in Arthur Chapman, «Learning the Lessons of the Holocaust: A Critical Exploration», in *Holocaust Education: Contemporary Challenges and Controversies,* ed. Stuart Foster, Andy Pearce, and Alice Pettigrew (London,: UCL Press, 2020), 50–73.

[48] Friedrich Nietzsche, «On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life», in *Nietzsche: Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 57–124.

[49] Eli Gottlieb and Sam Wineburg, «Between "Veritas" and "Communitas": Epistemic Switching in the Reading of Academic and Sacred History», *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 21, № 1 (2012): 84–129.

[50] Simon Gunn and Lucy Faire, eds., *Research Methods for History* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

to structure the thinking they do as a result, cannot do so without sets of conceptual or theoretical tools. If I am going to investigate the Tsarist economy in Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example, I need to have a framework of economic concepts at my disposal before I can start to do so, and I am likely to encounter a number of specific paradigms in the literature that seem particularly salient (for example, ideas deriving from Chayanov's theory of the peasant economy).[51] Conceptual and theoretical considerations of this kind often define different approaches to the past – global history,[52] cultural history,[53] queer history,[54] posthumanist history,[55] the history of ideas[56] and so on. It is not just conceptual and theoretical concerns that differentiate types of history, however, since they typically develop methodologies specific to the kinds of issue that they are exploring. As Goldstein has argued, 'constitution' is a neglected dimension of history-making, and one that it is vital to understand if we are to explain why there is so much variation in the representation of the past:[57] historical approaches often differ in their definitions of the archives and documents that are relevant to the exploration of the issue in hand, and it is possible to constitute the archive for an event or an issue in a variable range of ways. Population historians, for example, constitute archives and data sets in very different ways from historians of religion, although they might find themselves consulting documents created by the same hands in the past. To historians of population, documents created by priests might typically be of interest as records of births, marriages and deaths, and as sources of information to be transcribed into data bases that allow computerised queries to be run, identifying trends, say, in the average age at marriage, to be plotted over time.[58] To a cultural historian of religion, on the other hand, texts created by priests might be important as sources of different kinds of information, relating, for example, to community involvement in ritual and fund-raising for religious observances, or to resistance to change in religious practice, for example.[59]

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[51] Peter Gattrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850-1917* (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 1986); Alexander Chayanov, *Theory of Peasant Economy* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986).

[52] Peter Frankopan, «Why Global History Matters», in *What Is History, Now? How the Past and Present Speak to Each Other*, ed. Helen Carr and Suzannah Lipscomb (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2021), 17–32.

[53] Miri Rubin, «What Is Cultural History?», in *What Is History Now?*, ed. David Cannadine (Houndmills: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 80–94.

[54] Justin Bengry, «Can And Should We Queer The Past? », in *What Is History, Now? How the Past and Present Speak to Each Other*, ed. Helen Carr and Suzannah Lipscomb (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2021), 48–65.

[55] Ewa Domanska, «Posthumanist History», in *Debating New Approaches to History*, ed. Marek Tamm and Peter Burke (London, New York, Oxford, New Delhi and Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 327–37.

[56] Mark Bevir, *The Logic of the History of Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[57] Leon Goldstein J., *Historical Knowing* (Austin and London: The University of Texas Press, 1976).

[58] Tony Wrigley and Roger Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541–1871* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[59] Eamon Duffy, *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*, (New Haven London: Yale University Press, 2003).

There is no academic interpretation of the past, then, without a theoretical apparatus – concepts, methodologies, questions, and so on. These aspects of interpretation are less distinctive of academic practice than is often thought, however, it seems to me: although it is true that interpreters of the past working in academic disciplinary contexts are required, more than non-academic interpreters, to be explicit in their conceptual frameworks and their methodologies, it is also true that every attempt to make meaning about the past must, of necessity, embody a conceptual framework of one kind or another, have a methodology of some kind or other, and be asking a question or some kind that it is trying to answer through its interpretation, even if these things are often not made explicit. If I want to represent the past for purposes of commemoration, for example – a purpose that might be thought a long way from a sharp-eyed academic investigation of the 'truth' about the past – I am still going to have to have a concept of what the thing to be commemorated was, and an implicit theory of what commemoration is and how it might work. I would also need to have some method for gathering information about the thing I was going to commemorate in order to commemorate it – a date of death on a dead soldier's gravestone must be determined by some means or other, and it embodies a claim to truth just as much as a factual statement in an academic monograph.

The answers that historical texts present are shaped by the questions their authors ask, as Collingwood showed in his discussion of the logic of question and answer,[60] and the questions asked of the past are linked to the kinds of historical problem that are being investigated – causation questions differing from questions about significance, which differ, again, from questions about change, and so on. Different approaches to the past can also yield different types of question. Logics of inference vary by study type and research strategy – an inductive mode of inference being most applicable where the aim is to attempt generalisation about a topic, an abductive mode of inference being most applicable where the aim is to reason back from observed phenomena to underlying but not directly accessible mechanisms that help explain them, and a deductive mode of inference being most applicable in studies of individual cases, where new data is interpreted in the light of concepts and principles already accepted prior to the study beginning.[61] Again, whilst these things might be thought distinctive of academic practice, they are in fact present in all interpretation of the past whatever, to one degree or explicitness or another. Any narrative can be thought of as tacitly answering questions – about what happened, about what caused things to turn out as they did, about the significance of particular individuals and places. A Hollywood film about the Dunkirk evacuation, for example, will raise questions of this kind just as much as a monograph will, even if they answer them differently and under different types of epistemic constraint. What is true of questions is also

[60] Robin Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).
[61] Norman Blaikie, *Approaches to Social Enquiry: Advancing Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

true of inferences – and, as constructivist theorists of narrative have shown, all text-consumption involves inferential activity of various types to make meaning from story-data presented by narrators – indeed, there is no story-comprehension without it.[62]

As has been said, items 5 through to 9 in the diagram may seem most relevant to disciplinary historical enquiry conducted in academic contexts. However, the issues represented arise in all modes of relation to the past, albeit in differing degrees. If I set out, for example, to construct a representation of the clothing and interior décor and presentation of domestic spaces as a set designer for a fiction film set in a real historical period – or if I aim researching a computer game historical environment's mise-en-scène, I am still going to have to develop concepts (e.g., of 19th century clothing and status differentiation) and research strategies, including archives, questions and modes of inference. This insight can be deepened, however, and extended beyond practices with different aims and rationales within contemporary culture to explore and understand approaches to the past that differ in more radical ways. Differing cultural traditions of history making – for example, the traditions of Indian, Islamic and Chinese history making described in works of comparative historiography – can be compared in terms of their fundamental structural concepts (e.g., how they articulate time) and in their understandings of how knowledge claims are to be made and validated.[63] The same can be said of indigenous forms of history making also that draw on different ontologies from those found in modes of history making associated with Western modernity and that, for example, think about space less as a site in which history can unfold and more as having agency in history.[64]

Moving from issues of past knowledge-construction to questions of past-representing, we encounter a number of related questions that apply equally pertinently across very divergent modes of interpretation of the past, ranging from the academic and history-disciplinary interpretations through to interpretations of the past presented in narrative film and historical novels. A wide range of formal decisions must be made in all these cases: choices about mode of representation, media of representation, genres of representation, and so on. One can write history in the realist and third personal form that traditional high political history frequently took, as a political narrative of decisions and decision-makers, made up of the actions of leaders and key decision-makers. Alternatively, one can decide to evoke a complex situation more in the

[62] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).
[63] Daniel Woolf, *A Global History of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Georg Iggers, Q. Edward Wang, and Supriya Mukherjee, *A Global History of Modern Historiography* (London, New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).
[64] Clark, *Making Australian History*; Leila Blackbird K. and Caroline Dodds Pennock, «How Making Space for Indigenous Peoples Changes History», in *What Is History, Now? How the Past and Present Speak to Each Other*, ed. Helen Carr and Suzannah Lipscomb (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2021), 247–62; Mark Sheehan, «Ka Mura, Ka Muri [Look to the Past to Inform the Future]: Disciplinary History, Cultural Responsiveness and Māori Perspectives of the Past», in *Knowing History in Schools: Powerful Knowledge and the Powers of Knowledge,* ed. Arthur Chapman (London: UCL Press, 2021), 202–15.

manner of Tolstoy's battle narratives in *War and Peace*, disaggregated into separate narrations of the disjointed experiences of a range of participants, without an overall synoptic coherence.[65] There are a large number of narratological decisions of a formal kind to be made also in narrating any history in whatever genre – one might start a narrative, in the manner of Tarantino in *Reservoir Dogs*, at the end of the story and then work backwards to explain the denouement, for example, as Schama does, by starting his chronicle of the French Revolution with a micro-narrative about the decay of a plaster elephant erected in the Place de la Bastille by Napoleon, symbolising the decay of revolutionary hopes through this micronarrative.[66] One might, alternatively, decide to 'begin at the beginning,' as Thomas claimed to be doing in his radio play *Under Milk Wood* And tell out the story in strict chronological order, which is what Evans does in his trilogy about the Third Reich, for example.[67] In narrating, decisions must be made about the central character of the narrative also – about what the narrative is about. Both an historian of Trumpism writing a book about the phenomenon and a documentary-maker making a film about it would need to decide if their narratives were to be primarily about Donald Trump or, alternatively, about some other central protagonist, say, blue collar white America in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crash and the longer history of economic decline since the mid-1970s. There are many more narratological questions to consider – such as questions of focalization[68] or emplotment[69] - and these are questions that arise for all forms of narration, regardless of the genre or tradition of historical interpretation we are focused on.

Finally, Figure 2 focuses on audience as a dimension of difference in interpretation. All texts are constructed with some notion of their contexts of consumption in mind at the point of construction, even though texts can find themselves consumed in ways that their authors did not anticipate, as the reception histories of classical texts, for example, from their composition to the present indicates – Aristophanes did not anticipate being studied in twenty-first century classical civilisation courses, and neither did Plato. The impact of intended audience on narration can be scoped, for example, from the contrasting history of two narratives of the Peterloo Massacre – an event that took place in Manchester in 1819 – produced by the same graphic artists for different audiences for the bicentenary of Peterloo in 2019. Both graphic novels have

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[65] Hayden White, «Against Historical Realism», *New Left Review* 46 (2007): 89–110.

[66] *Reservoir Dogs*, dir. by Quentin Tarantino, Live Entertainment, Dog Eat Dog Productions Inc., 1993; Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1989).

[67] Dylan Thomas, *Under Milk Wood: The Definitive Edition* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2014); Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich: How the Nazis Destroyed Democracy and Seized Power in Germany* (London: Penguin, 2004); Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in Power, 1933 - 1939: How the Nazis Won Over the Hearts and Minds of a Nation* (London: Penguin, 2006); Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich at War: How the Nazis Led Germany from Conquest to Disaster* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

[68] Michael Toolan J., *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).

[69] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).

the same front cover image but they differ in their titles – the first, *Peterloo: Witness to a Massacre*, was written for an adult audience and the second, *Peterloo: Imagine a World*, was written for an audience of lower secondary school children to whose teachers it was distributed freely online and in hard copy.[70] The two texts are of very different lengths – the adult text has 90 pages of main text, and the school text has 15. The two texts vary in their depictions of the violence of the massacre, the adult text being much more explicit in showing injury detail. The two texts differ in narrative structure and strategy: whereas the former lacks an explicit narrator and is almost entirely narrated through quotations from primary documents, the latter is narrated in the voice of an old woman looking back on events, from the vantage point of the 1880s, and narrating her experience as a child on the day of the massacre to her grandchildren and explaining the significance of the event and why she lights a candle every year to commemorate it.

As we have seen, then, understanding interpretation is a complex task and one that brings together considerations that situate the authors of histories and traditions of history making (identity, context and purpose), considerations that focus on theoretical aspects of knowledge construction (conceptual and methodological frameworks, modes of inference, and so on), considerations of narration (including questions of genre and form) and questions of audience that both shape how texts are constructed and that bring us back to questions relating to the contexts in which interpretations are located. These considerations, I have argued, can be used to gain insights into, and to make comparison between, a very wide range of forms of history making, including modes of constituting and presenting the past conventionally excluded from consideration in history lessons. I will now go on to consider how approaching interpretation in this broader framing might help us rethink some the aims of history education.

Understanding Interpretations as a Foundational Aim for History Education

> Political leaders want a clear, simple, and uplifting version of history to inspire visions of the future – usually orated in heroic tones. Yet there are always many competing accounts, with the orthodox version often simply echoing the verdict of the political victors. Around the world in recent years a process of telling and listening to such competing stories has been deliberately developed in the hope of promoting 'truth and reconciliation.' Pioneered in post-apartheid South Africa and then followed in more than 40 countries, usually in fraught situations after civil war, colonial rule or authoritarian regimes, the practice has also been

[70] Polyp, Eva Schlunke, and Robert Poole, *Peterloo: Witness to a Massacre* (Oxford: New Internationalist, 2019); Polyp and Ben Marsh, *Peterloo: Imagine a World* (Oxford & Canterbury: New Internationalist & The Age of Revolutions Project, 2019), accessed 28.02.2023, https://www.keepandshare.com/doc/8240427/peterloo-imagine-a-world-pdf-32-5-meg?da=y.

adopted by Canada, Australia, and New Zealand to start addressing their historical treatment of indigenous peoples.[71]

The argument so far as shown that understanding historical interpretation is fundamental to the activity of arguing about the past and to the activity of understanding and debating representations of the past produced by history makers working in a wide range of traditions and genres. Understanding interpretation is vital in a further sense, however. We live in a world structured by past-referencing stories – personal stories, family stories, local community narratives, national narratives, and so on. Our worlds are multi-storied worlds, then, woven through with multiple stories addressing multiple forms and levels of human existence. A multi-storied world is one where, sooner or later, stories contrast with, conflict with, and, at times, come to contradict each other. Past-referencing stories can be sources of conflict and injustice and they can also be mechanisms through which conflicts and injustices are pursued. These facts about the present that our education systems are tasked with preparing young people to navigate and inhabit, point very clearly to a need to move away from narrow narrative constructions of history education that model it as an enterprise in inculcating national romances and myths, and that aim to set-up simplistic categories of 'identification with' and 'identification against.'[72] Regardless of the value that national identification may or may not have as an educational aim – and there is important work that puts the efficacy of such approaches to identity making into doubt[73] – an education that focuses on single and simple narrative enculturation cannot be adequate to the tasks of preparing young people for contemporary complexities.

There are further reasons to challenge narrow constructions of history as affirmative national narrative. Many of these stories have served in the past, as the quotation from Reynold's above demonstrates, not simply to deny complexity but also, and more centrally, to obscure and repress it. Affirmative narratives of the nation state have served, as scholars such as Mann and Trouillot have shown, to obscure and silence stories of genocide and expropriation.[74] These stories have often achieved prominence, also, by silencing and marginalising other traditions of history making and telling.

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[71] David Reynolds, *Island Stories: An Unconventional History of Britain* (London: William Collins, 2020), 255-256.

[72] David Andress, *Cultural Dementia: How the West Has Lost Its History and Risks Losing Everything Else*, (London: Head of Zeus, 2018); James V. Wertsch, *How Nations Remember: A Narrative Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

[73] James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Wertsch, *How Nations Remember*...

[74] Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015).

If history education is to prepare young people to understand the world in which they are to exercise political agency as citizens, and the competing stories that vie to shape and reshape that world and their identities in it, then, it seems vital that we educate them to understand the many and various forms that the interpretation of the past can take. It also seems vital that we equip them to understand not only the variety of forms on past-referencing story that they will encounter but, also, that we help them understand the forms and limits of these stories – what they can and what they cannot offer us, for example, and the limits of their claims on us.

Furthermore, also, it seems vital that we help young people develop the tools that will allow them to discriminate between stories of different types: understandings that may help them explain why stories might say different things; understandings that may help them know when it is appropriate to accept an interpretation in the terms in which it is offered, and when it might be appropriate to challenge what is being said; and, understandings that may help them see how to proceed when evaluating stories and, perhaps, when critiquing and challenging what they say. Equally, history education has a responsibility to help young people appreciate the range of forms that history-making can take in our present. Histories shape futures and an appreciation of plural forms of historical representation can only help broaden the range of possible futures available.

It might be thought that these considerations argue against a disciplinary orientation to learning history – they clearly foreground, after all, the education of citizens and not disciplines. There is a false dichotomy here, however, it seems to me. The same arguments can underwrite both the education of citizens and the education of disciplinary thinking – citizens navigate the world, after all, and disciplines help us make sense of the world.[75] What I am advancing here, it seems to me, is a meta-historical argument for a broadened concept of disciplinary learning. It is important for children to come to understand the world and its histories. As well as helping to build world-knowledge, the study of historical interpretation has the potential, perhaps, to help young people come to understand the multiple roles that forms of history making play in constructing human worlds, and in helping us make sense of them.

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[75] Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind: Beyond Facts and Standardized Tests, the K-12 Education That Every Child Deserves* (New York: Penguin Group, 2000).

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