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History as Identity Construction and Fostering of “Memory” Preservation

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Abstract

This paper presents data from a study carried out with primary school students in Portugal. We investigated the relationships between history, the past, and personal, family and collective memory using semi-structured interviews. Several questions were asked: in this paper the questions directly related are analysed: ‘What is history?’, ‘What is the past for you?’, ‘With who and how do you learn about the past?’. The results suggest that conceptions about the past and history are extremely diverse. History has many meanings, and emerged as a multi-faceted and ambiguous concept. The importance of history for the preservation of memory (personal and national) and as an affirmation of individual and collective identity was also recognised.

Memory and Historical Consciousness

If I was here without knowing what happened before, it would be very strange. I wouldn’t know anything, because I didn’t know about my family’s past or about other people. It would be very strange. (Anabela¹ 4th grade).

This and various other excerpts from the interviews analysed in this paper appeared to us to be pointing toward concepts of collective memory, and perhaps historical consciousness, of a type of historical thought which we did not expect from children in the first four grades of schooling (from ages 6 – 10). It is a fact that they would not be greatly meaningful in a quantitative study, but Roy Hallam, the most quoted standard-bearer of the current movement – who in following Piagetian theories indicates that the capacity for historical thought is reached at a much later age, once the formal operational stage which makes it possible has been reached – states that there are always exceptions, and a 1978 study clearly shows that “many of the children in primary schools – but by no means all – will reason at what can be called pre-operational level in history.” (1978, p. 9) Thus, we have decided to also include the concepts of the collective memory and historical consciousness in our analysis, above all bearing in mind the interviews of the 3rd- and 4th-graders in which several children make statements about the past and about history similar to the one given by Anabela above, as well as the following:

“History can be past, present and future.” (José Marco 4th grade).

“These are important things that happened and still we know about them and talk about them. People tell [the stories] to each other.” (Isidro 3rd grade).

¹ The students names are pseudonyms.

In fact, for Rüsen (2007) the past is kept alive by memory, and history is also memory, “an elaborated form of memory.” (p. 13) This author, part of a Germanic current which since the 1970s has renovated the historiography on historical consciousness and built a bridge toward historical education, has also assigned special significance to the interrelationship between the past, present and future, as we will touch upon later.

In the work, *Theorizing historical consciousness*, edited by Peter Seixas in 2004, this author in the introduction refers to the importance of the explosion of “memory studies in the past decade and a half, which “challenged and enriched the historiography by a whole different approach to the study of our changing ways of making sense of the past.” (p. 5) Not only historiographers but also a wide selection of academics from various disciplines, and even non-academics involved namely in local and regional history and genealogy, have been intensifying their activity in memory studies. As this author notes, “[a] common past, preserved through institutions, traditions, and symbols, is a crucial instrument – in the construction of collective identities in the present.” (p. 5) Identity and memory are inseparable; they depend on each other. Seixas (2004) based on David Lowenthal, a prominent author on memory studies and heritage preservation, questions the necessity of the concept of historical consciousness given that the concept of collective memory has been quite adequate and comprehensible for ordinary people and non-historiographers to use in understanding the past. One of the important identifying differences is the link of the past not only to the present but also to the future, which associates to the German historiography that emphasises “individual and collective understandings of the past, the cognitive and cultural factors that shape those understandings, as well as the relations of historical understandings to those of the present and the future.” (p.10)

Rüsen, in a chapter of the work we have mentioned, explains the relationship between historical consciousness, moral values and reasoning. He states that the past plays an active role in the decisions that are taken in the present and that are reflected in the future. As for history, he considers it to be current time’s mirror for the past in which the contemporaries learn something about the future, “a meaningful nexus between, present, and future – not merely a perspective on what has been (...). It is a translation of past into present, an interpretation of past actuality via conception of temporal change that encompasses past, present, and the expectation of future events.” (Rüsen, 2004, p. 67) This author, in a chapter of the book published in 2007 and organised by CiCe, *History teaching, identities, citizenship (CiCe)*, although affirming that it is not easy because both of them deal with the same field, clearly distinguishes memory from historical consciousness: a) memory is more linked to practical principles that guide the human mind; historical consciousness is a representation of the past seen in a more explicit way with the present, of that past which is significant for the present and more linked to temporal change and the pursuit of truth; b) the relationship between the past and present is an immediate one in the memory and mediated in historical consciousness; c) memory has more to do with imagination whereas historical consciousness deals with cognition; d) the past is stuck to memory while historical consciousness is directed toward the future. He warns, however, that “these distinctions are one sided. It is much more useful to mediate or even synthesise these two perspectives in presenting and representing the past.” (Rüsen, 2007, p. 16)

He deals with three forms of memory that memory studies have identified: *communicative memory*, which has to do with generational differences and the historical

experiences that certain events or symbols have for the representation of a political system; *collective memory* which presupposes a greater stability and selectivity of the represented past that contributes to a feeling of belonging for group(s) which is very important for a world undergoing change; and *cultural memory* which is the collective memory which remains stable in time. Bearing in mind the way that the past is represented, he considers that two forms of this representation can be identified: *responsive memory*, linked to a traumatic event, with the Holocaust being a typical example; and *constructive memory* in which the past is a narration and on-going communication, a history with meaning "and those who remember seem to be masters of their past as they have put memory into a temporal perspective within which they can articulate their expectations, hopes and fears." (Rüsen, 2007, p. 17) The author adds that when the memories go beyond the experienced past they become historical memories. The mental process of historical consciousness – that is to say, to give meaning to time by interpreting the past in order to comprehend the present and envision the future – involves four elements: "the *perception* of another time as different (...); the *interpretation* of this time as temporal movement in the human world, according to some comprehensive aspects (...); the *orientation* of human practice through historical interpretation – both outwardly as a perspective of action (...) and inwardly as identification conceptions (...) and finally the *motivation* for action that an orientation provides." (Rüsen, 2007, p. 18-19)

In Portugal, two studies on historical consciousness should be noted. One by Pais (1999) gives evidence of the role of historical consciousness in the construction of identity "understood in terms of image of self, for oneself and for those closest to us, those who have anticipated our existence, and for its part, will anticipate [the existence] of others." (p. 1) Amongst the several questions that the author asks, following the interpretation of the results, is the one about the fact that the majority of young Europeans place more value on knowledge of the past than on guidance for the future, or even understanding of the present, the three levels in which the factors involved in historical consciousness are grouped. This aspect is more salient in young people from countries that seem to valorise this aspect in the construction of a national identity. It is Gago (2007) who puts forth the exploratory study for a doctoral thesis significantly entitled *Conception of the past as expression of historical consciousness* in which he identifies three types of perspectives on the past in students of 10 – 14 years of age: the past as something fixed or that has taken place; as an interpretation of a historiographer; or as reconstruction, the fruit of dynamic relationships with the present.

Initially, the interview questions analysed in this study, which are similar to those from the studies of Levstik and Papas (1987), Levstik and Barton (1996) and Barton and Levstik (1996), were conceived with the same end as in these studies – the understanding of historical time for children – which is visible in the analysis categories of the table presented in the following section. In relation to the question of learning history, especially with whom they learn, they are also related with the study by Hoge and Foster (2002).

The study

This study is an integral part of more in-depth research conducted for the doctoral dissertation entitled, *O ensino da História no 1.º Ciclo: a concepção do tempo histórico*

nas crianças e os contextos para o seu desenvolvimento, (The teaching of history in the 1st Cycle: the conception of historical time in children and contexts for its development), done with primary school children (age 6 – 10) in Portugal. The study was done in two classes of an urban school in Braga, one of which was 1st – 2nd grade and the other 3rd – 4th grade, over two academic years (2004-2005 and 2005 -2006), with diverse teaching strategies implemented in these groups for the Social Studies and History with a view to promoting learning about the past and about history and to developing historical understanding and historical time via classroom activities presented by the doctoral student and many times continued by the classroom teachers. During the two-year period, each pupil (24 in the 1st/2nd grade group and 25 in the 3rd/4th grade group) was interviewed three times: at the beginning (b) of the 1st or 3rd grade and at the end (e) of the 1st and 2nd or 3rd and 4th grade.

With these interviews, we intend to verify to what extent changes were noted in the explanations given in relation to the conception of the past and of history and to the demonstration of historical knowledge after two years of activities. This paper describes only a part of the results of the study developed via semi-structured interviews, endeavouring to analyse mainly the relationship between history, the past and personal, family and collective memory established by primary school pupils. Content analysis (Bardin, 1994) was used to analyse and categorise the interviews, with the categories having emerged from questions of protocol centred directly on the notion of history, the past and the study of history: *For you, what is the past? What do you understand by the term 'history'? Where, how and with whom do you learn about the past and history? Do you think it is important to learn about history? What purpose does it serve?* And the subcategories emerged from the pupils' answers (see Table 1). To perform the categorisation, we used the software support programme, NVivo 2.0.

Table 1. Conception of the past, of history, and finalities of history

Categories	Subcategories	Total number of references by years of schooling					
		1 st b	1 st e	2 nd e	3 rd b	3 rd e	4 th e
Conception of the past	Chronological past	11	17	21	19	16	10
	Personal past	9	9	10	3	1	0
	Historical past	4	5	5	6	6	12
Conception of history	Chronology	2	2	4	8	4	6
	Human past	0	0	6	10	8	7
	Significant past	4	0	2	5	10	20
	Preservation of memory/Identity	0	0	2	2	6	3
	Human convention /evidence	0	0	0	2	2	5
	Discipline	0	0	3	1	2	1
	Change	4	0	3	0	2	11
	Linear Progress	0	0	0	7	4	1
	Story	7	11	12	1	3	0
	Personal Interest	4	0	2	5	10	3
	With multiple meanings	0	0	0	0	0	4
	Purposes/Finalities of history	Knowing and learning	8	19	17	18	23
Recounting and teaching		0	5	0	1	8	8
Understanding/comparing past, present and future		0	0	8	5	0	9
Reminding, remembering, as memory		2	3	18	3	8	4
Historical ambiguity		10	4	2	3	0	0

Although the majority of pupils associate the past with the chronological past, as something that has already taken place or happened, and mostly quite some time ago, of note for 1st and 2nd graders is their association of the past to different times. Thus, some of them refer to the past: "Those are old things," "It already happened a long time ago," "It's what happened many years ago," while others considered that the past is: "The days that are already gone," "the other day," "last night," "It was yesterday," or "might be 5 months [ago]." We did not discover in our pupils the difficulty detected by Levstik and Papas (1987) which states that, mainly, 2nd-graders use time expressions in a confusing manner when explaining what the past is. There are 2nd graders who express rather elaborate varieties of thought, recognising that all of the present will become the past in the future. "The past is when we'll be living in the future," as Duarte states. For the majority of 3rd and 4th grade pupils, the past represents: "things that have already happened," revealing consciousness that the past is not only what "happened a long time ago" but also something nearby, as the example given by Belinda demonstrates: "[Some things] already happened a long time ago, others a short time ago." The idea of the past as continuous time, from the most remote to the closest in time, comes out clearly in the explanation given by Anabela, "For me, it seems like the oldest to the most recent." Some students explain the past via an opposition to other time periods, present and future, as the example of José Marco indicates, "Yesterday was the past, today is the present, tomorrow is the future." We found more elaborate explanations in which the idea of reversibility/irreversibility of time is also expressed, as in the example offered by Manuel: "Things that happened, that maybe can still happen again," or in the argument from José Filipe, "These are things that happened, that's passed, that we can't change. We can only change the present and the future. The past is already gone."

Although the pupils were not asked directly, "What is the difference between the past and history?" given the analysis of the justifications for what they understand by past and history, we can state, as did Levstik and Papas (1987) and Hoodless (1998), that some pupils distinguish history and past in chronological terms, taking into account that history is what occurred a long time ago, as the 2nd-grader Maria says, "Because history is much older and it happened in the long time ago."

Also of note is the association of the past to personal time for some of the 1st and 2nd graders, justifying what they understand as the past through personal time, deeply lived out and firmly based in life experiences, as 1st grader Paulo explains, "It's about spending time at home, at school, in the living room and at the beach." Few 3rd graders are able to explain what the past is through the personal/family past, and when they do so, they associate it with history, as Alberto explains, "When I was small, my mother told me about the past, like about my grandfather when he went to the war for the 25th of April and she told me more when my grandmother died of cancer." Some pupils, even in the 1st and 2nd grades, associate the past with the historical past, essentially, the story of Jesus. Yet it is mainly in the 4th grade that the pupils begin to distinguish the past of history in a clearer way, associating the past more frequently with the historic past, with what is particularly significant and with what is "left for history." They explain the past thusly: "It's what the people did before we were living," as Silvia mentions, or more explicitly in Mariana's comments, "These are the special things that already happened and that became the history of Portugal." The historical past is perceived as change, as one pupil states, "It's very different, the past from the current of today." Catarina

mentions as significant past not only simple facts and historical personalities, such as kings, but also the time/era in which they lived, valorising aspects of daily life in her comment: “The past are things that happened, things that remind us of kings. The past also reminds us of important people, like the King D. Afonso Henriques. And it also helps you to see what that time was like.”

From the analysis of the pupils’ responses to the question, *What do you understand by history?*, eleven categories emerged regarding their conception of history (in Table 1). It should not be totally surprising that the younger pupils, the 1st- and 2nd-graders, associate history with story-telling and personal history, since this is not part of the curriculum in the first years of the primary school syllabus. As is evident, many are not conceptions of “history.” To the question, *What is history?*, they assume the word to mean *story* (since in Portuguese there is only one word for the two concepts) and frequently respond with a question, “Which story?”, “History?”, “What [kind of] story?” or they mention examples of children’s tales or narratives that they know, such as Little Red Riding Hood, Snow White, Cinderella or Noddy. As in Levstik and Papas (1987), we have verified that some of the younger pupils in the 1st and 2nd grade already associate history with chronology, using terms related to time to explain what history is and its relationship to the past when they say that history is “the past,” it is “from a long time ago,” “about things that happened many years ago” or even “[about] people who lived a long time ago.” The 3rd- and 4th-graders continue to use this category but in a more detailed way, using expressions such as “things from long ago,” “from old things, very old, that we haven’t heard about yet,” and of the intrinsic relationship between the past and history, Belinda states: “History is the past because the past is history,” or with a greater temporal specificity, referring to the temporal importance of history: “To know when [something] happened,” or as Robert says, “History deals with what happened during all these centuries.” Some of the 3rd- and 4th-graders, when asked what history is, give examples of historical time periods: “the stone age,” “the time of Jesus,” and “the time of the kings.”

The association of history to the significant past emerges mainly in the descriptions of pupils at the end of the 3rd and 4th grades, explained by the introduction of the study of history in these grades, although this is present in some 1st and 2nd grade pupils whose examples of history are the story of Jesus and the history associated with the kings of Portugal. The 4th graders are able to identify levels of significance, distinguishing what is really important in history, such as, for example, the justification given by Roberto when referring to history as important “to study the important people who have already lived and what special things have already happened in the past,” or by giving some examples of some important events in Portuguese history, given that this is the year that History of Portugal is being taught. At the end of the 3rd grade, the pupils give more relevance to the history of daily life, reinforced in the pupils of the 4th grade, as Filipe here mentions: “It’s so that we know how the people lived in olden days. And what were the habits of the people from the olden days.” This type of history was worked on with the pupils via a classroom project which reflected the student discourse.

History is understood by some students of the 2nd grade as the preservation of memory and personal identity, referring to words and expressions such as “remembrance,” “remembering” and “what passes from generation to generation.” Pupils in the 2nd grade

and the beginning of the 3rd grade associate history with the knowledge of a familial past and the necessity to preserve this past, recalling and transmitting this past from generation to generation, as Nelson comments, "It's remembering the family. Remembering ourselves." After studying history, the pupils recognise it as important for the preservation of memory, not just personal memory but also national, and as essential for the construction of the individual and collective identity, as the 4th grader Anabela expressed so well in the quote from the beginning of this paper. Some 4th graders recognise that there exist different types of history and that it can have varying types of significance, as Bernardete explains, "History for me is ... different types of history, the history of Portugal, the history of different places, what counts as the things that happened to mark our new time."

As for the function of history, as analysed in the responses given by the pupils when asked *Do you think it is important to study history? What purpose does it serve?*, every school year studied reinforced that it is indeed important in order to know and learn the subject, with the role of history in the school curriculum appreciated.

History serves as a means for the preservation of memory and identity, beginning with the 2nd grade, mainly associated with family history, the recognition of the importance of preserving remembrances and recollections of the family's past in order to be transmitted later on to children and not let anything be forgotten, an idea present in the response of the pupil, Maria, "[It's for] later when our children ask what grandmother's or grandfather's life was like, and then we explain what it was." This valorisation of the function of history as the preservation of family history, expressed by some 1st-graders, and overwhelmingly by 2nd-graders, is justified in part because the theme of family is being studied by the pupils of this grade level and because they have, over these two years, developed various activities related to the study of the family (genealogies, personal and familial timelines, construction of a museum of family objects, interviews with family members). In their explanations, the pupils in the 3rd and 4th grade express the same idea of the function of history in the preservation of familial memory, but they do so in a more detailed way: "For example, if I learn something about my great-great grandmother, I can tell that story to my children and then my children can tell it to their children, and that way our family will not be forgotten," or as Roberto or Bernardete say, "I think it's important because we can learn more about our ancestors and relatives and other things." The consciousness of the importance of history to identity can be found in the argumentation of Filipe, at the end of the 3rd grade, when he says, "Because if we didn't have a past, we would never know what happened."

We were surprised by the fact that an occasional 2nd grader seemed to show a relatively elaborate feeling of historical consciousness even without having yet studied history. For example, Duarte states that history "is good for us to make the future," or as Filipe more vigorously affirms, "History is important because it lets us study old things, study the past, and if you study the past, you know the future," continuing, "because if we know the past well, everything will be better in the future." This can, however, be a case of their hearing and repeating words without their understanding the fullness of the meaning; Filipe himself confessed to having heard the teacher make such statements, but the second part of his commentary reveals awareness of the relationship between the past and future. It should be added that these are pupils who state that they talk to

grandparents and other relatives about these matters, who have contact with old things and who visit museums. Also present in the pupils' discourse is the idea that history allows us to avoid mistakes from the past, and 4th grader Roberto says indeed that there are lessons to be learned by saying, "sometimes we get to see the lessons from history," and another student expresses the idea that history shows the good and that bad things that have occurred. In the 4th grade, the pupils reveal a historical consciousness that conveys knowledge acquired in school via the study of history, revealing more elaborate thought in our presented justifications. Thus, for example, Bernardete argues about the understanding of the past and the significance of some events: "Some historical moments that were past, now we can understand them because they are historical moments." For José Marco, history allows him to understand the present and affirms what it is good for: "To know more about our past and also what is happening now." The 4th grader Sílvia integrates the idea that history contributes to the perception and comprehension of change into her answer: "The past is an important thing because I think that people should learn what happened in olden times so now they can see the difference between the past and the present." In 4th-graders what is mainly prevalent is the notion of history associated more with change than with progress, which is more present at the beginning of the 3rd grade, making these pupils more like Irish children (Northern Ireland) as seen in the Barton study (2001) in which they display a conception of history associated with the idea of change while American children have more of a conception of progress.

In relation to the study of history, and about the past, the school setting, although considered by pupils to be a privileged space and one meant for learning, is nevertheless one less referred to by the students. Catechism classes are the principal space for learning about the past and about history for pupils up to the 2nd grade, before the formal study of history begins in school, whereas for the 3rd-graders it is museums. As for the museums, many of the students referred to the ones they visited, the type of museum it was and what they learned.

At home and in the family setting, in addition to the parents as agents of transmitting historical knowledge, the pupils, primarily the older ones, highlight the relevant role of the grandparents, especially that of their grandmothers. Their stories contribute to the preservation of the family memory and the individual, family and even national identity, as they tell about their lives in the past, as we see in the example of 3rd grader Isidro when he states that his grandparents have told him about "what they did in the past," or comparing the past with the present as José Nuno suggests that "my grandmother only tells me that long ago it wasn't like now, there were really old things, that school was different." Sometimes in the personal stories, important living events from Portuguese history appear, as Paula recounts, "She says that my grandfather was going to the war. She says there was a really big revolution on the 25th of April, and other stuff that I don't remember."

Photographs are the prime choice of pupils of all levels of schooling for learning and studying the past, which allows them to remember the past and contribute to the preservation of the past and family history. For the study of history, there is a certain tendency to prefer the use of books, photos and visits to monuments and cities, rather than the use of the media for learning. Nevertheless, beginning at the 3rd grade, there is

increased use of the Internet and the indication of websites, films and television stations that pupils watch (the Discovery Channel and the History Channel).

Conclusions

Historical consciousness about our past and our ancestors is fundamental knowing who we are and where we came from, and this is directly associated with our feeling of identity. The results suggest that conceptions about the past and history are extremely diverse. The notion of history has many meanings and it emerged as a multi-faceted and ambiguous concept. The idea of historical past was viewed as being static, as "something that happened a long time ago" principally by younger children, while older children already demonstrated a feeling of historical consciousness. The results suggest that conceptions about the past and history are extremely diverse. The feeling of historical consciousness seems to show itself in children around the age of six or seven, even before formal history studies begin at school. The formation of historical consciousness is not a direct consequence of historical knowledge and school is not the only promoter of this consciousness. The importance of the family and the contribution of visits to museums and monuments are also emphasised. History was not only seen as the past (on a personal, national or world level), but as a way of understanding the present and of preparing for the future. The importance of history for the preservation of memory (personal and national) and as an affirmation of individual and collective identity was also recognised. The way time is conceived in history and its inter-temporal relationships can be reflected in historical consciousness and in decision-making.

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