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America: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly Comparisons
A Case Study of the Representation of “America”
in Preservice Teacher Lectures

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If history is a product of our educated interpretations, how do we know that we are accurately representing the past when our interpretations are influenced by the events and contexts of our own time? The idea of historical consciousness essentially answers this question by dismissing the notion of “accurate” historical interpretation divorced from the identity and context of the historian (Mitrović, 2015). In other words, the interpretation of history itself is an act performed by actors, and the context of those actors will have implications for their reading and understanding of past events (Rüsen, 2004).

This notion extends past individual interpretations of history into broader community understandings of the collective past. While the “collective past” can indicate any group-based collective remembering activities, Wertsch (2002) points out that modern states have the power and resources to shape and perpetuate collective memory. For that reason, in contemporary society, much of “collective memory” can be directly attributed to the actions of specific nation states. For Americans, community understandings of the collective past tend to bend the actions and choices of historical American figures into a flattering light, even at the high school level when student-led critical interpretation of documents should be common (Lee, 2007). Less flattering interpretations are often challenged and/or discarded by major portions of the American public and by official gatekeepers. One example of this phenomenon in American culture is the conflict that arose when the College Board attempted to change the AP US History standards in 2014 in a manner that was criticized by conservatives for focusing too heavily on

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the negative aspects of American History (Flaherty, 2015), leading to a re-revision in 2015 that included more focus on American Exceptionalism (Massey, 2015).

New teachers coming into the teaching profession are often exposed to conflicting interpretations of the American Past. At the college level, new teachers are usually exposed to more challenging perspectives, sources, and analyses in their history courses than they were in high school (Booth, 2010). However, if they also grew up as members of the American community, they were likely raised with certain flattering ideas about the greatness of choices made by historical figures in American History that four years of college-level coursework may not dim. They are also individual actors making their own interpretations, so their own past experiences and identity formation influence their interpretations. In addition, these new teachers contend with the will of the people: they are expected to “teach to the standards,” whether those standards align with their own interpretations or not. And for student teachers, there is enormous pressure to please major stakeholders in their communities, including their mentor teachers, administration, and parents (Anderson & Stillman, 2013).

Given the context and challenges of being a new teacher, and the various conflicting interpretations of American History they have been exposed to, how do new teachers choose to represent America? Is it in the flattering, glowing light of the positive communal understandings of America’s collective past? Do new teachers, fresh from explorations of challenging interpretations in their college-level History courses and aware of the different interpretations of history, choose to present conflicting interpretations about American History to students? The purpose of this study was to explore how a cohort of social studies pre-service teachers (PSTs) represented America in their lectures. Specifically, this paper will explore the ways that the historical consciousness of participating social studies PSTs influenced their narrative choices within lectures collected during their internship semester.

Historical Consciousness and Narrative

Conceptual Framework: Historical Consciousness

The roots of “historical consciousness” can be traced back to Hans-Georg Gadamer (1963), although most modern scholars cite the influence of Jörn Rüsen (1987, 2004), particularly because of his emphasis on applying historical consciousness to history education. Historical consciousness, at its heart, is the idea that “there is no uncontextual understanding” or interpretation of events (Mitrović, 2015, p. 331). Whenever individuals interact with temporal change, they enact meaning-making processes that form a cohesion between past, present, and future. Although this is an individual process, it is also necessarily embedded in the collective consciousness of the groups and/or wider culture(s) in which the individual has been socialized (Zanazanian, 2015). Because of the contextual nature of both socialized and individual identities, the historical consciousness one develops will demonstrate different values when thinking about the past, and these values will shift and adjust over time as context changes. This leads to a

situation where there is no right or wrong historical consciousness, although there can be wrong interpretations of the past, as will be discussed in a later section (Körber, 2008, Wallace-Casey, 2017).

Historical consciousness is not defined in this paper as something that we intentionally “develop” in students, like we would with skills such as “historical literacy” (e.g., Perfetti et al., 1995; Roderigo, 1994), “historical thinking” (e.g., VanSledright and Frankes, 2000; Wineburg, 2001), or “historical reasoning” (e.g., Kuhn et al. 1994). These types of processes emphasize the “activity of students,” whereas *historical consciousness* refers to underlying and often unintentional meaning-making processes within individuals (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008, p. 88). Each of these skills are often defined as pedagogical goals for history instruction. Examples of these skills-based approaches include teaching students how to critically read primary sources, synthesize multiple perspectives, and engage in meaningful discussions about the past.

While sometimes “historical consciousness” is defined in pedagogical circles as a “positive value construct, in opposition to ignorance” (Anderson, 2017, p. 12), it is usually differentiated from skills-based approaches in the literature. This paper uses Rösen’s (2004) definition of historical consciousness as the meaning-making all humans bring to their understanding of their personal, national, and cultural pasts. In this study, which looked at the lectures of preservice teachers, the historical consciousness of the preservice teachers can be determined because their individual meaning-making (and by extension the meaning they are trying to pass on to students) is made “visible” through the narratives they tell in their lectures. In a later section, this paper explains how historical consciousness manifests as the narratives people tell about the past, and how they can therefore be explored using narrative analysis.

Challenges of Historical Consciousness for Historians and History Teachers

For people who often interact with the past, such as historians and history teachers, historical interpretation should begin with a “recognition that words give rise to multiple mental models, and that the first one that comes to mind is one that tells us more about who *we* are than the meanings of the people we are trying to understand” (Wineburg, 2005, p. 207). Understanding of the world—past, present, and future—is always situated in time, and while Wineburg would have historians recognize this, there are limits to our ability to place ourselves in context. One limit would be the fact that our contexts are always changing (Grever, 2019), so our contextual understandings and meaning-making processes are constantly in flux, making it difficult to pin down a meaningful interpretation of the past. In addition, socio-cultural contexts place limitations on our perspectives that we are unlikely to recognize in ourselves; for example, the fact that people in cultures that value individualism may emphasize the role of individuals in bringing about change as opposed to societal factors (Barton, 2001).

In addition to these practical limits on recognizing our own contextualized perspectives, there are also limits on teaching students the nature of interpretation. Overemphasis on the

contextualized nature of understanding, for example, can be interpreted by students as an inability to know anything concrete about the past. As Lee (2004) put it, “For students who think we can know nothing about the past unless we were there, history is not an impressive body of knowledge” (34-35). There are other pedagogical issues that arise as well. Historians must make choices about which topics and documents deserve attention, and often have difficulty combing through multiple conflicting accounts of the past to create a coherent picture (Seixas, 2005). In a school setting, time, resources, and instructor knowledge limit the amount and type of conflicting accounts teachers can reasonably be expected to include. Both Seixas (2005) and Lee (2004) also point out that students often arrive in history classes with deficit perspectives of people in the past, and have difficulty understanding the actions and motivations of people that hold vastly different values and experiences.

Historical Consciousness as Narrative

Historical consciousness emphasizes the way human brains process past events, rather than the events themselves. Events themselves are ephemeral and transitory, and unless they are somehow recorded (through the written or spoken word or through a tangible object), they are lost (Straub, 2005). It is people who connect previously unconnected events, acts, artifacts, and other pieces of information into a coherent “temporal unity.” This often takes the form of “*narrative connections...that begin with temporal differentiations and sequentializations*” and take shape as a narrative or a story (Straub, 2015, p. 54). Calling historical interpretations a “narrative” is not intended to diminish their veracity or importance. As Polkinghorne (2005) states: “the notion that historical narrative explanations are selective and interpretive does not lead to the conclusion that any actual occurrences referred to in the narrative are projections of the narrator” (p. 18).

It does, however, mean that critical analyses of historical narratives are required in order to authenticate the narrator’s explanations for events. Historical narratives authenticated through critical analysis will likely contain past events with evidence to support them and represent, to the best of the historian’s current knowledge and understanding, a true interpretation of these past events. In addition, “historical reality” comprises “events, happenings, and actions...that are significant to a group—at least one group. History is basically made up of stories that concern, affect, or move many people” (Straub, 2005, p. 46). So one person’s narrative does not constitute the narrative of history. Instead, we as members of groups carry with us the cultural backgrounds and frames of reference which affect our interpretations of past events (Virta, 2007). Historical narratives, therefore, involve events that “pass the muster of critical review” and are “significant to a group” while necessarily being coherent with the experiences and expectations of individual members of that group.

Features and Analysis of Historical Narratives

Historical narratives have many features that other narratives do. They have a “plot,” for example, which provides a beginning and an end to a particular narrative, determines which relevant events belong in the particular story, and frames the “end” of the story as its natural or dramatic conclusion (Straub, 2005). Narratives also require actors (both human and systemic actors, such as Poverty) and agency. Bruner (2005) reminds us: “The search in narrative is for the intentional states “behind” actions...high on the agenda of narrative is exploring the reasons for action, reasons that can then be judged” (p. 28). Narratives therefore require both plots that can be followed to a conclusion and actors that can be judged for their role in the plot. Of course, because narratives require these features, the dual questions of *whose plot* the narrative tells and *who is judged responsible* for both positive and negative aspects of the plot become significant. For example, Cutrara (2018) points out that Indigenous epistemologies can conflict with structured historical thinking models, leading to plots and judgements that mirror colonial logic and intentionally leave out Indigenous notions of what should be included in the narrative.

Narratives also make use of literary devices, such as metaphors, which function as “interpretive filters” and can be used to maintain particular ideas about events and groups in the past (Zanazanian, 2015, p. 24). For example, metaphorical language is often used to describe minority or marginalized groups, and the choice of metaphor can determine whether the group is viewed as delinquent and in need of control, sympathetic but powerless, or empowered and capable of action. Van Stipriaan (2007) provides an example of contested terms for the freeing of slaves. The phrase “abolition of slavery” implies that with a single action, freedom from slavery is “given” by benevolent powers-that-be. This is the phrase often used in textbooks. Van Stipriaan (2007) contrasts this phrasing with “the emancipation of slaves.” Emancipation, having a broader meaning implying multiple freedoms, including freedom from legal slavery, has a different connotation that allows for the stories of multiple actors to emerge as part of the narrative.

It is important to analyze the language of historical narratives, and the emotions that are elicited by particular linguistic choices (Straub, 2005). Virta (2007), for example, uses the phrases “the Union won the Civil War” and “The North won the War between the States” to demonstrate the way in which textbooks often use language as though it is neutral, when in fact there is a significant amount of explanation and context involved in understanding what these phrases mean, and how they may differ in their interpretation (p. 17-18). In this case, the change from military conflict (“The Union won the Civil War”) to a more social conflict (“The North won the War between the States”) represents an effort to manipulate the emotions of Southerners. It’s one thing to lose a war in a military conflict, it’s another thing to lose your culture to your enemy in a social conflict. Similarly, Clark (2019), referring to the arguments over wording in Australian history, includes arguments over using the word “invasion” to describe European Colonialism, instead of “colonization.” “Invasion” is intended to invoke a different emotion in the listener than “colonization,” an emotion that reinforces the harshness of the violence that accompanies the act of colonizing. Marker (2019), also discussing differences

between Western and Indigenous perspectives, states that the issues in dispute are not necessarily disputes about facts. “It is more that the two worlds, Indigenous and Western, maintain separate discussions in separate languages” (p. 186). When creating historical narratives, word choice creates specific pictures in the minds of the reader (or listener), so metaphors, symbolism, and agency all matter in the story the narrator is trying to tell.

Similarly, comparisons can be used in historical narratives for many reasons. They are often used essentially as metaphor, to provide context for what something meant, as opposed to just saying what something was. For example, comparing a revolution in one country to a revolution in another country would illuminate the differences between the two revolutions or the two countries (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008). These comparisons could also serve as metaphors designed to elicit an emotional reaction, similar to how word choices were described above as creating emotional reactions within the reader. For example, in an American context, comparing the “success” of the American Revolution to the “chaos” of the French Revolution serves to elicit feelings of pride in one’s country’s historical achievements. The purpose of the comparison is to highlight the achievements of the country in which the narrative is being told, and to manipulate the emotions of the listener. This is not to imply that America is the only country that uses comparisons to elicit emotions. Van Stipriaan (2007) shared that high school history textbooks in the Netherlands in the recent past contained one sentence on the role of the Dutch slave trade but devoted a long paragraph to slavery and abolition in the United States. This narrative choice served to elicit negative emotions in regard to the slave trade in America while preserving positive emotions about the Netherlands’ similar history, as it implies that the Dutch slave trade was not as bad as the American slave trade.

Development of Individuals’ Historical Narratives

Thinking in narrative forms is inherent to human processing, and as a result, we begin learning historical narratives as children. School is hardly the first or most important place that people actively encounter and construct meanings about the past, although early encounters with the past will likely be fragmented and include “mythical as well as realistic events” (Ribbens, 2007, p. 63). Bruner (2005), for example, in describing the process of narrative in memory formation, discusses the “procedures by which families construct a collective family continuity through ‘dinner-table’ talk” (p. 37). Green (2019), in her research on family stories and their historical structures, pointed out that family stories she studied extended to up to five generations, often beyond living memory of the people telling the stories. These earliest narratives, perhaps not surprisingly, are incredibly resilient to change. Letourneau & Moisan (2004) explored persistent myths about Quebec that contradict the official narrative taught in schools. They found that children’s core narratives were developed in childhood as they absorbed a set of historical facts about Quebec, Canada, and their place in the world. Once developed, these narratives behaved “like a Black hole” absorbing everything around it and remaining fairly unmodified, despite the introduction of contradictory historical facts taught in schools (p. 119).

People encounter the past in their large and small communities through avenues such as movies, museums, memorials, comic books, video games, websites, and television programs. But they also encounter the past in more personal spaces, such as photo albums, Instagram and Facebook memories, talking to grandparents, conducting genealogy, and sitting around the dinner table discussing the history of current events with their families. While all historical knowledge contributes to self-understanding and identity (Aronsson, 2000), this kind of history is separate from the academic history students learn in school and can be called “popular historical culture” (Ribbens, 2007), “practical history” (Vinta 2007), and “heritage or lay history” (Lowenthal, 1998), among other possible terms. This paper will follow Ribbens (2007) in calling it “popular historical culture” while keeping in mind that it includes elements of both popular culture and family culture.

Historical “appropriation” happens when people encounter a piece of history, and make it theirs (Ribbens, 2007). This process happens with both academic history and popular historical culture. The collection of historical knowledge appropriated from various sources constitutes that person’s “historical culture” (Clark & Peck, 2019; Ribbens, 2007). As Clark and Peck (2019, p. 2) explain: “more than simply understanding how people think about history, this interpretation of historical consciousness also reveals history as fundamental to the ways we think about ourselves.” For many people, official academic history does not contribute as much to their historical consciousness as popular historical culture. For example, Ribbens (2007), with Greber, conducted a survey of 275 Dutch students and 146 English students. While the overwhelming majority (85%) agreed that history was important in their lives, it wasn’t official history that was considered important. Only 11.7% of the Dutch students selected Dutch History as most important, compared with 32.7% that selected the history of their families as most important. The English numbers were 27.6% selecting the history of their families, and 8.2% selecting British history as the most important. Li (2019) also found that while school-based history in China lacked relevance to contemporary Chinese students, this didn’t mean that students did not care about the past, but rather that they cared about “intimate pasts and intimate uses of the past—first-hand, experimental, intimate, familial” (p. 139).

Development of National Historical Narratives

Understanding that once set in childhood, historical narratives are difficult to change, countries often choose a dominant master narrative and give it “an aura of authority in the eyes of pupils and parents alike” by making it the official school curriculum, a canon of knowledge that all members of that country are expected to know (Ribbens, 2007, p. 64-65). The meta-narrative of American History, for example, is often described as the Quest for Freedom (e.g., Lee, 2007; Wertsch, 2004). While it is true that not all countries have master-narratives that are taught in schools (e.g. McCully and Barton, 2019), it is also true that many modern countries lean toward narratives that present their histories in a favorable light. Wertsch (2004), for example, explained that:

Modern states have sponsored the most ambitious effort at creating collective memory ever witnessed...States not only attempt to provide their citizens with official accounts of the past, but they also seek to control the particular ways such accounts are used, as well as access to alternative versions. (p. 50)

Wertsch (2007) differentiated between two types of national narratives, episodic and schematic narratives. Episodic narratives are the events that make up the stories, but the schematic narrative is the underlying narrative structure. In other words, the schematic narrative is the overall story the country is trying to tell. While many scholars are suspicious of master narratives created by states (Lee 2007; Legêne, & Waaldijk, 2007; Ribbens, 2004; Wertsch, 2004), these narratives do serve a purpose. Torpey (2004) points out that such narratives tend to be forward-thinking, emphasizing collective projects and pursuits for a better future. In addition, a lack of agreed-upon historical narratives results in “[opening] the door to all manner of unanchored conjecture regarding the supposed contents of people’s recollections” (Torpey, 2004, p. 246). In other words, lacking a basic agreed-upon national narrative, people are free to whatever version of the past that suits them and their political agendas. While we will discuss the importance of dissecting national narratives and providing a multi-voiced historical narrative to students, Torpey’s concerns illuminate why national narratives continue to be viewed as useful.

The benefits of a national narrative aside, such narratives face some serious issues. First, while high-stakes exams and official curricula wield substantial influence, teachers also have choice and agency in terms of what they teach and how they teach it. As a result, what students experience varies even when they are bound to the same curricula and standards (Lee, 2007). We have also seen that the first historical narratives children are exposed to remain powerful predictors of their future historical narratives. When these two are in contradiction, the narratives children establish in their youth often supplant national narratives, as Letourneau & Moisan (2004) found in Quebec. In addition, national narratives change as national context changes. Wertsch (2004) explored the example of Soviet-era and post-Soviet-era national historical narratives, and found that events had to be “re-emplotted” to switch out heroes and villains and to portray events that were considered “triumphs” in the Soviet-era as “grand tragedies” in the post-Soviet era. Ribbens (2007) also explores the changes to national historical narratives that occurred in Britain post-WWII, after the rise of Nazism revealed the negative impacts of “nationalistic narratives” in a multicultural society.

Finally, and most importantly, these national narratives often leave out key voices. In the quest to “unite” a nation under one story, conflicting stories are often excised. For example, Legêne, & Waaldijk (2007) explored the way Dutch National Identity portrayed the agency of both males and females and Europeans and Indonesians differently in their official narratives. In the United States, King (2019) has explored how narrative silences create “a one-sided historicity of incomplete narrations” (p. 165). Specifically, in the American context, King looked at the historical consciousness of PSTs teaching Black history and found that they often taught about

Black victimization without accompanying stories of Black agency, and about Black victims that somehow had no antagonists. “Racism was narrated as acts of past transgression without a nexus to the present” (King, 2019, p. 167). White supremacy was rarely discussed or challenged, even in historical settings (as opposed to in discussions of ongoing challenges with racism).

Multiperspectivity and National Narratives

All of which leads us to our final point about narratives, and about historical consciousness as a narrative: national historical narratives, as they exist in standards, curriculum, and teacher training, should include multiple voices and multiple perspectives. As Van Stipriaan (2007) stated:

The first priority is to search for these different voices, for example Black and white. The next and probably more important priority is to show how these voices have interacted and form a complex story. It is about the inclusiveness of the story, that there is never only one voice, one historical truth, one color, one canon. (p. 217)

One implication is that there is an indefinite number of stories historians could choose to tell about the past based on our current interests and contexts (Lee, 2004). Limiting ourselves to one master storyline misses the point of learning history. Virta (2007) calls this *multiperspectivity*; since historical events often involved struggles and animosities and our accounts of them are necessarily unobjective, history teachers are tasked with developing the “capacity to understand the fact that historical issues are sensitive and problematic and that there are always various interpretations available, thus requiring critical and empathetic reading of historical texts so as to avoid an unrealistic view of history” (p. 18-19).

This requires that history teachers teach students not a “preformed grand narrative, but an apparatus for making sense of what narratives are and do in history” (Lee, 2004, p. 10). Students should be aware of not only the existence of the master narrative they are being taught, but also “those that rebuke and contest them” (Anderson, 2017, p. 14). Anderson (2017), for example, discussed the need to expand epistemology in Canadian national narratives to new forms of knowledge that include Indigenous perspectives. Others, such as Legêne, & Waaldijk (2007) and Van Nieuwenhuysse & Wils (2019) have pointed out the glaring omissions and/or narratives of deviancy in the histories told of women and immigrants in national canons that focus on the national past. Importantly, teachers should not just ‘add-on’ alternative voices and perspectives while continuing to teach the grand narrative, but instead should embed multiple perspectives within the narrative itself. This may create “tension of disrupted common-sense thinking” (Smith, 2012, p. 12) as learners weave different and lesser-known perspectives into one fuller story. As an example of what this should look like in an American context, King (2019) suggests the following principals based on Biko’s (1978) notion of Black Consciousness:

(1) resisting White epistemic historical frameworks, (2) redefining Black history as its own genre and set of historical contexts independent of Western knowledge, and (3) recognizing Blackness as complex and human. (p. 164)

This should be done by expanding the canon to include non-Western thinkers and being prepared to teach not just about Black people but using Black voices.

For history teachers, multiperspectivity is a difficult task. It requires a great deal of nuanced understanding about history, and continually updating knowledge of historical “concepts, representations and interpretations” (Letourneau, & Moisan, 2004, p. 114). Teachers not only need continually updated historical knowledge, but if they are teaching against the agreed-upon national memory, they will need the skill set to breach previously instilled historical narratives. This is especially challenging, because students’ “narrative cores and basic matrices behave like decoders and encoders of any new knowledge they may encounter, objectively sheltering them, at least at the outset, from any ‘alienating’ learning” (Letourneau, & Moisan, 2004, p. 120). There are possible strategies for influencing students’ uncritical acceptance of national historical narratives. It is possible that changing the learning context by making students more active and adopting a disciplinary approach to historical inquiry could make both teachers and students more likely to move beyond familiar narratives (Wallace-Casey, 2017). This approach runs into the previously stated concern: it requires in-depth knowledge of the existing primary and secondary sources in order to even know what the alternative narratives may be. For teachers new to the teaching profession, including the subjects of this study, teaching history this way is a monumental expectation.

And yet, there are clear reasons why history teachers should make efforts to teach history using as many different voices and perspectives as possible. Peck (2019) provided a vignette of a classroom where students drew negative connections between their ethnic identities and the stories about these identities being taught in classrooms. She found that for many students “past is not past” (p. 220). Members of ethnic identities with ignored or mistaught perspectives felt they could not use school history to develop their identity, forcing them to turn to popular historical culture as a basis for most of their understanding of their past. The lack of a formal education that encompasses multiple perspectives led to confusion, anger, and arguments over questions such as who can claim the rights of citizenship (Peck, 2019). National stories that lack multiperspectivity can pit students’ competing identities against each other. It is also becoming ever clearer in today’s world that students need to learn tools for exploring a contested past in a safe and supportive environment that emphasizes reason and evidence over emotional appeals (Grever, 2019). And as Bruner (2005) reminds us, counter-narratives are actually more fun to learn and more engaging for students. This is why we are so intrigued by gossip, so “uncertain of the limits of libel law,” and such “robust defenders of the right to free thought and free speech” (Bruner, 2005, p. 30-31). Despite the difficulty, then, it is essential for history teachers to ensure that narratives presented to students are multi-voiced and engaging.

Context and Methodology

This case study focuses on exploring the historical consciousness of preservice teachers through analyzing the narratives within their lectures. The bounded unit (Yin, 2017) of this case study were social studies preservice teachers completing their final student teaching assignment in the Spring of 2020. Both the researchers and participants were based out of a medium-sized teacher preparation program located in a Southeastern state in the United States.

The researchers explained the project to Social Studies PSTs at their student teaching orientation and asked for volunteers to audio-record a minimum of three lectures at least a week apart and email the audio file along with a digital slide show used for the day's lesson to the researchers. The requirement that the lectures be a week apart was intended to ensure that different topics were covered within the lectures. Six of the preservice teachers agreed to do this, and emailed audio files of their lectures to the researchers. The six preservice represented a convenience sample of volunteers for this project. Three of the PSTs were female, three were male, and all were white and in their early twenties. All but one of the participants attended high school in the county in which they did their student teaching, and all of them intended to teach in the state in which they were trained and earned certification. Not all of them were teaching in History courses, but all of them made explicit or implicit claims about America in nearly every lecture collected. Only one lecture—from a Sociology course—did not contain a reference to America that was useable for this study.

For the purposes of quoting specific lectures within the following sections, each of the participants was assigned a pseudonym:

- Michelle: white female, Psychology and Sociology
- Jacob: white male, US History and Government & Economics
- Jennifer: white female, US History and Government & Economics
- Jeff: white male, Government & Economics and World Geography
- Whitney: white female, Government & Economics
- Cortland: white male, Government & Economics class

Altogether, the researchers collected 16 audio-recorded lectures before the preservice teachers were forced to switch to online learning platforms midway through their internships due to the Coronavirus outbreak. Graduate Student Workers transcribed each of the audio-files, and the transcriptions were then coded. An open technique (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was applied to analyze the transcripts. Initial coding consisted of tagging single words and short phrases used by the participants that provided meaning related to the concept of “America” (McCann & Clark, 2004). Follow-up coding tagged sociologically constructed codes assigned to the words and phrases used by the preservice teachers (Bailey & Davis, 2010). Part of the coding procedure was to organize the emerging codes into ideas relevant to the Conceptual Framework. This

organization revealed patterns in how the participants referenced the concept of “America” in ways consistent with the literature on historical consciousness and historical narrative.

This is a case study (Yin, 2017) bound to a specific group of participants. Like all case studies, generalizability to other populations is challenging, and is not the intention of this study. The purpose of the study is not to make the claim that all preservice teachers in similar contexts will manifest their historical consciousness in their lectures the same way as this study’s participants, but rather to understand in some depth what this looked like for these particular participants. Seixas (2019, p. 111) argued that there is a need for “a targeted sample of case studies” on the replication of cultural memory, including local, smaller-scale studies, and this case study follows others that have used ideas from historical consciousness to explore the historical narratives told by students and adults (Wallace-Casey, 2017).

At the same time, it is important to recognize the contextually situated nature of this study. As discussed in the review of literature, the historical consciousness of groups and individuals is difficult to pin down because it is always changing. The events of 2020 that took place following the collection of data for this study (which took place between January and March of 2020) may very well have changed the participants’ perspectives on “America.” The questionable government response to the COVID-19 epidemic, the protests (and responses to the protests) that took place following the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, the challenges to the validity of the 2020 presidential election results and the attack on the U.S. Capitol building on January 6, 2021 all took place following the collection of data for this study. In addition, the participants have since graduated from their teaching programs and become certified teachers in their own classrooms without the institutional barriers of student teaching. It is very possible that if the same study was conducted using the same participants one year later, the results would be quite different. The authors acknowledge this limitation. At the same time, given that the series of events from March 2020 to January 2021 occurred shortly after data collection for this study, the time period represented in our data is an important one to study and to be able to compare to future results on this topic.

Findings

Over the course of 16 lectures, the preservice teachers in our study made a variety of claims, both implicit and explicit, about America. While the majority of these claims aligned with the Quest for Freedom meta-narrative of American History (e.g., Lee, 2007; Wertsch, 2004), there were also times that the participants challenged this narrative, either explicitly (for example by bringing up issues such as the amount of money spent on the country’s defense, its history of slavery and colonialism, and gun violence) or implicitly (for example, less-than-positive critiques of America’s consumer culture). There were several times that candidates used comparison as a narrative device to make a point about America. Usually, these comparisons

followed statements that challenged the master-narrative and served the function of softening the critique.

This section will present two examples from the lectures that illustrate each of these categories: Teaching the Master-Narrative, Questioning the Master-Narrative, and Using Comparisons to Other Countries. In the Discussion section, we will explore how these examples compare to the literature on historical consciousness, specifically the development of historical narratives. Finally, the Implications section will provide suggestions on how teacher education programs can train new teachers to pay attention to the narratives they teach students.

Teaching the Master Narrative

Implicit and explicit messages in the lectures often followed the ‘Quest for Freedom’ master-narrative identified in the literature. Two of the 16 lectures explicitly included the word “freedom” nine or more times in the course of one lecture. One of the most common plots was “America is a place founded on the principles of the rule of law and balanced government.” One preservice teacher explicitly made this connection: “Rule of law. The main point during the American Revolution, Declaration of Independence, Constitution, Bill of Rights” (Jennifer, Lec. 1).

Probably as a result of where the participants were in the standards and pacing guide, the lecture topics were often about these specific founding documents. The lecture narratives often told the origin story of American Freedom, referencing the founding documents and principles in reverential ways. The overall message was that America is founded on sound principles that were once debated but are now beyond dispute. These principles included the idea that power comes from the consent of the people (without addressing which people), that national and state power are now balanced as a result of our brilliant founders (without acknowledging the role of slavery in these early debates), that checks and balances function to keep our system in check, and that representative government serves to ensure that the interests of “the people” are served by the powerful. The lectures further implied that as a result of this smoothly functioning system, America was primed to take advantage of the Industrial Revolution and become a leader in the export of consumer goods, mass media, and high-quality education.

Example 1: The first example comes from the Sociology class. Michelle was reviewing the concept of Culture. She began her unit by exploring American culture and commonly accepted American values, like hard work, morality, personal achievement, and efficiency: values that were selected based on work by Williams (1951). As part of American Cultural values, she said,

Equality and democracy. Duh, right? Have you ever taken a US History class? US Government class? Read our constitution, our founding documents? This is like the common thread through all of the foundations of American Government and Society. Fair representation, freedom again, duh. Right? If you asked foreigners to describe America, what do they always say? Right? Americans like their freedoms. We like our freedom of speech. We like our freedom of religion.

Sometimes we like our freedom of the press...and education, right? (Michelle, Lec. 1)

Because Michelle was painting a picture of American culture and was using Sociological terms and researchers, most of the values she presented within the context of this lecture were discussed as having both positive and negative aspects. This particular passage stood out in the narrative because it was the only “American value” that was not addressed in terms of potential positives and negatives. It was also the only “American value” discussed in this lecture about which ideas from students were not solicited or provided. In fact, Michelle presented this value as being unequivocal and beyond discussion, using the word “duh” twice in this selection. Notably, Michelle submitted three lectures for this project, and never used the word ‘duh’ in any other passage of her lectures.

Example 2: The second example comes from a Government class on the branches of Government. Cortland was explaining the system of checks and balances, and briefly proposed a possible negative of this system (bureaucracy means it can take a really long time for laws to be passed, even when they are beneficial) before quoting John Adams to explain why this is actually a good thing. A student asked whether laws can be repealed, given the lengthy process involved in getting them passed. Cortland responded:

Yes, but it's a long process. Remember Prohibition? They repealed Prohibition. Prohibition just wasn't working. There was just a huge personal outcry, public outcry. Because, you have to think, the power of the government comes from the people, the consent of the people. So if the public is speaking loud enough, governors will listen. (Cortland, Lec. 1)

Following this statement, Cortland showed the Schoolhouse Rock Video “I’m just a bill” and continued with the overall narrative of his story, which was the specific way that the system of checks and balances is supposed to function in American Government. The above statement is most noteworthy for being unnecessary to the overall narrative of the lecture. This kind of side statement reinforcing the “freedom of the people” aspects of the master narrative – “In America, the power of government comes from the consent of the people” – was fairly common in all the lectures on Founding Documents. On the other hand, contrary statements questioning the master narrative or encouraging students to question the master narrative were extremely rare.

Questioning the Master Narrative

The lectures from participants did not include many explicit examples where the preservice teachers, as an intentional part of their lectures, questioned the master-narrative, but there were two that we will discuss below. There were, in addition, instances where negative aspects of American history or culture were implied without being explicitly recognized as such. In one such instance, Jacob used Mexico’s banning of slavery and America’s refusal to do so as a reason why Texans rebelled against Mexico in 1835. Although he did not explicitly say that slavery was bad, there was an implication that the rationale for rebelling was less about

“freedom” than about maintaining the status quo vis-a-vis slavery. Similarly, in the Sociology lectures, America’s obsession with material items was brought into discussion by Michelle, and the students were challenged to explore the downsides of consumerism. Two different teachers brought up the second Amendment. In one instance, Cortland offered a tentative opinion that the founders’ definition of “militia” meant “a state funded defense force with an actual government structure...you can’t just say, you get a whole bunch of your buddies from down the road there and get your pitchforks.” He then concluded, “So a lot of people cite that as important to our nation and stuff like that. All right! Let’s move on.” In each of these cases, the questioning of the master narrative was an essential aspect to teaching the content. The teachers were willing to add these aspects of the narrative as necessary to telling the overall story, but they did not add any more than what they needed to make their point. In addition, as in the above examples, they often made these counter-narratives implicit rather than explicit. Next, we will look at two explicit examples questioning the master narrative.

Example 1: The first example comes from a Government course where Jacob lectured about choices a country could make in terms of where to spend tax dollars. In the master-narrative of American History wherein the government rules by the consent of the governed, there would be some discussion and perhaps criticism of the American Government’s choices regarding national defense spending in proportion to programs that more directly benefit the American people, such as education, health and infrastructure spending. Instead, Jacob chose to present America’s choices in regard to federal spending as those of an anonymous country, rather than those of America.

A country rather than a person may want to spend more resources on education and health, but it may not be able to because it also has to pay for roads and defense. Now we’ve learned about government already. There’s a big difference in a country not being able to spend certain resources because they have to pay for something else. And a country that prioritizes or thinks something else is more important than spending on a different service or a good or an object, right? So we can make the argument that some countries out there don’t see education and health as important as defense, right? So it’s not that they want to spend more, it’s that they’re prioritizing the other thing. So they’re spending more on that. Right? (Jacob, Lec. 2)

What’s interesting about Jacob’s comment is the choice to frame arguments about the spending of “a country” and “some countries out there” when it’s clear that at least some of his comments are directed toward the American context. He could make this more explicit by saying, “We can make the argument that America doesn’t see education and health as important as defense, right? So it’s not that our country doesn’t want to spend more, it’s that we prioritize defense spending over other programs.” By making it anonymous, he is avoiding a discussion about these priorities. In fact, no discussion occurred. He did not ask questions relating this to the American context, and students did not comment. What could be an important discussion was instead

watered down to an anonymous scenario where “a country” makes rational choices that remain unquestioned.

Example 2: In this example, Whitney discussed More Developed Countries (MDC) and Less Developed Countries (LDC) with her students. She had already explained that LDC became less developed as a result of having their wealth and resources stripped away by MDC, specifically European countries. (Example, she said: “Europe was utilizing resources and these other regions weren’t able to benefit from them because Europe was.”). Her narrative in this lecture drew a clear line between the greed of European countries and the current plight of LDC. During the lecture, the focus turned to healthcare. Here, she broke from the narrative she had been building, wherein the MDC have more advanced social programs than the LDC as a result of the history of European imperial policies. She said,

Okay. All right. Health and welfare in developing countries. So the U.S. is terrible in healthcare costs. Okay. It’s down there with the developing countries, in the U.S. private individuals are responsible for 95% of their healthcare costs. And remember in Europe it was 30, so that’s more than half of your costs are coming out of your pocket. All right? So here you can see the U.S. and it says, well, is this from 2006, but it says on average, people spend \$6,500 on healthcare. And in Japan it’s only \$2,500, all right? So developing countries more than 6%, or no, less than 6% of private individuals are responsible for 50% of their health care. So the U.S. is not looking so good in that aspect. (Whitney, Lec. 1)

At this point, Whitney has acknowledged that many MDCs have better health care systems than America. But then she adds that they “are struggling to maintain their levels of public assistance.” In other words, the US is “not looking good” in health care, but given time, other MDL won’t either. As the use of anonymity does in the first example, this narrative choice softens the explicit critique.

Using Comparisons to Other Countries

Finally, there are several instances where the participants compared America to other countries or declined to do so (as in the above instance of “European” colonization’s impact on LDC) in a way that softens explicit or implicit critiques against America. In one lecture on Western Expansion, Jacob made a clear statement that America committed atrocities against the Native Americans, while immediately pointing out the British did also:

And who are we so bad to, we hated Native Americans? We made the move west, we annihilated their tribes, we do the same thing in Oregon, okay? And the British people were in on that as well. When Madison thought that Britain and the Indians or Native Americans were, had some sort of pact, the British look down on Native Americans just like Americans do. (Jacob, Lec. 1)

In this example, Jacob was discussing relations between Britain and America in the West, so bringing the British into the discussion made sense in context. In the two examples we will highlight in this section, the teachers offered information beyond the scope of their lecture to implicitly or explicitly soften critiques that may arise.

Example 1: In this example, Jeff was lecturing on pro-natal and anti-natal policies. In this part of the lecture, they were discussing the pro-natal policies put in place by the French government post-World War II.

Jeff: Well, cash benefits will be like what we were talking about, like maternity and paternal leave and the allowances and things like that. But the other benefits would be like, um, childcare is provided.

Student: Oh, that's pretty nice.

Jeff: Like I said, most of these countries on here, in order to pay for all this, they have really high taxes because it's, it's basic. It's basically a, well, it's basically welfare system is what they are (Jeff, Lec. 1).

In this example, we see a student appreciating the policies of another country, and we see Jeff reacting by changing the narrative to make it negative. In an American context, the term “welfare” has been considered negative since the 1960s as a result of the coupling in the public imagination of welfare initiatives with support for poor African Americans (Morris, 2015). Reading this section of the lecture, it appears as though Jeff realized that the French policies were being made to sound too positive, so the tone of the conversation changes at this point to highlight the costs of the policy.

Example 2: In this example, Cortland was discussing how laws are made at every level of state government. To make the point that there can be a number of these laws, he tapped on a map at the front of the classroom and said that somewhere in Kansas, it's illegal to walk down the street barefoot. The students were aghast, and in the audio for this lecture, several students shouted out, “What?”, “where?”, and “what happens to you if you do?” Cortland answered:

Cortland: It's a fine. It might be Kansas or something there's a couple cities you can't really walk barefoot. I know in Thailand you can't chew gum because they think you're going to spit gum on the ground and they're gonna have gum stains all over the sidewalks, it's a law, it's a law. I think in Thailand you uh... Usually [in America] for ridiculous things like that you just get slapped with a fine or something. Um, so like a ticket, maybe 50 or 100 bucks depending on how serious the crime is, how serious the state thinks the crime is. I think in Thailand for chewing gum you actually do jail time for that.

Student: In Singapore you get caned for punishment.

Cortland: Singapore, yeah (Cortland, Lec. 1).

Cortland answered the questions about the Kansas law, and then immediately brought up laws in Thailand that were harsher than the law he brought up in an American state. His choice to do so encouraged at least one student to bring up prior knowledge of other countries with “worse” laws and punishments than those in American cities. As in the previous example, the tone of the conversation changed. In the previous example, the teacher seemed to feel like the policies of other countries were coming off too positively for students. In this example, the teacher seemed to feel like the policies of places within America were coming off too negatively for students. In both cases, the critique was softened by the teacher’s narrative choices.

Discussion

The narratives found in the lectures of preservice teachers in this study demonstrate various ways that their historical consciousness was shaped by their environment and experiences. The literature review discussed how we begin learning historical narratives as children (Bruner, 2005; Green, 2019), and how these narratives can be particularly resistant to change (e.g., Letourneau & Moisan, 2004; Ribbens, 2007; Wertchsh, 2004). The underlying template, the “schematic narrative” aspect of national narratives can be particularly resilient, because it is part of the upbringing of children from a very early age (Wertsch, 2004). From the narratives of the preservice teachers’ lectures in this study, what emerges is a historical consciousness that clearly reflects the common American master-narrative “the Quest for Freedom” with plots including rule of law, governing “of the people and by the people,” and explicit framing of “equality and democracy” as the foundation of American government and culture.

A variety of narrative devices were used to reinforce these plot lines and tell the story. In one of the highlighted examples, a participant used the word “duh” twice during her lecture while explaining that “equality and democracy” are a major aspect of American cultural values. This silencing technique, ensuring no debate on this point, was all the more remarkable because other values (including those related to consumerism) were treated differently in the same lecture. The other values may not have been as significant a part of the schematic narrative template of America, and therefore were held with less reverence than the value of democracy and freedom. Another participant, apparently concerned that students were acknowledging the positive aspects of a different country’s pro-natal policies, spit out the phrase “welfare system” like a curse word. This word choice, in an American system, reads inherently negatively, and the way the participant says it (“it’s, it’s basic, it’s basically a, well, it’s basically welfare system is what they are”) like he’s hesitant to even say the word, reinforces this message.

In her work, Clark (2019) referenced arguments over the narrative wording in Australian history, including “invasion” vs. “colonization.” In our study, Whitney chose “colonialism” and “imperialism” as the preferred terms for her lecture on the impact these policies had on Asian and African populations. This section of her lecture totaled 192 words, 10 of which were

“Europe” or a variation thereof. The word “Europe,” in other words, made up almost 20% of the section of the lecture devoted to the impacts of imperialist policies on Asian and African economic development. Given the realities of American imperialistic policies that also hindered the economic development of impacted countries, the abundance of clarification here serves as an accusatory linguistic finger pointing to Europe (and away from America).

Straub (2005) recommends analyzing narratives for the emotions elicited by particular linguistic choices. In this study, it makes more sense to look at the emotions intentionally NOT elicited. Examples include the participant who critiqued American policy while using anonymous terms such as “a country.” This linguistic choice appears designed to mute emotional response. Based on the lack of discussion around the ideas presented, the choice appears to have been successful. Similarly, there are several instances of muting emotion by the use of comparison. A participant acknowledges that Health Care in the US “is not looking so good,” then suggests that this may soon be the case in other Developed Countries as well. Another acknowledges that Americans treated the Native Americans horribly, while in the next sentence accuses the British of being “in on that as well.” Students are encouraged to recognize the financial costs of pro-natal policies that Americans do not have access to rather than question whether such policies would benefit Americans. In a Government class, a participant brings up a law in an American city that elicits a negative reaction, and immediately references laws in other countries that will elicit a more negative reaction. In all of these cases, the narrative choice is to mute potential or elicited negative emotions associated with aspects of American history, government, and culture. By muting emotional responses, the participants were effectively making the story less engaging for students, since emotional responses stimulate learning (e.g., Gabrieli, 2020; Immordino-Yang & Knecht, 2020). This suggests that these choices were not made to benefit student learning or understanding of the content. There are at least two possible reasons for these narrative choices. Preservice teachers could be making narrative choices to tell the story in a manner consistent with their own historical consciousness. It is also possible that being new teachers and unsure of their leeway in veering from the national master narrative, they made narrative choices to reinforce a positive image of America out of a belief that this is what they are expected to do.

Earlier, we explored the reasons why historical narratives should embed multiple perspectives (Virta, 2007) and expand the canon beyond Western thinkers and familiar narratives (King, 2019; Wallace-Casey, 2017). This is important for many reasons. For many students, including women, minorities, and immigrants, the stories told about America leave little room for their families’ positive stories. The content of the lectures varied based on the course taught and where the PSTs were in the standards. However, as we have seen, lectures included stories about American culture, the founding American documents, and Westward expansion, among other narratives rife with multiple perspectives. Within these stories, America did not always emerge as the triumphant hero. For example, the Westward Expansion story included wording clarifying that “we annihilated” Native American tribes (Jacob’s original wording). The founding

documents lectures included disagreements on the way America should look. But the participants stopped short of embedding multiple perspectives from women, minorities, immigrants, and others.

For example, the Westward Expansion story did not include sources or voices from Native Americans, or stories about their resistance. Stories about founding American Documents included dissenting voices around the role of the federal and state governments, and stories about why the Bill of Rights contained specific wording as a reaction to British policies that proceeded the American Revolution. They did not include dissenting voices about slavery, or stories from women or Black Americans denied rights by the founding documents. Not only were these voices not included, these stories were not mentioned as part of the narrative. It could be that the PSTs themselves were often unaware of complicating and dissenting narratives given the development of their own historical consciousness. If so, this is a weakness that can be addressed with further education. It is also possible that they did learn alternative narratives in their history courses and chose not to address them because of their beliefs about history or their beliefs about expectations regarding teaching history in this context. If this is the case, it's a harder fix, requiring actively addressing the role of historical narrative in building historical consciousness.

Implications

The C3 Framework (2013) and related materials for preparing social studies teachers include instructions on selecting compelling questions and including a variety of sources and evidence to explore these questions. The preservice teachers in this study were taught these methods, and in fact many of these 16 lectures included source and evidence work as part of their lesson plans, following the lectures (as seen in the daily slide show presentations they submitted along with their audio files). For example, after Cortland's lecture on the Bill of Rights, students read portions of the Bill of Rights, and discussed how it related to their own lives. After lectures on checks and balances, a couple of the PSTs required students to read portions of the Constitution that related to the roles of the three branches. Others focused on conflicts such as Hamilton's views on federalism compared to Jefferson's views, where quotes from each were compared. The lecture on pro-natal and anti-natal policies related here included secondary sources representing multiple perspectives. While the data used for this project was their lectures, the PSTs did include sources and evidence in their lessons once the lectures were over, and these sources and evidence did contain multiple perspectives.

However, the lectures provide insight into what stories the PSTs told, and whose perspectives were going to be compared and explored within the sources they selected. The inclusion of sources and evidence as part of their teaching suggests that the PSTs did not intentionally exclude voices and perspectives from the stories they told. There is also no evidence that they intentionally used literary devices, word choices, and comparisons to mute potentially negative emotions stirred up by the content. The impact of their upbringing,

schooling, experiences, and beliefs is reflected in the stories they tell about the past, and the PSTs did not appear to be aware of this connection as they taught. However, as a result of this lack of awareness about the stories they reflexively tell, they were not able to intentionally tell different stories, either. Their agency as teachers was curtailed by their lack of understanding about their historical consciousness, and how their historical narratives likely differ from that of many of their students.

A significant amount of time in their social studies methods course was spent on the need to ask questions and use sources and evidence, but it is clear that not enough time was spent on the concept of stories, and narratives, and whose stories get told. One implication of this study is that it would benefit PSTs to explore their own historical consciousness and recognize the influences and perspectives that built their historical narratives. Allowing space for intentional study of their personal and national narratives gives them the agency to intentionally change the way they teach narratives, and whose stories they choose to include. It may also encourage them to be more aware of the word choices and linguistic devices they use in their lectures and lessons.

If we want to train teachers capable of teaching about and with non-traditionally dominant voices, they need to recognize whose voices are dominant in their own understanding of the past. As one suggestion, methods courses could include an assignment where students record their own lectures and analyze the stories that they told in terms of pure narrative terms: what was the plot? Who were the actors? What metaphors were used to make a point? Were there actors affected by the story whose voices weren't being included? Raising awareness of historical consciousness changes the context for new teachers, and as we've seen, historical consciousness is always in flux. These contextual changes have the potential to not only raise awareness among PSTs of the stories they tell, but to alter their historical consciousness enough that their stories become more complex without active thought.

Conclusion

Literature on historical consciousness, particularly historical consciousness as narrative, stresses that there are differences between “popular historical culture” and academic history as taught in a classroom setting. History classes provide a “common” history, thanks to standards and official curriculum materials. This difference can lead to one of two outcomes. The first outcome would be that “official” history classes take advantage of this privileged position to teach the fundamental skills of the historian, and to help students learn to differentiate and intentionally select ideas about the past to appropriate into their historical consciousness. Lee (2007) describes this position this way:

History accepts that we may be obligated to tell different stories from the ones we would prefer to tell (even to the point of questioning our own deep-seated presuppositions). It demands that we respect the past, treating its people as we

would want to be treated, and not plundering it for present ends. Not all pasts recognize these standards. (p. 50-51)

Rüsen's (2004) work on historical consciousness also demonstrates a more critical, skillful weaving of different interpretations of historical events as one uses history education to refine and build more intentional historical consciousness.

However, the other possible outcome is that "official" history classes essentially become another form of popular historical culture, a populist mishmash that makes "no distinctions among myth, legend, heritage, and history" (Seixas, 2019, p. 105). Teaching history well, intermingling multiple related but distinct storylines, voices, and narratives, is challenging. It requires a deep knowledge of the content, and a firm understanding of the narrator's own contextual realities and interpretations in order to recognize where characters and plots are missing from the narrative. Those whose work involves the training of future storytellers of official history, be they historians or history teachers, can help improve the multiperspectivity of the official narrative by introducing the contextual and shifting nature of historical narrative. Training in the ability to weave together multi-voiced narratives may impact the ability of future generations to tell better, fuller, and richer stories of the past.

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