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Historical Perspective Taking: A Standardized Measure for an Aspect of Students' Historical

Thinking

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Abstract

Researchers widely agree that learning history should involve more than learning historical facts

and should include competencies of historical thinking. Various models of historical thinking

view students' competency to take historical perspectives as a standard in history education. In

this study we introduce a standardized measure for historical perspective taking (HPT) consisting

of a short scenario set in the German Weimar Republic. We assessed students' HPT by using

rating scales; our data was obtained in grammar schools from 170 German 10th graders. Latent

class analyses identified three types of students with similar profiles of HPT. One was present-

oriented and two showed more or less contextualized historical thinking. Students' history grades

were connected to their HPT competency. We discuss limitations of the study and argue for

further research on measures assessing students' historical thinking.

There is ample consensus today that students studying history should do more than simply increase their factual knowledge about historical events, people and processes (e.g. Dickinson, Gordon & Lee, 2001). Working with historical documents, evaluating contradictory evidence or taking historical perspectives contribute to students' historical thinking, empowering them to encounter various historical accounts in school, in everyday life and in the media.

However, making historical thinking a standard in education is no simple matter, as Dickinson et al. (2001) have pointed out. Conceptually, research, policy and teachers have to agree on relevant competencies of historical thinking. In this study, we focus on a competency we call historical perspective taking (HPT). It means knowing that certain historical agents or groups had particular perspectives on their world, and being able to see how that perspective would actually have affected actions in different situations (Lee & Ashby, 2001). Students who achieve this will not only benefit in terms of historical understanding but will also be better able to cope with the present world (Ashby & Lee, 1987). For these reasons HPT has become a standard in various models of historical thinking. In the United States, the National Standards for History in the Schools (NCHS, 1996) mention "appreciating historical perspectives" as one part of historical comprehension. In the UK, this competency can be found in History Standard 2 of the National Curriculum – "knowledge and understanding of events, people and changes in the past". In Germany, which is the context of the present study, taking historical perspectives is part of a taxonomy proposed by the Association of History Teachers (Sauer, 2006).

Setting up a standard like HPT requires measures to test whether large numbers of students meet it. Measures for students' historical competencies have to be different from merely fact-checking, multiple-choice items; they require theoretical elaboration combined with a sensible methodological approach. To date, reliable standardized tests are lacking. The aim of the present study is to introduce a measure for students' HPT competency.

1. Theoretical Background

Yeager and Foster (2001) conceptualize HPT as a complex process. They include an understanding of historical context and chronology, the analysis of historical evidence and interpretations, and the construction of a narrative framework in their definition of this competency. Portal (1987) conceptualizes historical empathy as a heuristic process which can stimulate other forms of historical thinking. He emphasizes the imaginative component of this concept. To Lee and Ashby (2001), who regard HPT or historical empathy as a predominantly cognitive task, it consists of knowing that certain historical agents or groups had particular perspectives on their world and of being able to see how that perspective would actually have affected actions in different situations. In our study, we apply their understanding of HPT.

A central theme in discussions on HPT has been the problem of presentism. Judging historical agents from only a present-oriented perspective is widely regarded as non-historical and thus as reflecting a low level of competency (Ashby & Lee, 1987; Barton, 1996). HPT is about escaping one's own views and opinions in order to understand past actions and events; however, some scholars have questioned this demand as being idealistic (VanSledright, 2001; Wineburg, 1999). Psychological phenomena like epistemic egocentrism (Royzman, Wright Cassidy & Baron, 2003), the failure to set aside one's own privileged knowledge when thinking about others, imply that thinking in a present-oriented way could correspond to a general pattern of human behavior. Still, the goal remains for students to acquire contextual historical empathy as outlined in Ashby and Lee's (1987) taxonomy. Seixas (1996) argues that despite the fact that we can never be

perfectly non-presentist, negotiating the tension between past and present is essential for sophisticated historical thinking.

Another component that is less clear in the research is the role of the historical agent. Nonetheless, it could function as an intermediate stage between presentism and contextualization. Students confronted with historical situations tend to assign roles to historical agents, often in a stereotypical way (e.g. Ashby & Lee, 1987; Bermúdez & Jaramillo, 2001; Lee & Ashby, 2001). In doing so, they are able to refer to roles or institutions they know from their own lives (e.g. the role of a father or that of a businessman); these they then use to explain thoughts and actions of people in the past. Such attempts do not entirely meet the demands of historically contextualized thinking, but could mark a step forward in decentring from one's own completely presentist view. Even though this phenomenon has been observed in the research, its exact role with respect to students' competencies remains unclear.

In our study we include present-oriented perspective taking (POP), the ability to show contextualized thinking (CONT), as well as the notion of thinking about the role of the historical agent (ROA) to measure students' HPT competency.

In search of a measure of students' HPT with respect to the aforementioned components, we have noticed a gap in research on historical thinking. Standardized instruments hardly exist. Most evidence relies on qualitative studies using interview techniques or group discussions to target HPT competency (e. g. Ashby & Lee, 1987; Shemilt, 1987; Voss & Wiley, 1997; Wineburg, 1991). While these methods are well-suited for gathering in-depth information about students' thought processes, they are less adequate for gaining a representative picture of larger student samples required for standard-based assessments. Two measures using questionnaires are worthy of mention: Gehlbach's (2004a) draws on Ashby and Lee's (1987) stages of historical empathy. It contains statements (reflecting different stages) on why the Greeks divided themselves into social

classes although they believed in a democratic government. Von Borries measured historical empathy as part of the Youth and History Study (Angvik & Von Borries, 1997). Students were asked to imagine themselves in the position of a teenager in the 15th century who was forced to marry someone he or she neither knew nor loved. The data displayed the constructs "obedience" and "resistance", but no actual historical empathy as the author concludes.

Our strategy in constructing a standardized measure for HPT was to draw on approaches from a related theoretical concept, namely that of social perspective taking (SPT). According to Johnson (1975), SPT is the ability to understand how a situation appears to another person and how that person will react cognitively and emotionally to the situation. In many respects SPT and HPT show similarities. Bermúdez and Jaramillo (2001) emphasize that in both cases students have to shift from a self-centred point of view to the other person's perspective and then co-ordinate both to build a mental representation of society. Gehlbach (2004b) considers SPT a situated construct whereby time is a constituent component. He argues that temporality (taking past, present or future perspectives) should influence students' outcome regarding this competency; however, empirical evidence on this aspect is still lacking. Selman (1980) proposed a developmental sequence of social perspective coordination starting with an undifferentiated and egocentric perspective (level 0) transforming into an in-depth and societal-symbolic perspective taking, in which personalities are conceptualized as systems with their own developmental histories (level 4). To connect this to historical thinking, taking the perspective of someone living in a different time inherently requires coordinating between past and present. In Selman's level 4 a societal dimension of perspective taking is addressed. Applied to historical contexts, perspective coordination should depend on the specific time period during which social interactions take place.

Despite the similarities between HPT and SPT, major differences do exist. HPT requires that one adopt the view of another person who acts in an entirely different situation, time and/ or culture. This makes HPT an even more challenging endeavor. Secondly, the types of coordination in SPT and HPT cannot be easily compared. While coordination in SPT happens within an interpersonal situation with the intent of improving communication and solving interpersonal conflict (Selman, 1980; 2003), the purpose of HPT is to provide a more plausible explanation of a historical situation. The perspective taker and the target person never meet; one is the subject, the other the object of historical investigation.

Still, the two concepts seem to share sufficient commonality to use ideas of SPT in constructing a standardized measure for HPT. Various measures have been developed to assess students' SPT. One strand consists of video measures to assess accuracy of perspective taking (e.g. Gehlbach, 2004a; Ickes, 1997; Ickes et al., 1990). Applying them to a history classroom seems difficult in many respects since participants have to be assessed individually and historical situations have to be re-enacted to meet the demands of the subject. A second strand relies on self-reports, as does the subscale "Perspective Taking" (Davis, 1983). This scale is easy to implement but does not actually target competency in taking perspectives; it simply reveals an intention to do so. A third strand comes from developmental research. To assess social perspective coordination, Selman (1980) conducted interviews with children using hypothetical interpersonal scenarios. This methodology has been modified according to theory (e.g. Yeates & Selman, 1989), and has been transferred into written form (e.g. Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2003; Mischo, 2005), also with rating-scale items (Hickey Schultz & Selman, 2004). With regard to historical situations, it allows for the incorporation of rich contextual descriptions and is easily implemented in classroom settings.

2. Research questions

The aim of our study was to measure HPT with a new instrument that could be applied to large samples of students to assess whether they meet standards of historical thinking. Our intention was to measure three aspects of HPT: present-oriented perspective taking (POP), the role of the historical agent (ROA) and students' ability for historical contextualization (CONT). Our first goal was to examine the structure of our HPT measure. Second, we were interested in whether students could be reliably discerned according to their ability to take historical perspectives. A third issue was the criterion-related validity of the instrument. If students' specific HPT competency as measured by our instrument offers meaning for history education, it should relate to their history grade as an indicator of their performance in classroom.

3. Method

In search of a theory-based, context-related, and standardized measurement with high curricular validity, we decided to work with a hypothetical historical scenario and an item-rating format. We applied Selman's (1980) methodology, and modified it to assess a core competency of historical thinking. By this means, we could use a historical context that is integral part of the history curriculum. We refrained from using a primary or secondary source as a task for assessing HPT, since this would also require measuring indirectly students' competency to handle historical

documents or other parts of historical inquiry. To ensure that our scenario reflected a historically plausible situation, it was reviewed by expert historians. We selected a scenario set in the Weimar Republic and investigated students attending 10th grade where this topic is extensively covered.

3.1 Participants

186 students from ten 10th grades at three urban grammar schools (the top track in the German school system) participated in the study. 16 students were excluded because of missing data. This leaves 170 cases (71 male, 99 female) with a mean age of 16 years. 37% had immigrant status.

3.2 Measurement

3.2.1 Historical Perspective Taking

The scenario we developed presents a young man (Hannes) in the Weimar Republic in Germany, thinking about which party to vote for in the 1930 election (appendix). He talks to a friend about the situation in Germany during that time. In a country that struggles with the legacy of World War 1 and a deep economic crisis, he prefers a leader who will bring back prosperity.

Students were requested to take Hannes' perspective and decide whether he was likely to vote for an anti-democratic party like the NSDAP. Nine items were formulated which were based on the aforementioned aspects of historical perspective taking. Three items display present-oriented perspective taking (POP). Item POP2, for example, introduces a contemporary perspective, which is projected onto the historical agent in the scenario. Hannes is supposed to see that only in a democracy can people participate in decision-making. The second group of items contains statements which address a specific role of the historical agent in the scenario (ROA). In ROA3 Hannes is seen as the son of a desperate businessman whose company is in jeopardy, thus influencing his decision. Three items demonstrate historical contextualization (CONT). CONT1 points out that Hannes has had little democratic experience as this form of government had not yet prevailed; therefore, he is likely to vote for Hitler's party.

Items were shown in random order; students answered them on a four-point rating scale from 0 (doesn't fit his/her situation at all) to 3 (fits his/her situation very well). To assess face validity, four coders sorted the items into the three groups (POP, ROA, CONT). Inter-coder analyses revealed good consistency ($\kappa = .83$).

3.2.2 History grade

Students were asked for the history grade from their last report card. Each grade was coded from 0 (unsatisfactory) to 15 (excellent) based on the German grade system.

3.3 Procedure

The study took place as a group assessment in classrooms. Written and oral instructions were given to students before they worked on the scenario. All students succeeded in completing the task within 15 minutes.

4. Results

4.1 Dimensionality of the HPT measure

We applied a principal component analysis to examine the structure of our measure. Two factors were extracted which met the criteria of an eigenvalue > 1 and Cattell´s Scree Plot. They accounted for 51% of the variance (factor 1: 35%; factor 2: 16%). Results are presented in table 1. The factor loadings after varimax rotation reveal that POP and CONT items constitute one factor representing the two poles of presentism and contextualization. Two ROA items (ROA2 and ROA3) constitute the second factor. One item in this category (ROA1) violates simple structure with loadings above .40 on both factors; it was consequently excluded from further analysis.

4.2 Student classes of HPT competency

To differentiate among students in this two-dimensional concept of historical perspective taking, we chose Latent Class Analysis (LCA) (Lazarsfeld & Henry, 1968). The existing data were found to fit a rating scale model with class specific parameters. For selecting models in this study, the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC), which accounts for sample size, was used. Additionally, we report results of the Consistent Akaike Information Criterion (CAIC). The model with the smallest BIC and CAIC values is chosen as the one which best represents the data.

One apparent problem in LCA – unless a sample size is enormous – is that the number of possible response patterns exceeds the number of participants. Thus, the chi-square p-value approximation for the goodness-of-fit statistics is not appropriate as a model selection criterion. One solution is to use a parametric bootstrap to calculate fit statistics (von Davier, 1997). We used Pearson and Cressie Read statistics to estimate model fit.

To gain information about the nature of each latent class, the average class-specific item scores were plotted against each item across the classes. This enabled us to examine response profiles and detect qualitative and quantitative differences in response patterns between subpopulations. We conducted LCA with the WINMIRA 2001 program (von Davier, 2001).

A model with three latent classes best fits to the data (table 2), since both BIC and CAIC are smallest and the parametric bootstrap reveals values above .05 for Cressie Read and Pearson statistics.

Item score profiles for the three latent classes are plotted in figure 1. The largest class, containing 66% of the students, is characterized by moderately low scores in POP items and moderately high scores in CONT items. Class 2 yields a clearer pattern. POP items are strongly rejected whereas CONT items are strongly supported. Compared to the first class, the ROA items are answered a little more depreciatively. Class 3 shows a reverse response pattern with regard to POP and CONT items. POP items are moderately supported within this group but CONT items are moderately rejected. ROA items are answered in a moderate way with a relatively high score in ROA2 compared to classes 1 and 2. This class is also the smallest in size containing 10% of the students. With respect to response patterns class 2 seems to perform high on HPT while classes 1 and 3 contain middle and low performing students.

As a measure for the reliability of this model, the expected class membership probabilities for the latent classes appear in table 3. High values in the diagonal indicate that students can be reliably assigned to the three classes of this model.

4.3 Relation of students' historical perspective taking to history grade

After selecting LCMs for students' historical perspective taking competency, HPT class membership – calculated for each student by LCA – was related to students' history grades. Core assumptions for conducting parametric tests were violated (e.g., classes of similar sizes and variances), so we used a Kruskal-Wallis test. The history grade was connected to the class assigned by the HPT measure ($\underline{H}(2) = 19.61$, $\underline{p} < .001$). We used Mann-Whitney tests to follow up this finding. Applying a Bonferroni correction, we established a 0.0167 level of significance.

The history grade for members of class 1 was lower than for those of class 2 ($\underline{U}$ = 1457.5, $\underline{r}$ = -.29); it was higher for class 2 than for class 3 members ($\underline{U}$ = 104.5, $\underline{r}$ = -.51). Students who showed the highest agreement to the CONT items and the highest rejection to the POP items earned better history grades than did both other groups. It made no difference for history grade whether a student belonged to the middle (class 1) or the lowest (class 3) HPT class ($\underline{U}$ = 589, $\underline{r}$ = -.17).

5. Discussion

In this study we have introduced a standardized curriculum-related measure to assess students' competency in HPT. Incorporating research on historical thinking, we have identified three aspects of HPT, forming two dimensions of the measure. The first consists of the two poles presentism and contextualization; the second includes items about the role of the agent. Three student classes of HPT competency could be reliably distinguished. One class, which contains 10% of the sample, answers present-oriented items moderately positive but rejects items with historical contextualization. We assume that this pattern reflects low performance in HPT. The second class (66%) shows a reverse pattern with moderately negative ratings on the POP items but moderately positive ratings on CONT items. The third class (25%) strongly rejects POP items but strongly agrees to CONT items. Supporting our impression that this reflects a high HPT competency relevant for history learning in schools, these students get better history grades than do the other two classes. We regard this finding as a first indication of the instrument's criterion-validity. However, we did not find a difference in history grades between low and middle HPT

class, even though their response patterns look almost opposite to each other. Furthermore, the percentage of variance explained by the two factors is only 51%. We can only speculate whether the remaining 49% are relevant HPT factors. It seems plausible to attribute them to historical content knowledge, or to attitudes which might contribute to students' performance as well.

We were also unable to clarify the implications of the ROA items. Students with better history grades answer them more dismissively than do the other classes but differences between classes are very small. Possibly, competent students are more cautious in agreeing to simpler categorizations of historical agents, concordant with Bermúdez and Jaramillo (2001). Further refinement of these items may be necessary, especially since only two of our items clearly loaded on the ROA factor.

Our study is limited by its selective sample, since we only investigated students from the highest track in the German school system. This could explain the small number of students falling into the low-performing class. In studying 10th graders we limited ourselves by looking only at one historical context from the relatively recent past. To provide a curriculum-related measure, this seemed to be appropriate for our sample; nevertheless, important questions remain open about how students take historical perspectives when more distant times or foreign cultures are considered.

As a general limitation of performance measures, the underlying reasoning processes which lead students to respond to the items in a certain way remain unclear. Studies using additional interview techniques could identify features of students' thinking when taking historical perspectives. Moreover, expert ratings of history teachers could help clarify how competent students are expected to respond to the measure. Another point of interest is the teacher's part itself. Researchers could investigate which instructional arrangements support historical contextualization in students' HPT.

In conclusion, our study shows that measuring a specific historical competency such as HPT with a standardized instrument has attained initial positive results regarding reliability and validity. As students' HPT relates to their success in history classes, we suggest that further refinement of measuring this and other competencies of historical thinking through research has important implications for educational policy and those who implement it.

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Appendix

Election scenario

Historical Perspective Taking

Düsseldorf, Germany in 1930. Hannes (20 years old) is the son of a man who owns a small business manufacturing tailor-made shoes. One day Hannes meets with his friend Gerd. They talk about the situation in Germany and the upcoming elections.

Hannes says: "My father's company is teetering on the brink of collapse. Since the war ended, everything is getting worse and worse. After the depression in 1923, we began to feel some hope again. But now it is worse than ever before. I don't know how this is going to end. Right now, I still have a job in my father's business. But when he closes down, I have no idea where to get a job. We have always been reputable people – and look at us now!"

Gerd responds: "You are right. What has happened to our country? Look at what is going on today. Nobody has a job and the mobs in the streets are letting loose on each other."

Hannes replies: "My father always says that we were better off during the time of the empire. What can we do when our country suffers from a crisis and the winners of the war are hurting us wherever they can? Our politicians with their policy of appeasement really don't do us any good. It is high time for Germany to be ruled by someone who knows what to do and who really takes the lead. During the last election, I supported the DNVP (conservative nationalistic party in Germany during that time), but I don't know if they've got the right people to save our country."

Below you will find some statements. Read through all the statements first. Then, try to take Hannes' perspective and mark for every statement how well it fits his situation.

Could Hannes vote for an anti-democratic party like the NSDAP?

		Doesn't fit his situation at all	Doesn't fit his situation too much	Fits his situation somewhat	Fits his situation very well
POP1	He certainly won't vote for the NSDAP. What they have done to Germany and the world, one cannot approve.	↑	↑	↑	↑
POP2	He will realize that only in a democracy can people take part in decision-making. That is why he will decide reasonably, and that does not mean NSDAP.	↑	↑	↑	↑
POP3	He will not vote for the NSDAP. Their slogans are easy to see through. It is evident that this will lead to war.	↑	↑	↑	↑
ROA1	As a member of the bourgeoisie he would probably like to go back to the empire when his family was better off. He could vote for an antidemocratic party.	↑	↑	↑	↑
ROA2	As a son of a businessman he will likely vote for a conservative party, but not necessarily for the NSDAP.	↑	↑	↑	↑
ROA3	Because his father's company is about to collapse, he could vote for a party that represents the rights of the smaller businessmen.	↑	↑	↑	↑
CONT1	Hannes lacks experience with democracy. He probably doesn't know about the risk connected with the NSDAP, and thus is likely to vote for them.	↑	↑	↑	↑
CONT2	To him, Hitler probably represents a strong leader. He probably won't think too much about the threats connected with the NSDAP.	↑	↑	↑	↑
CONT3	In his situation he only sees the disadvantages of democracy. That is why he is likely to fall for the slogans of the NSDAP.	↑	↑	↑	↑

Notes:

Historical Perspective Taking

Items are placed in order of the category of historical perspective taking. In the original instrument, items were placed in random order. Items 1 to 3 contain present-oriented perspective taking (POP); items 4 to 6 contain the role of the historical agent (ROA); items 7 to 9 contain historical contextualization (CONT).

Table 1

Results of the principal component analysis

Item	Factor loadings (rotated)	
	1	2
POP1	-.777	.080
POP2	-.707	.265
POP3	-.675	.308
ROA1	.630	.433
ROA2	-.142	.755
ROA3	-.039	.627
CONT1	.527	-.003
CONT2	.592	-.257
CONT3	.754	.113

Note. POP – present-oriented perspective-taking; ROA – role of the historical agent; CONT – historical contextualization

Table 2

Results of the latent class analysis

	BIC	CAIC	Empirical p value using parametric bootstrap method	
			Cressie Read	Pearson χ^2
LCM with 1 class	2984.49	2994.49	0.000	0.000
LCM with 2 classes	2832.21	2853.21	0.040	0.100
LCM with 3 classes	2809.39	2841.39	0.075	0.170
LCM with 4 classes	2833.64	2876.64	0.020	0.020

Table 3

Expected class membership probabilities

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3
Class 1	0.938	0.046	0.015
Class 2	0.127	0.872	0.000
Class 3	0.004	0.000	0.996

Figure caption

Figure 1. Item score profiles of the HPT measure