

Historical Empathy: A Cognitive-Affective Theory for History Education in Canada

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Article abstract

Historical empathy involves a process of attempting to understand the thoughts, feelings, experiences, decisions, and actions of people from the past within specific historical contexts. Although historical empathy has been a rich area of study in history education for several decades, this research has largely taken place outside of Canada. In this article, I argue that greater attention should be paid to historical empathy in Canadian history education research and curriculum because it can support learning outcomes related to historical thinking and historical consciousness, citizenship, and decolonizing and anti-racist approaches to history education. Drawing from and commenting on other scholarship, I present a cognitive-affective theory of historical empathy which includes five elements: (1) evidence and contextualization, (2) informed historical imagination, (3) historical perspectives, (4) ethical judgements, and (5) caring. Through exploring each element and some pedagogical considerations for educators, I emphasize the affective dimensions of history to centre their importance for history education in Canada.



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Abstract

Historical empathy involves a process of attempting to understand the thoughts, feelings, experiences, decisions, and actions of people from the past within specific historical contexts. Although historical empathy has been a rich area of study in history education for several decades, this research has largely taken place outside of Canada. In this article, I argue that greater attention should be paid to historical empathy in Canadian history education research and curriculum because it can support learning outcomes related to historical thinking and historical consciousness, citizenship, and decolonizing and anti-racist approaches to history education. Drawing from and commenting on other scholarship, I present a cognitive-affective theory of historical empathy which includes five elements: (1) evidence and contextualization, (2) informed historical imagination, (3) historical perspectives, (4) ethical judgements, and (5) caring. Through exploring each element and some pedagogical considerations for educators, I emphasize the affective dimensions of history to centre their importance for history education in Canada.

Keywords: historical empathy, history education, affective dimensions, historical thinking, citizenship education

Résumé

L'empathie historique est un processus qui cherche à comprendre les pensées, les sentiments, les expériences, les décisions et les actions des personnes du passé dans des contextes historiques précis. L'empathie historique est un champ d'études riche dans le domaine de l'enseignement de l'histoire depuis plusieurs décennies, mais ces recherches ont surtout eu lieu à l'extérieur du contexte canadien. Dans cet article, je soutiens qu'une plus grande attention devrait être accordée à l'empathie historique dans la recherche et dans les programmes d'enseignement de l'histoire au Canada, car elle peut soutenir les résultats d'apprentissages liés à la réflexion historique, à la conscience historique, à la citoyenneté et aux approches décolonisatrices et antiracistes de l'enseignement de l'histoire. En m'inspirant et en commentant d'autres études, je présente une théorie cognitive affective de l'empathie historique qui comprend cinq éléments : (1) la preuve et la contextualisation ; (2) l'imagination historique informée ; (3) les perspectives historiques ; (4) les jugements éthiques ; et (5) la sollicitude. En explorant chacun de ces éléments et certaines considérations pédagogiques pour les éducateurs, cet article met l'accent sur les dimensions affectives de l'histoire afin de centrer leur importance pour l'enseignement de l'histoire au Canada.

Mots-clés : l'empathie historique, cours d'histoire, dimensions affectives, réflexion historique, éducation à la citoyenneté

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Introduction

In history and social studies classrooms across Canada, students are engaged in learning about events, people, and circumstances in the past that require an awareness of different perspectives and consideration for the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of others. Many of the topics under study (Indian Residential Schools, women's rights, systemic racism, LGBTQ2S+ rights, immigration, war and conflict) have deep historical roots, and their lasting legacies in the present make these issues relevant and meaningful for different students in different ways. When they are approached by teachers with careful pedagogical consideration, these topics also hold the potential to foster empathy toward other people—in many cases, people vastly different from the students themselves—in both the past and present. In light of this, I ask: How might empathy be conceptualized in relation to teaching history in Canada and what are the associated pedagogical actions of educators and learning outcomes for students?

It is with this question in mind that I turn to historical empathy, an approach to teaching history focused on understanding the thoughts, feelings, experiences, decisions, and actions of people from the past within specific historical contexts (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Endacott & Brooks, 2013). For nearly five decades, historical empathy has been a rich area of research in history education around the world, particularly in the United States and England (Brooks, 2009; Endacott & Brooks, 2018; Yilmaz, 2007). Empathy as a learning outcome was first introduced to the history curriculum in England during the 1970s, a time of significant pedagogical change resulting from new understandings of cognitive development (Retz, 2018). In an effort to move away from rote learning and towards a disciplinary approach to history, British scholars began mapping out a series of second-order thinking concepts grounded in historical methods (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Portal, 1987). As Lee and Ashby (2001) explain, the term “empathy” was adopted in the curriculum because it was a catchy word that could be given a new meaning in relation to history. However, it soon became clear to teachers and researchers that empathy was problematic for history education due to a wide range of interpretations of the term. For instance, many teachers tended to conflate “empathy” and “sympathy,” which resulted in students simply feeling bad for people in the past (Knight, 1989; Lee, 1984). Such conceptual ambiguities led to challenges with implementing empathy in history classrooms, which sparked criticism of the term among researchers, politicians, and the

general public. As a result, there was a turn away from explicit discussion of historical empathy among teachers and researchers in England by the late 1980s.

In response to the backlash against empathy in England, scholars began to clarify some of the conceptual confusion surrounding the term. To counter the argument that empathy was “softening”—eroding the intellectual rigour of—the history discipline, early scholarship in North America described historical empathy as a purely cognitive act, equivalent to perspective taking (Blake, 1998; Bryant & Clark, 2006; Doppin, 2000; Foster, 1999; Foster & Yeager, 1998; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Lévesque 2008; Riley, 2001; Yeager & Foster, 2001). Those who favour the cognitive approach believe the purpose of historical empathy is to develop students’ historical thinking skills using the methods of the history discipline. Since the early 2000s a new trend emerged in which scholars conceptualize historical empathy as a cognitive-affective process that also makes space for a range of feelings, emotions, and connections to be present alongside historical inquiry (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Davison, 2017; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Kohlmeier, 2006). By reconceptualizing historical empathy as a cognitive-affective process, these scholars present approaches that not only value the ability to think historically but also the development of responsible, caring citizens.

In the context of history education research in Canada, relatively little attention has been paid to historical empathy, with some exceptions (Bryant & Clark, 2006; Karn, 2021; Lévesque, 2008, 2011; Seixas, 1996; Wallace-Casey, 2022; see also Duquette, 2021 for a special issue on historical empathy). Historical thinking, a sub-field of history education concerned with outlining a series of second-order procedural concepts derived from the methods of the history discipline, remains a predominantly cognitive endeavour in Canada. For instance, Peter Seixas’s historical thinking framework (Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013), which has heavily influenced provincial and territorial history and social studies curricula (Clark, 2011), does not explicitly include the terms “historical empathy” or “empathy.” Although Seixas’s earlier framework of historical understanding included empathy (Seixas, 1996), his later work no longer referenced historical empathy due to concerns about possible conceptual confusion over the term among teachers, as was the case in England (Retz, 2018). Instead, the processes and outcomes related to historical empathy were now spread across two concepts, “historical perspectives” and “the ethical dimension” (Seixas & Morton, 2013). While these are both necessary elements of historical empathy, the focus on the cognitive elements of historical thinking fails to ad-

dress affective components, which exist in classrooms even when teachers may not plan for them and can act as important driving forces for learning about the past.

In this article I argue that greater attention should be paid to historical empathy in Canadian history education research and curriculum. Since affect and emotion are often overlooked in studies of teaching and learning history in Canada, I place a particular focus on the affective dimensions of history as they relate to historical empathy. I begin by outlining how a cognitive-affective approach to historical empathy can support the learning outcomes and purposes of history education identified by Canadian scholars in recent decades. Then, to clarify any pre-existing conceptual confusion, I present an original theory of historical empathy, drawing together and commenting on scholarship from researchers in the English-speaking Global North. Each of the five elements of this cognitive-affective theory intersects with and extends current approaches to historical thinking in Canada, and contributes toward fostering more caring, open-minded citizens who are willing to engage in making change.

Aligning Purposes and Learning Outcomes

In Canada, history education research in the last few decades has centred on three main purposes for teaching and learning history in schools: (1) developing historical thinking and historical consciousness (Clark, 2011, 2018; Duquette, 2015; Gibson, 2017, 2021; Lévesque, 2008; Peck, 2011; Seixas, 2004, 2006; Seixas & Morton, 2013); (2) fostering citizenship within a democratic society (Osborne, 1995, 1996; Sears, 2011); and (3) deconstructing popular narratives through decolonizing and anti-racist histories (Cutrara, 2018; Gibson & Case, 2019; McGregor, 2017; Miles, 2018; Stanley, 2000; Taylor, 2018). A cognitive-affective approach to historical empathy can support learning outcomes related to each of these purposes.

Early on, researchers studying historical empathy argued that its central purpose was the development of students' historical understanding through the application of disciplinary methods. Foster and Yeager (1998) explained that historical empathy requires logical thinking about historical evidence and "appropriately creative skills that seek to bridge the gap between what is known and what may be inferred from history" (p. 3). Studies have found that even elementary school students (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brophy, 1999; D'Adamo & Fallace, 2011; Davis Jr., 2001; Dulberg, 2002; Field, 2001;

Jensen, 2008) and students with learning exceptionalities (Turner, 1998) can improve their historical understanding and thinking skills through their engagement with historical empathy. In outlining theoretical frameworks and analyzing empirical findings, many scholars have identified qualities of historical empathy that foster students' inquiry and historical thinking skills, including understanding multiple and diverse perspectives, considering contexts, analyzing evidence, recognizing cause and consequence, making inferences, avoiding presentism, and forming judgements (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Foster, 1999; Lévesque, 2008). These qualities of historical empathy are closely aligned with the six historical thinking concepts in Seixas and Morton's (2013) framework, which have been taken up in different ways in history and social studies curricula across Canada.

As scholars began to consider the affective dimensions of historical empathy with a sociocultural approach to history education, an additional purpose was emphasized: fostering citizenship in a pluralistic democratic society (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Davison, 2017; Dulberg, 2002; Endacott & Brooks, 2018). In their studies, these scholars have demonstrated the value of historical empathy for promoting empathy, inclusion, caring, and open-mindedness in the present. As Dulberg (2002) explained, "Learning to take another's perspective, and caring enough to do so, is essential in understanding history. It is also essential in getting along with others in daily life" (p. 3). This is particularly true when students encounter perspectives that differ from their own or that seem hard to relate to from the outside. In coming to understand that sometimes people in the past did things that do not make sense to us today, students can also recognize that others' perspectives in the present might make sense within their particular contexts and experiences. For instance, Davison (2017) explained that by teaching about different perspectives on the First World War, including pacifist stances, students were better positioned to consider anti-war arguments in the present. These skills and dispositions, developed through a focus on historical empathy, are essential to fostering citizenship within a democratic society.

In the process of developing more open-minded citizens who care about different perspectives in the past and present, historical empathy also offers students opportunities to create change in the present. According to Barton and Levstik (2004), it is not sufficient to simply recognize and appreciate diverse perspectives, but students should be taught to "make changes in their own values, attitudes, beliefs or behavior" (p. 237). Historical empathy sometimes involves difficult knowledge related to trauma, vulnerability,

and crisis in the past—and our relations to these histories in the present—which is likely to “unsettle one’s capacity to go on as before” (Garrett, 2017, p. 36). While more research is needed in this area, a few empirical studies (De Leur et al., 2015; Jun, 2020; Kohlmeier, 2006) have revealed the potential for students to translate historical empathy into everyday empathy and, in doing so, demonstrate a willingness to change circumstances and relationships with others around them. In Dulberg’s (2002) study involving fifth graders, some students drew connections between the past and present, while linking empathy with “learning to do right and wrong and taking action” (p. 30). These are important learning outcomes of historical empathy that may support decolonizing and anti-racist approaches to history education in Canada.

The research considered here demonstrates that historical empathy can support the development of understandings, skills, and dispositions related to the curriculum and life beyond the classroom. Students can develop historical thinking competencies and consider various connections among perspectives in the past and present. In the process, they may also develop the skills and dispositions required to become caring and open-minded citizens who are willing to effect change in the present. These learning outcomes address the purposes of history education, as articulated by scholars in Canada. The various elements of historical empathy—as I have conceptualized them—and how teachers may approach them to support learning is the focus of the next section.

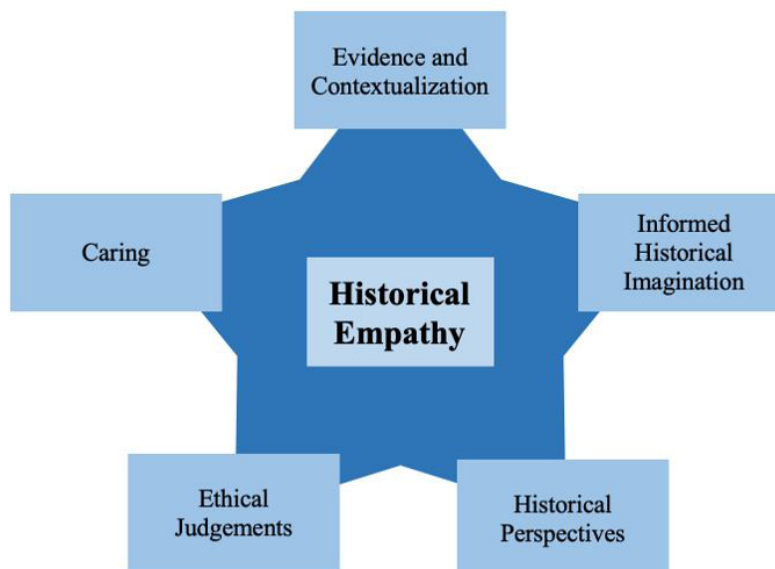
Conceptualizing Historical Empathy

In this section, I present a theory of historical empathy for history education in Canada, which includes five cognitive and affective elements: (1) evidence and contextualization, (2) informed historical imagination, (3) historical perspectives, (4) ethical judgements, and (5) caring (see Figure 1). I begin with a discussion of the elements of historical empathy that are most similar to the cognitive-oriented historical thinking concepts outlined by Seixas and Morton (2013), while extending each element in ways that account for an affective component. I end with a discussion of caring, as it is the most significant departure from their framework. Although these elements are presented in this order, they are not intended to be sequential. In other words, teachers and students are likely to find themselves engaging in many of them concurrently, which is visually represented in Figure 1 by the star-shaped diagram that connects each element together without indica-

ting a particular sequence. It is also important to note that the five elements are related in other ways, beyond their connection to historical empathy, which is highlighted by the dark shaded space in the diagram—lines can be drawn among elements, in different combinations, without passing through historical empathy. However, I argue that a powerful pedagogical approach to historical empathy includes all five elements and integrates both their cognitive and affective dimensions. In combination, these five elements of historical empathy support the learning outcomes and purposes of history education outlined in the previous section.

Figure 1

Five Cognitive-Affective Elements of Historical Empathy (Sara Karn, 2022)



Evidence and Contextualization

When empathizing with people in the past, historians engage in two closely related tasks: analyzing evidence and considering historical contexts (Lévesque, 2008). Likewise, students learning to empathize in their history classrooms require sufficient background information about historical events, people, and concepts, which can be acquired through teacher instruction, textbooks, films, literature, and primary source analysis (Brooks,

2011; Endacott, 2010; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Lévesque, 2008). This section begins by considering the role evidence plays in developing historical empathy, followed by a closely related discussion of contextualization.

According to Seixas and Morton (2013), asking good questions, drawing inferences, and analyzing a source (whether primary or secondary) turns it into evidence for historical inquiry. Empirical studies of historical empathy have emphasized the importance of providing students with a range of sources that highlight various historical perspectives. As students work through their analysis, teachers play an important role in offering strategies for decoding texts (Colby, 2010) and thought-provoking questions that generate empathic engagement with historical figures (Brooks, 2008; Cunningham, 2007; Kohlmeier, 2006). In the process of turning sources into evidence, students learn to account for different—sometimes conflicting—perspectives, which is a foundational skill for doing history that also has applications in the present.

With its focus on understanding diverse perspectives based on a variety of sources, historical empathy also offers students more opportunities to engage with a wider scope of evidence than Western tradition allows. As educators try to shift away from exclusively Westernized thinking about historical evidence (Anderson, 2017; Donald, 2012), questions arise about the potential role that Indigenous epistemologies and pedagogies—including land-based learning and sharing oral histories—could play in fostering historical empathy. However, some scholars in Canada have raised concerns about the incommensurability of historical thinking, informed by Western/Enlightenment traditions, and Indigenous epistemologies (Cutrara, 2018; Marker, 2011; Seixas, 2012). In response to these concerns, other scholars have identified common ground between historical thinking and Indigenous education, and they suggest ways forward (McGregor, 2017; Gibson & Case, 2019). In addition to possible alignments with the six historical thinking concepts conceptualized by Peter Seixas (Gibson & Case, 2019), historical empathy offers another way forward that could be more inclusive of Indigenous ways of knowing about the past.

It is through a close examination of historical evidence that contextualization occurs, a key component of scholarship on historical empathy (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Davis Jr., 2001; Davison, 2017; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Foster, 1999; Yeager & Doppen, 2001). Lévesque (2008) distinguished three contexts that should be accounted for when empathizing with people in the past: the personal (inner), the sociocultural (outer), and contemporary (present-day). Personal contexts are the beliefs,

perspectives, and values of a source's author. However, there are limitations to understanding their context since you cannot always glean everything from the author themselves. Therefore, the personal context must be understood in combination with the outer or sociocultural context—including political, economic, and sociocultural factors—in which the historical actor lived. This involves narrowing in on what Retz (2018) suggested is “a specific kind of context—the context in which it was possible for past agents to hold their beliefs as true and to act upon them accordingly” (p. 218). In these ways, teaching students about historical contexts allows them to think more critically about how they interpret evidence, further developing their historical thinking skills.

It is not only past contexts that should be accounted for; contemporary issues, values, and decisions also shape how we make meaning about the past. Therefore, students should consider contemporary contexts in an effort to “appreciate the ‘pastness’ of the past and potentially avoid imposing their own framework of meaning on others in their interpretations” (Lévesque, 2008, p. 166). Historical empathy offers opportunities for students to consider how their own positionalities—personal values, views, experiences, and contexts—shape their understandings of historical actors. VanSledright (2001) argued that we must explicitly acknowledge the influence of our positionalities because our contemporary experiences, values, knowledge, and assumptions are impossible to bracket out. In his view, an important learning outcome of historical empathy is the potential for students to gain an increased level of self-awareness. In a recent study, Dutch teachers and students in secondary history classrooms recognized that an awareness of one's own positionality is critical to empathizing with historical actors (Bartelds et al., 2020). Despite the importance of student reflexivity and positionality to developing historical thinking, these concepts are not emphasized in Seixas and Morton's (2013) historical thinking framework. With decolonizing goals in mind, history education researchers in Canada have called for increased attention to considering one's positionality and reflecting on individual and collective identities when studying the past (Cutrara, 2018; McGregor, 2017; Miles, 2018; Taylor, 2018). Thus, historical empathy could support learning history within cross-cultural contexts.

A theory of historical empathy that includes a range of evidence and accounts for past and present contexts can contribute toward historical thinking and citizenship outcomes. Students are encouraged to think historically in ways that are related to other concepts of historical thinking (e.g., historical perspectives) and may also build their

capacity to recognize their own positionalities as reflexive, critical thinkers. When teachers guide students to gather multiple pieces of evidence and consider various contexts, students are also learning skills required in the present. However, understanding the past is often limited by the availability of sources and the diversity of perspectives they portray. Students should also learn that when the historical record is incomplete, we may rely on other tools to fill in the gaps.

Informed Historical Imagination

Much of the debate surrounding historical empathy in history education has rested on the role of imagination—that is, how far we can reach when supposing or inferring details about the past based on available evidence (Lee, 1984). For instance, Stockley (1983) contended that imagination should be minimal due to the tendency to treat empathy in history as “some sort of spontaneous imaginative and intuitive response” (p. 54). Foster (1999) also cautioned against associating imagination with historical empathy: “That view of historical empathy...leads to an irresponsible and erroneous understanding of our past. True history depends on cautious inquiry and close examination of available evidence” (p. 19). These scholars were concerned about the use of imagination eroding the integrity of the history discipline, since they believed such intellectual work needed to be grounded in verifiable evidence rather than imagined details.

However, these views underestimate the potential for imagination to improve our understanding of and engagement with history. According to Gaddis (2002), in cases where evidence may be lacking or contradictory, even historians “must use logic and imagination to overcome the resulting difficulties” (p. 41). But imagination is not simply about being able to infer details from existing evidence; it can also engage students in more meaningful learning. Friesen (2011) identified a lack of imagination in historical thinking approaches and argued that teachers should “kindle an infectious delight” (p. 211) and “inspire a sense of wonder” in their students (p. 222). Similarly, Judson and Egan (2013) suggested that Imaginative Education, which strives to “emotionally and imaginatively engage students in learning,” (p. 9) can be applied to teaching history through rich storytelling. Accounting for these different views on the role of imagination in history, I propose using the term “informed historical imagination,” which encompasses both cognitive and affective approaches to historical empathy.

In certain circumstances, gathering knowledge and drawing conclusions directly from evidence is not possible. When the historical record is incomplete, historians and students alike rely on an informed historical imagination to make inferences about the past. Historian and philosopher R. G. Collingwood described an analogy of a ship:

If we look out over the sea and perceive a ship, and five minutes later look again and perceive it in a different place, we find ourselves obliged to *imagine* it as having occupied intermediate positions when we were not looking. (Collingwood, 1946, p. 241, as cited in Lévesque, 2008, p. 147, emphasis added by Lévesque)

Likewise, gaps in historical knowledge can be filled by imagining or inferring details based on available information. For example, in his biography of a Canadian First World War pilot, Broad (2017) stressed the importance of imagination to his historical methodology. As he explained, most people today do not have aerial combat experience, so understanding the perspectives of First World War pilots requires imagining the experience by extrapolating details from primary evidence and triangulating different types of sources.

The role of imagination in filling gaps in historical evidence may be particularly useful to what several scholars (Anderson, 2017; Cutrara, 2020; Marker, 2011; McGregor, 2017; Miles, 2018; Peck, 2011) have identified as an important goal of history education in Canada today: presenting diverse perspectives that reflect a range of backgrounds, experiences, and identities. The turn toward social history beginning in the 1960s, which considers the experiences of ordinary people in the past, has illuminated significant issues surrounding access to historical evidence. There are certain groups, particularly those from marginalized communities, whose histories are incomplete because sources have not been preserved due to power dynamics and archival methodologies (Griffith, 2019; Stoller, 2009). Therefore, in order to represent diverse perspectives, even when evidence is lacking, an informed historical imagination is crucial.

When historical evidence does exist, imagination plays a key role in how students interpret the evidence (Davison, 2017). In attempting to examine evidence from the position of a historical actor, imagination is required to interpret or “suppose” what that position may have been (Lee, 1984). Often, there are a range of possibilities that could account for the thoughts, values, actions, or decisions of historical figures. These possibilities must be reasonable within the historical context but are not necessarily formed di-

rectly from the evidence, as people in the past did not always leave explicit traces of their views and actions. Imagining allows students to generate different scenarios and evaluate their feasibility within a given context. As Davis Jr. (2001) explained, historical empathy involves engaging in a sense of “wonderment about reasonable and possible meanings within, in a time that no one can really know” (p. 3). Historical fiction may offer one pedagogical approach for engaging students in this process, as many fiction writers rely on a combination of evidence and imagination to develop their stories involving perspectives, places, and times that are vastly different from their own (Clark & Sears, 2020).

By engaging an informed historical imagination, teachers can help students expand their abilities to empathize with historical actors, and thus, develop their historical thinking skills. When primary evidence is incomplete, students can fill in gaps by imagining details that fit within the context of the time. This allows them to empathize with perspectives for which little evidence exists, broadening their understanding of Canadian history.

Historical Perspectives

Understanding historical perspectives is another key part of historical empathy that builds historical thinking skills. As Seixas and Morton (2013) described, taking a historical perspective involves “evidence-based inferences about the thoughts and feelings of the characters of history” (p. 138). When outlining a set of five “Guideposts” for historical perspective-taking, Seixas and Morton (2013) explained that inferring how people felt or thought in the past does not necessarily mean *identifying with* those historical actors. In other words, seeking to understand a historical perspective is not necessarily for the purpose of identifying or sympathizing with it (e.g., we would not study *Mein Kampf* for the purpose of identifying with Adolf Hitler, nor would we say that we can ever fully understand him, but we may seek to understand how his anti-semitic perspective could have come about). In fact, encouraging students to identify with historical actors can lead them to sympathize with or condone the behaviours of those in the past, outcomes that have been consistently discouraged by those studying historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Foster, 1999; Lee, 1984). According to these scholars, the pedagogical focus of perspective-taking should remain on teaching students to avoid presentism, consider historical contexts, draw inferences based on evidence, and explore diverse points of view.

Although Seixas and Morton (2013) outlined a number of important elements involved in understanding historical perspectives, their approach does not account for the affective components necessary to the development of historical empathy. For Endacott and Brooks (2013), “historical perspectives” is merely one component of historical empathy: “The exclusively cognitive act of perspective taking is not historical empathy, though we submit that perspective taking is certainly one very indispensable aspect of historical empathy” (p. 41). Barton and Levstik (2004) also draw attention to the educational benefits of affective elements: “affectively mediated information appears to increase the likelihood that learners will consider alternative perspectives” (p. 236). If teachers increase their emphasis on feelings and emotions—those of historical actors and the students themselves—students will be more likely to engage in learning about different perspectives and achieve a deeper understanding of those perspectives. This is essential if we want students to develop historical thinking skills and become citizens who are able to empathize with different viewpoints.

A consideration of multiple perspectives promotes empathy in the past and present through a combination of thinking and feeling. Studies of historical empathy have shown that when students are provided sources that reflect a wide range of perspectives on a topic, they demonstrate more complexity in their thinking (Doppen, 2000; Endacott, 2010; Foster, 1999; Yeager & Doppen, 2001). Virta and Kouki’s (2014) research findings support the argument that perspective-taking is related to the affective dimension, as Finnish students were more engaged when considering various perspectives surrounding emotional and controversial issues in their country’s history. Considering different perspectives can help students understand just how many factors and emotions can influence the process of forming ideas, making decisions, and acting upon them, both in the past and present. As Endacott and Brooks (2013) pointed out, historical figures did not always apply logic or reason when making decisions, so the affective elements of historical empathy allow students to imagine the emotions and feelings (i.e., fear, love, hate) that motivated people to act in certain ways.

Teachers should also be aware of whose perspectives are represented when students study the past. For instance, in their critical analysis of the film series *Canada: A People’s History* which is widely used as a teaching resource in Canada, Bryant and Clark (2006) described how the film only portrays the perspective of Europeans and their opinions of Indigenous peoples. As they explain, “The result is an empathetic distance

from Aboriginal peoples and a sense of proximity to Europeans” (p. 1052). Therefore, teachers should think critically about the resources they use, to ensure they represent diverse perspectives to foster empathy in their students (with equally diverse perspectives). Presenting students with past perspectives different from their own can also encourage open-mindedness. As Davison (2017) explained, this may “help students to understand unfamiliar perspectives in the present” (p. 82). In this way, studying historical perspectives is essential to developing more engaged citizens who value diversity and acceptance in the present.

Understanding past perspectives is a key part of historical empathy that draws from cognitive and affective processes. Teachers can engage students in a range of classroom activities that have been found to promote perspective taking, including third-person writing tasks (De Leur et al., 2017), discussions (Brooks, 2011; Doppen, 2000; Kohlmeier, 2006), debates (Jensen, 2008), simulations (Rantala, 2011), and field trips (Cunningham, 2007). By examining historical perspectives, students learn to recognize multiple points of view, understand and appreciate different perspectives, and think critically about the consequences of one’s actions. These outcomes have the potential to enhance historical thinking in Canada and create more accepting, open-minded citizens who are willing to engage with diverse perspectives in the present. But it is not enough to gain an understanding of historical perspectives; historical empathy also involves making ethical judgements about what transpired in the past.

Ethical Judgements

Historical empathy involves forming judgements about past perspectives and decisions, yet judging the past on its own terms can be difficult for students. By forming ethical judgements—defined here as the process of making decisions about an appropriate course of action based on social and personal conceptions of right and wrong—students can find contemporary relevance and meaning. This element of historical empathy is closely related to the ethical dimension of historical thinking included in Seixas and Morton’s (2013) framework, which is less frequently taught in history classes or studied by researchers (Gibson, 2014; Milligan et al., 2018). Through a renewed focus on ethical judgements, as a central component of historical empathy, Canadian students can develop historical thinking and learn to draw connections between the past, present, and future.

Although many historians make ethical judgements when studying the past, concerns have been raised about students making unwarranted judgements or drawing direct lessons for the present (Boix-Mansilla, 2000; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2013). Therefore, when judging the actions of people in the past, it is important to exercise caution and avoid judgements solely based on contemporary worldviews. However, it can be difficult for students to remove themselves from present-day perspectives which involve the benefit of hindsight—knowledge about the consequences of actions taken in the past (Wineburg, 2001). It is here that the “contemporary context,” discussed earlier in relation to contextualization, can be implemented. By critically assessing their own positionalities, students can better understand how their beliefs in the present contribute to the judgements they make about the past (VanSledright, 2001). As Retz (2013) asserted, “our understanding of people in the past will only acquire meaning in our lives when our questioning of them occurs hand-in-hand with a questioning of ourselves” (p. 224).

Through guiding students to consider evidence and historical contexts carefully, teachers can support their students in uncovering the values and norms of a particular period. It is within these norms of the time that fair judgements about past thoughts, beliefs, and actions can be made. However, as Seixas and Morton (2013) noted, “if you find out there were some people who acted against the norms of the time period, it is proof that it was *possible* to see things differently” (p. 177, emphasis in original). To use a commonly cited historical example relevant to history education in Canada (Lévesque, 2008; Metzger, 2012), students should not judge the Nazis’ genocidal policies as simply reflective of everyone’s beliefs during the time because some Germans thought differently and hid their Jewish neighbours. This highlights the importance of considering the wider context of the time when empathizing and forming judgements about past actions.

Forming ethical judgements also highlights connections between the past, present, and future. In other words, ethical judgements are an element of historical empathy that contribute to the development of historical consciousness, an understanding of the temporality of historical experience (Seixas, 2006). Connecting the past to present and future dimensions allows students to consider “how the past they encounter in and out of schools informs present social choices and future preferable destinations” (den Heyer, 2017, p. 6). For instance, present controversies surrounding the commemoration of historical figures tied to histories of colonization and genocide, such as Sir John A. MacDonald in Canada, involve ethical judgements of past actions that have far-reaching

consequences for the present and future (Gibson, 2017, 2021; Milligan et al., 2018). In these situations, historical empathy encourages students not only to contextualize past actions, analyze relevant evidence, and infer missing details, but it also evokes an ethical response. In a classroom study, Metzger (2012) found that the knowledge students gained about the Holocaust was inseparable from the “moral lessons” they drew for living in the present. Ethical judgements, then, are just as much about understanding the present as they are about understanding the past. In this way, the ethical dimensions of historical thinking support the development of historical empathy by shifting away from an exclusive focus on past perspectives to consider their implications for the present and future.

As shown by scholars such as Barton and Levstik (2004), students are typically more engaged by approaches to learning that involve emotional or ethical responses to the past. Barton and Levstik cited many examples in which students in the United States and Northern Ireland exhibited strong emotions, becoming “outraged” when they learned about people “who suffered brutality...and who were denied rights to which we believe they were entitled” (p. 97). Virta and Kouki (2014) also found that controversial issues involving morals and emotions were interesting to students when learning about the past. As Endacott and Brooks (2013) noted, teachers should guide students to make “moral decisions” by providing them with opportunities to openly react to historical content and reflect on how decisions and behaviours in the past have long-lasting implications for the present and future. As a result, students may be better prepared to reflect on the consequences of their own actions and make ethical decisions in the present and future, as responsible citizens.

Despite some of the challenges involved in forming ethical judgements, they play a significant role in the development of historical empathy. While attempting to understand historical actors, students can improve their historical thinking by situating historical perspectives within the values and norms of the time and considering the meaning of past decisions in the present. Ultimately, making informed judgements on ethical issues in the past allows students to reflect on the consequences of their own actions in the present. A focus on ethical responses highlights how the past, present, and future are connected, making learning more meaningful.

Caring

Embracing the affective elements of historical empathy has the potential to extend and improve current approaches to historical thinking in Canada. In making this argument, I adopt Barton and Levstik's (2004) four varieties of care in history education: (1) *caring about* people and events in the past, (2) *caring that* particular events took place, (3) *caring for* people in history who have suffered injustices or oppression, and (4) *caring to* change our beliefs and behaviours in the present in light of studying the past. According to Barton and Levstik (2004), "*care* is a term that covers a variety of related meanings, but each involves some relationship between learners and the object of study, and these relationships often include emotional commitments or feelings or personal relevance" (p. 229, emphasis in original). Caring—and the range of emotions and feelings that may flow from it—engage students in wanting to learn about the past and to apply their learning both within and beyond the history classroom.

Caring about the past plays a crucial role in engaging students in historical empathy, through addressing topics that interest students. In their classroom studies, Barton and Levstik (2004) found that students cared about emotional circumstances in the past and topics with personal family connections. Teaching about the history of children and adolescents is also meaningful, as students can empathize with someone their own age who lived in a different time and place. For instance, in one study students became highly engaged in learning about the experiences of children in war from a museum exhibit (Savenije & de Bruijn, 2017). Wineburg (2001) provided a rationale for such connections: "we need to feel kinship with the people we study, for this is exactly what engages our interest and makes us feel connected" (p. 6). In general, the questions we ask about the past are informed by our own experiences in the present, as well as our concerns about the future.

Caring that particular historical events occurred allows students to develop their own responses to the past, including ethical responses. One of the strongest early critiques against caring involved the belief that the affective element can easily overpower the cognitive processes of historical thinking (Foster, 1999; Lee, 1984). On the contrary, classroom studies have shown that affective and cognitive processes can be complementary to one another. For instance, Barton and Levstik (2004) found that students were able to understand historical perspectives by examining evidence and drawing inferences, but this

did not stop them from forming judgements about the past based on their reactions in the present. When learning about the Salem witch trials, students understood that past perspectives on witchcraft and legal processes were different than contemporary views, but they did not accept the methods used to determine if someone was a witch (e.g., drowning). In this way, caring that certain events happened allows students to evaluate the consequences of past decisions and consider how they might act differently in the present.

Caring for people in the past involves responding to their suffering, injustice, or oppression. In Barton and Levstik's (2004) classroom studies, students often expressed a desire for retrospective justice. When learning about the Holocaust, one student wished they could "punch Hitler in the face," while others wanted to travel back in time in order to "do something" to save the Jews (p. 235). Thus, caring for others is similar to the type of care found in everyday life. Students want to do something to change the way events unfolded in the past because they cared for the well-being of others, even if they lived long ago. As Noddings (2002) explained while conceptualizing the role of caring in character education, "an emphasis on...students' interest in the subject matter to be studied, and the connections between classroom life and that of the larger world provides the foundation for our attempts to produce moral people" (p. 85). The historical dimension of care is no exception. Through caring for historical actors, students may develop the desire to affect change on issues of ethical concern in the present.

Caring to change our present values, beliefs, and actions in light of studying the past is a significant outcome of historical empathy. Barton and Levstik (2004) asserted, "If they [students] do not care to use history in the present, then we should put away our packets of primary sources" (p. 238). This being said, there are currently only a few studies that reveal how students have translated their empathy toward people in the past to empathy toward people in the present (De Leur et al., 2015; Jun, 2020; Kohlmeier, 2006). Nevertheless, these studies discovered that the ways in which students demonstrate caring is shaped by their own background and experiences. For example, Kohlmeier (2006) found that female and male high school students expressed concerns that women in the past were treated unfairly and cared about their experiences and perspectives. Importantly, students of both genders expressed a desire to change how women are treated in different contexts moving forward. Thus, caring has the potential to bridge different understandings and experiences of the past, based on gender and other factors.

Since affective elements of learning about the past have been largely ignored in historical thinking in Canada, I propose that we consider more seriously the potential of a caring approach to historical empathy. Providing an educational space to explore emotions and feelings can encourage us to “see differently” (Boler, 1999). In other words, caring about perspectives different from one’s own and thinking critically about them can lead to more complex and multi-layered understandings of others. For instance, decolonization is an issue of contemporary significance with deep ties to the past that is especially relevant to all of us living on the land that is now referred to as Canada. Settler students from all backgrounds should have opportunities to *care about* the experiences of Indigenous peoples in the past, *care that* they have suffered injustices, *care for* their well-being in the past and present, and *care to* change relationships with Indigenous peoples. There are connections to Donald’s (2012) work on ethical relationality, as caring in history can encourage students to “acknowledge and honour the significance of the relationships we have with others, how our histories and experiences position us in relation to each other, and how our futures as people in the world are tied together” (p. 536).

In fostering opportunities for increased engagement with Indigenous histories, teachers should be aware that some scholars (Simon, 2004, 2013; Taylor, 2018) have identified concerns about the role of feelings and emotions in studying “difficult knowledge” (Britzman, 1998). Simon (2013) cautioned against assuming that hearing personal narratives of violence and pain will necessarily lead to empathy among students, or a sense of being implicated in ongoing colonialism. In fact, depending on how they are taken up in the classroom, affective connections could do more harm than good, creating a “spectacle of suffering” (Simon, 2004, p. 190). With this in mind, affective responses to the past should evoke “a sense of civic responsibility and renewing relations of trust” (Simon, 2013, p. 135)—an active response that involves fundamentally changing relationships and structures while working towards reconciliation. At the same time, teachers should also recognize that some students, particularly those from marginalized communities, may care deeply about the difficult histories discussed in class because of their personal and family connections. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be sensitive to how their students’ backgrounds and experiences inform the many ways they come to care.

A theory of historical empathy that emphasizes affective dimensions can develop informed, caring citizens who are willing to enact change. In order for teachers to engage students in history and ensure their learning is relevant, students need to care about the

past and how it impacts the present and future. The affective dimension of care holds a great deal of potential for fostering solidarity and relationality among different groups and communities, through learning to empathize with different perspectives.

Conclusions

In this article I have argued for increased attention to historical empathy within history education research and curriculum in Canada. In doing so, I have highlighted a need for greater engagement with the affective dimensions of history, which exist in classrooms whether teachers plan for them or not. To support educators in implementing a cognitive-affective approach to history education, I presented a theory of historical empathy that contributes to many learning outcomes. When students are guided to examine evidence and consider past and present contexts, they build their historical thinking capacities and become more reflexive, critical thinkers. Applying an informed historical imagination to fill gaps in evidence allows students to consider a wide variety of perspectives, especially those of marginalized groups. Understanding such diverse historical perspectives through a cognitive-affective approach can develop open-mindedness toward multiple points of view in the present. These connections between the past, present, and future, are also made by students when forming ethical judgements about historical perspectives, thereby deepening their historical consciousness. Caring engages students in learning about the past in the first place and can contribute toward fostering empathetic citizens who are willing to affect change in the present.

As previously mentioned, this theory of historical empathy is more comprehensive than others offered to date because it draws together and comments on research from many scholars over the last several decades. My hope is that by providing detailed attention to each element—rather than subsuming some elements within others as has been done in the past (notably, imagination and ethical judgements)—history education researchers in Canada can better understand how historical empathy can contribute to various approaches to history education. Likewise, if we are to move past the idea that historical empathy is too ambiguous for school history and may cause conceptual confusion, teachers require a clear theoretical framework to guide their lesson designs. As a result, they may pay closer attention to relationships between the cognitive and affective

dimensions of history and provide space for each of these five elements in their lessons. The substance of such lessons on historical empathy, both within and beyond the history classroom, is ripe for further inquiry within Canadian contexts.

This theory of historical empathy has also been positioned within history education research that is aligned with various approaches and purposes in Canada. With regard to historical thinking, this theory of historical empathy draws attention to some of the limitations of historical thinking as it is currently conceptualized. In particular, greater emphasis on the affective dimensions of historical thinking is warranted moving forward. Historical empathy also offers great potential for furthering citizenship education outcomes. Future empirical studies may help us move toward understanding how cognitive and affective elements can work together to foster empathy, care, and open-mindedness, as well as students' willingness to affect change. Though I have pointed to a few ways in which historical empathy may support reconciliation and building solidarity among various groups and communities in Canada, there is a clear need for more research in this area.

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