Integrating historical and moral consciousness in history teaching

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore historical perspective-taking from a social psychological perspective and reflect on the role of social identities and conceptions of human nature in perspective-taking. The sample consisted of 160 Year 9 students in Finland who responded to a historical perspective-taking task based on an edited excerpt from the book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (Browning, 1999). Based on qualitative content analysis, four types of answers were identified: all groups have the potential for good and evil; in-group is morally superior; lessons learned from history; and in the future similar situation would be possible. Social identity as an in-group – out-group distinction was essential in the responses as well as moral and historical empathy. Our empirical data shows that many students are willing and able to reflect on complex ethical questions on history lessons, and therefore we suggest that open discussions and consideration of different perspectives should be encouraged in history teaching. In addition, connecting historical topics to current day issues would help students to recognize the patterns of thinking that may lead to intergroup conflicts and violence.

KEYWORDS

historical consciousness, moral consciousness, empathy, perspective-taking, social identity

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Introduction

Similarities between historical and moral consciousness

According to Jörn Rüsen (2005), historical consciousness refers to a kind of narrative competence, the ability to generate interpretations of the world where there are meaningful interrelations between the past, the present, and the future. Generating these interpretations includes awareness of different contextual aspects that influence the thinking and experiences of historical characters. Rüsen believes that there is a moral element in historical consciousness, because according to his empirical observations, people are predisposed to give history moral meanings. Ammert, Sharp, Löfström, and Edling (2020) suggest that in the context of history teaching, addressing issues connected to moral values can deepen knowledge and stimulate students' historical consciousness, which in turn can contribute to students' moral development. They showed in their empirical analysis that more than a third of their sample of 15-year-old high school students from Finland and Sweden were able to reflect the interrelations between the past, the present, and the future, when they were given a task concerning morally relevant historical events.

Research on moral psychology has identified several important components of moral development and moral behavior, many of which share similar elements with historical consciousness. James Rest's (1986) Four Component Model of moral behavior is a widely used framework to assess the psychological processes involved in moral functioning. The components identified by Rest are: (1) moral sensitivity (interpreting the situation); (2) moral judgement (judging which action is morally right/wrong); (3) moral motivation (prioritizing moral values relative to other values); and (4) moral character (having courage, persisting, overcoming distractions, implementing skills). Of these components, moral sensitivity and moral judgement in particular share similar elements to historical consciousness. Moral sensitivity can be defined as an awareness of how our actions affect other people immediately and in long-term (Rest, 1986). It includes being aware of who are the parties concerned in the situation, what lines of action are possible, and what might be the consequences of different behaviors to different parties. Moral sensitivity requires the ability to reflect on the other's viewpoint, and cognition and affect are interconnected in moral sensitivity in the form of perspective-taking and empathy (Rest, 1986).

Moral reasoning is another crucial component in morality. In a cognitive-developmental approach, perspective-taking or role-taking forms the basis of moral development. Both in justice reasoning (Kohlberg, 1984) and ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Skoe, 1998) approaches, moral reasoning is thought to form a developmental path from egoistic perspective to balancing and coordinating all conflicting perspectives involved in the situation. Hence, the more advanced levels of moral thinking are also by definition more reflective and complex, considering more perspectives compared to lower levels of moral reasoning. While Kohlberg's theory, 'The ethic of justice' is concerned with equality, fairness, and individual rights, 'the ethics of care' is concerned with responsibilities in relationships, focusing on avoiding hurting others and maintaining relationships. Justice reasoning is claimed to be universalistic reasoning with its assumption that the same justice principles are applied across situations (Kohlberg, 1984), whereas care reasoning is more particularistic and considers the specific characteristics of the situation and different parties (Gilligan, 1992). An interesting question is, would justice reasoning be more related to historical consciousness than care reasoning, if the latter were more focused on relationships? Some studies have indeed shown an increase in students' level of justice reasoning, when discussions considering different perspectives have been added to history lessons by trained teachers (Nucci, Creane, & Powers, 2015).

For both moral sensitivity and moral reasoning, the ability and willingness to try to take other people's perspectives is essential. This means that the person can imagine what kind of perceptions, interpretations and motivations people can have in different situations. Perspective-taking generates understanding for different morally relevant issues that the situation

involves and makes it possible to judge, which course of action would be the right and just one in the given circumstances.

Martin Hoffman (2000) has created a developmental theory of empathy, which emphasizes the role of cognitive perspective-taking. According to the theory, even newborns react to others' distress, but only older children understand better what the other is feeling, because they realize that he or she has inner states independent of their own, and they may react differently than they themselves would. Mature emotional empathy means that a person can understand the other's life circumstances more broadly and feel empathy for another's experience beyond the immediate situation. Hoffman believes that the cognitive development that enables the child to differentiate between self and the other also transforms self-focused empathic distress into compassion for the victim. Moreover, empathy is seen to be the base for guilt. According to Hoffman (2000), guilt is characterized by tension and regret which arise when a person feels empathy for the victim and understands that she/he is responsible for the victim's distress. Therefore, guilt motivates attempts to alleviate others' distress.

In the domain of history research, a concept of historical empathy has been used to assess the cognitive aspect of perspective taking, or perspective recognition, but also the affective responses to the past, historical empathy as caring (Brooks, 2011; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Nygren, 2016; Nolgård & Nygren, 2019). Thus, the cognitive aspect of historical empathy is conceptually near moral perspective-taking, whereas historical empathy as caring – caring that people of the past were treated unjustly, or still are – can be seen as parallel to emotional empathy. Recent studies among school students show that when thinking about the history of national minorities, historical empathy as caring is prominent (Nygren, 2016; Nolgård & Nygren, 2019). Students can be simultaneously critical and caring in their historical thinking (Brooks, 2011; Nolgård & Nygren, 2019). A previous study also shows that empathy expressed by students in historical writing tasks is related to the instructions they receive before the task (Brooks, 2008).

From a philosophical point of view, it is important to remember that although psychology researchers write about 'understanding' and 'perspective-taking', it is never fully possible to take other peoples' perspective or understand their experiences, motives, or emotions. How would a person know whether he or she has understood what the other person is thinking or feeling? Empirical evidence shows that people often have difficulties to infer another person's thoughts and feelings accurately (Ickes, 2001). Furthermore, all individuals are unique in terms of their biological characteristics and life experiences. At best, it can be an effort to take the other person's perspective or to reflect the possible thoughts or emotions the other person could be experiencing. Heidi Maibom (2019) claims in her paper *What can we learn from taking another's perspective?* that accuracy might not be the main goal in perspective-taking. Understanding other's viewpoint may be more approximate, a blend of the self and another. According to Maibom (2019), this kind of attempt to extend our understanding beyond ourselves is nevertheless important and useful in social relationships, and it can be an important tool for developing one's moral characteristics.

Morality and social identity

Recent social psychological research has emphasized the influence of social identity in terms of moral thinking and moral emotions. According to social psychologist Jonathan Haidt (Haidt, 2012; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018), people have a strong, evolution-based tendency towards tribalism, favoring their own in-group and ignoring or demonizing the out-group, as research about empathic bias also shows (Cikara, Botvinick & Fiske, 2011). Labeling groups of people as good or evil creates "common enemy identity politics" which is likely to hinder perspective-taking and understanding between different groups. Instead, Lukianoff and Haidt (2018, p.244) suggest that schools should embrace "common humanity identity politics" which means emphasizing the uniting values and similarities between different people. Value researcher Shalom Schwartz (2007) has presented a similar concept, inclusiveness of the moral universe,

which refers to the breadth of the community to which people apply moral values, such as equality and rules of fairness.

Many historical topics are likely to activate conceptions related to social identities, for example nationalities or political groups. In the case of historical injustices that were encountered in Finland in the Civil War of 1918, or in the Second World War, for instance, group identity may be activated. There are two cognitive processes involved in transforming group membership into group identity. Categorization takes place when individuals classify people based on their membership in various groupings. The most critical classifications are in-group (the group one belongs to) and outgroup (the group one does not belong to). Identification occurs when individuals take on the qualities and characteristics of the group to which they belong (for example, Turner et al., 1987). Therefore, it is possible to feel guilt or shame on behalf of a group to which one belongs (Lickel et al., 2005). This so-called collective guilt or shame has inspired a lot of research in recent years. Also, in this context perspective-taking and empathy are relevant concepts: collective guilt and shame can motivate repairing collective injustices, when people feel empathy towards the victimized group (Brown & Cehajic, 2008).

Social identity and limitations of empathy

Many authors have pointed out that empathy has some limitations as a driving force for prosocial behavior. In empathic over-arousal the level of empathic distress becomes so high that it turns into personal distress, which inhibits people from acting on behalf of the victim (Houston, 1990; Strayer, 1993). High level of empathy may also increase the tendency to perceive situations as negative and distressing (Chikovani et al., 2015). Cognitive abilities to regulate emotions are therefore important for preventing personal distress reactions. In addition, empathic distress might be biased in favor of one's in-group, family, or friends (Hoffman, 2000; Stürmer, Snyder & Omoto, 2005). People tend to feel more empathy towards in-group than out-group members and thus help in-group members more (Stürmer, Snyder & Omoto, 2005), and empathy is especially reduced when the out-group members are seen as rivals (Richins, Barreto, Karl, & Lawrence, 2019). Sometimes the failure of a competitive out-group may even cause pleasure and motivation to harm the out-group (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011). Rieffe and Camodeca (2016) found in their study about adolescents' empathy and different social roles that adolescents who were more often nominated as being bullies by their peers reported lower cognitive empathy (such as perspective –taking) than their non-bullying peers.

We can conclude that perspective-taking is an important element in moral development, and it would be an important question whether this skill can be practiced thought history teaching aimed at developing students' historical consciousness. However, several social psychological phenomena, for example social identities, are important to consider when planning such history lessons.

The present study

In this study, we analyze students' responses to a historical perspective-taking task. Our research question is, how different ways of constructing social identities and different conceptions of human nature are observable in students' written answers? We also discuss different strategies to address the questions of social identities and perspective-taking in history teaching.

Methods

Participants were 15 and 16-year-old Year 9 students in the University of Helsinki practice schools (N=160). University students who are studying to become teachers have their traineeships in this type of school, and these schools represent general Finnish population in terms of student sociodemographic background. The schools were in the metropolitan area (one school), in towns of 50-80,000 inhabitants (three schools), and in rural municipal centres (three

schools). The gender distribution was equal, with no dominant majority of any gender in the classes. In terms of its socio-economic profile, one rural area school's demographic was lower middle class and working class, compared to the other schools. In the classes that participated in the study, there were, in total, less than five students with migrant backgrounds. Students answered an electronic questionnaire in class. Students and their custodians had given informed consent and the study was reviewed by research ethics board.

Students first read an edited excerpt from the book *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*, by the historian Christopher Browning (1999). The excerpt described a massacre in a Polish village during the World War II. The students were asked to reflect the experiences of Major Trapp, who was ordered to kill the villagers, and his soldiers, who he decided to give a choice not to participate in the killings. Having read the excerpt the students were asked to answer eight open questions, which were about the excerpt and the conduct of the soldiers and about the relationship between history discipline and moral judgments. This same material has been used as a part of another study focusing on a different theoretical perspective, temporal orientation in student's reflections (Ammert et al., 2020).

We analysed the data using qualitative content analysis. Our approach can be described as inductive content analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The idea is that the analysis is mainly data-driven, and the coding categories are not pre-defined based on previous studies or theories. The data is first coded by open coding, then the codes are grouped and finally groups of codes are described by abstracts concepts. In this study we focus on how different social groups and human nature in general are described in students' answers. We analyze the social-psychological aspects of perspective-taking; how different social identities are reflected in perspective taking?

Original quotes were in Finnish, and we attempted to translate the examples shown here as accurately as possible. Both authors read the material carefully several times. The first author developed the first version of themes, which was then refined based on discussions. Because this is a purely qualitative study with no predefined theoretical categories, reliability cannot be evaluated by quantitative methods, but instead it is important that the reader can follow the logic of the analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Flick, 2002) Our aim was to describe the diversity of the data comprehensively and to illustrate the content of different themes by providing quotes from the students' written answers.

For this study, we analyzed how different social groups and identities are addressed in the answers to questions 2 and 3:

2: "Does the story have some kind of message to you? Do you think that it has some kind of message to today's people? Explain you answer."

3: "Could a similar situation, as described in the text, take place in Europe today or in the future? Why or why not?"

Results

Based on qualitative content analysis we identified four themes representing different ways of understanding social identities or human nature in general: all groups have the potential for good and evil; in-group is morally superior; lessons learned from history, and in the future a similar situation would be possible.

All groups have the potential for good and evil

In the theme all groups have the potential for good and evil, respondents presented an understanding that a similar situation could be possible in Europe, because most people can act in good or evil ways due to changes in circumstances:

> It is possible to brainwash people to do horrible things, and it is important to learn from the past.

Some respondents also pointed out that the story presented the protagonists from a multi-faceted perspective, showing that there is a capability for goodness in everyone:

> ...The story showed that no one is completely evil. Afterwards it is easy to blame the parties who did more bad things, but in my opinion, in war all are losers. Something was done profoundly wrong when things got into that point...

> I think the story is meaningful because it gives a more humane picture of the SS-soldiers.

These responses highlight that people in general are capable of cruelty when manipulated in certain ways, and some members of demonized groups may be willing to make moral choices in difficult circumstances.

In-group is morally superior

The second theme, in-group is morally superior, refers to responses where good and moral in-group members were differentiated from unmoral out-group members. Only the out-group may be capable of carrying out such terror:

> I don't think that at least in Finland or in other European countries [this could happen] because they are quite safe countries and most of them are led by presidents. And many of them are democracies.

> I don't think so [that this could happen], because in Europe human rights are quite good compared to for example Africa or Middle-East.

> It is not very likely [that this could happen], except by some terrorist organization.

In these responses different arguments are presented to justify, why Finns or Europeans today are different from the Germans during the World War II. The responses seem to lack historical knowledge in many cases (for example, Germany was a democracy before the Nazi party attained power through democratic election).

Lessons learned from history

For both questions, the respondents presented ideas that there is a lesson to be learned from history and for that reason, the story is significant:

> It is significant, for people to learn and not to repeat mistakes of the past.

> In my view, this has or should have an impact on present-day people, because present-day people hopefully do not want to do anything so sadistic again.

Statements indicating that the world and people are better now, represented viewpoints that this kind of situation could not take place in Europe again, because people in general have developed to be more humane since the World War II:

> No, because I believe there is more humanity and mercy in the world.

> No, because in today's world the majority is against discrimination. It would cause a huge uproar in the social media.

> No, because humanity does learn from its mistakes and nothing good came out of that war.

The respondents also stated that the main message of the story was to endorse moral values, such as equality, tolerance, and freedom of speech:

> What stood out for me from the story was equality and that everybody is equally important, men, women, elderly people.

> The message is that everyone should be given freedom of speech and all opinions should be listened to. I feel that all people should read this and learn a lesson.

Moreover, there were arguments that the story emphasized the importance of independent moral judgement even under pressure:

> Perhaps one message for contemporary people could be to dare to come forward to show one's opinions and conscience.

> Sense of morality and expressing one's own opinion. All people can refuse to do some things that they think are not right morally or in any other way.

This way of thinking reflects higher levels of moral judgement in Kohlberg's theory: morality is not defined as merely following rules and authorities, but as independent reflection of moral values and principles.

In the future a similar situation would be possible

In the fourth theme, not now but maybe in the future, the respondents expressed the view that a similar situation is not possible now, but perhaps some time in future this could happen. In some answers, the time frame was very wide:

> Could not for decades yet, but perhaps after thousands of years.

Some students also reflected the question of which kind of circumstances could lead to this change:

> I think that a persecution that would be so bad and extensive and concern all people that belong to a certain religious group or race could not arise in the world today. --- In the future, if things change for the worse, it could be possible.

> Of course it could, human beings are unpredictable and self-centred, and "big bosses" in particular might want more than their due, instead of fostering peace.-- I don't believe though that it is going to happen at present or in the near future, because youngsters and kids are being told about war in schools, and anyway there is more information on everything.

In the first answer it is indicated that something like holocaust could not happen in today's world, but perhaps in the future if things change, it would be possible. However, there is no precise explanation about what those "things" could be. In the latter answer, genocide is presented as unlikely in today's world, because children are taught about war in schools and there is so much information available. This is interesting view, considering how much media attention different human right issues in different parts of the world have received.

Discussion

Our aim was to explore historical perspective-taking from a social psychological perspective and reflect on the role of social identities and conceptions of human nature. We concluded that a central concept in developmental moral psychology, perspective-taking, is also very relevant in the context of history teaching. Drawing on the theory by Hoffman (2000), we differentiate between perspective-taking, emotional empathy, and personal distress. Although emotional

empathy can motivate moral behavior, it may be biased towards in-group or it can turn into personal distress and motivate avoidance. Perspective-taking is an effective antidote to both weaknesses: it helps to identify with the more distant out-group members and to differentiate between self and the other. These concepts are also parallel to cognitive and affective aspects of historical empathy (Brooks, 2011; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Nygren, 2016; Nolgård & Nygren, 2019).

In this study we provided Finnish 9th grade students with a demanding perspective-taking task: we asked them to imagine how a Nazi officer and soldiers would think and feel when ordered to kill civilians in a Polish village. They were asked to argue whether the story had message for them or for people in general, and could a similar situation, as described in the text, take place in Europe today or in the future. The respondents were also asked to justify their arguments. Applying qualitative content analysis, we identified four themes representing different types of arguments: all groups have the potential for good and evil; in-group is morally superior; lessons learned from history, and in the future similar situation could take place.

The first theme, all groups have the potential for good and evil, represents arguments that do not differentiate in-group and out-group in their capability of being humane. The answers emphasize that people can turn to be good or evil due to the changes in circumstances. These arguments reflect mature empathy, ability to understand other's perspective and the other's life circumstances more broadly (Hoffman, 2000), and to overcome the distinction of in-group and out-group (Cikara, Botvinick & Fiske, 2011; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). In Schwartz' (2007) terms, these responses refer to a large inclusiveness of the moral universe, ie. that moral values apply also to the out-group members.

In the theme, in-group is morally superior, it is highlighted that this could not happen in Europe, but possibly in another continent or by some outer organization. Thus, the respondents clearly differentiate the characteristics of in-group and out-group. These arguments refer to the categorization process of group membership (Turner et al., 1987), and are in line with results about empathic bias towards in-group (Stürmer, Snyder & Omoto, 2005; Cikara, Botvinick & Fiske, 2011; Rieffe and Camodeca, 2016; Richins, Barreto, Karl & Lawrence, 2019). Moreover, this can reflect the lack of empathic accuracy, the difficulty to infer another person's thoughts and feelings accurately (Ickes, 2001). Perspective-taking exercises, especially towards out-groups, could possibly reduce this type of polarized attitudes.

The respondents stated that there are several lessons to be learned from history. Some expressed an optimistic view that this kind of situation could not happen anymore because people have developed to be more humane and wiser since the World War II. Rejection of the idea that people are still capable of cruelty towards other human beings, may reflect the personal distress dimension of empathy (Houston, 1990; Strayer, 1993). Thinking that something horrible could happen in the near future, may cause distress that leads to search counterarguments for that.

Some respondents stated that the story could teach us the importance of moral values and independent moral judgment. These responses referred to moral motivation aspect of morality (Rest, 1986), endorsing moral values such as equality. In addition, stressing the capability for independent moral judgment, concern for equality and individuals' right to state their opinion, emphasizes justice as a crucial foundation of moral thinking (Kohlberg, 1984). On the other hand, focusing on avoiding hurting others, reflects ethics of care (Skoe, 1998). Thus, it seems that both justice and care approaches are present in the students' answers.

The last theme, in the future similar situation could happen, represents understanding that things can change in time and that circumstances in societies affect peoples' behavior. According to cognitive-developmental models, this signifies reflective thinking, where different perspectives are considered simultaneously (Kohlberg, 1984; Skoe, 1998; Hoffman, 2000). Moreover, it reflects historical consciousness, ability to generate interpretations of the world where there are meaningful interrelations between the past, the present and the future (Rüsen, 2005). This category is similar as the genetic type of historical consciousness in Ammert et al. (2020).

Reflecting how and why certain behaviors occur or change in time is perhaps the most relevant intersection between historical and moral consciousness.

How to enhance historical perspective-taking in school?

Our empirical data shows that many students are willing and able to reflect on complex ethical questions on history lessons, as pointed out also by Brooks (2011), Nygren (2016), Nolgård & Nygren (2019) and Ammert et al. (2020). Furthermore, a relatively recent study suggests that students' level of moral reasoning can be enhanced by integrating discussions on moral issues in history teaching (Nucci, Creane, & Powers, 2015). However, it is important to do this in the right way: instead of offering predefined ways of interpreting historical events, the teacher should encourage open discussion that considers different perspectives to the issue at hand. Asking the students to describe the perspectives of different people belonging to different groups could potentially develop both historical and moral consciousness.

Practicing perspective-taking can play a significant role in moral development (Kohlberg, 1984; Skoe, 1998; Hoffman, 2000). Our task was an example of a demanding perspective-taking exercise: the students were asked to imagine how a Nazi officer (or soldier) thinks and feels (a member of an out-group that is labeled as purely evil). Carretero (2017) emphasizes the importance of presenting the variability of the out-group in history teaching: Some people were perpetrators, but some of them could be also victims, passive or active bystanders and even heroic helpers. This kind of realization has been associated with willingness to reconcile problematic intergroup relations.

The latest Finnish high school curriculum, which took effect in 2021, explicitly states that "historical empathy strengthens a student's ability for multi-faceted ethical reflection," i.e., moral judgment (LOPS 2019, p. 282). However, moral reflection is not a very pronounced theme in the curriculum as a whole. Still, it allows the teachers to integrate perspective-taking exercises and moral reflections in their lessons if they wish to do so. Current research in social psychology suggests that this can be a good way to enrich the students moral thinking and improve intergroup relations (Nucci, Creane, & Powers, 2015; Carretero, 2017).

Another relevant issue is whether history teaching should question the view held by many students that the events of the World War II are in the past and unlikely to happen again. Addressing current (or more recent) conflicts and human right violations in different parts of the world, including Europe, might help to see similar patterns of thinking and behaving that may lead to intergroup violence or even genocide. Ammert et al. (2020) come to the same conclusion: they suggest that teachers could connect historical topics to current day issues. This could enhance understanding, which could lead to learning important lessons from history and developing both historical and moral consciousness.

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