

Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools

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MANY RESEARCH STUDIES have shown how students engage with historical documents, make sense of the past, and develop historical understanding to construct their own historical knowledge. Some of these studies have dealt specifically with empathy. I define empathy or historical imagination as the ability to see and judge the past in its own terms by trying to understand the mentality, frames of reference, beliefs, values, intentions, and actions of historical agents using a variety of historical evidence. Empathy is the skill to re-enact the thought of a historical agent in one's mind or the ability to view the world as it was seen by the people in the past without imposing today's values on the past. This article aims to synthesize the scholarly literature about empathy, drawing on the works of both past and recent scholarship in history education. It will show how educational researchers and disciplinary historians have viewed, discussed, and studied the notion of historical empathy at both the theoretical and the empirical levels. It will first pinpoint the conceptual issues surrounding the term and then move on to explain the efforts to translate the term from theory into practice.

Debates about the Meaning of the Term

The discussion must begin by examining efforts to define the notion of

historical empathy with its different dimensions. Depending on where the term is used, it takes on quite different meanings. Because empathy is assumed to purport the affective domain of human skills in people's everyday use, "too commonly, people misunderstand historical empathy as sympathy or kind of appreciative sentiment. This understanding of empathy means developing a positive attitude or feeling toward an individual, event, or situation."¹ Within the scholarly community, the term is assigned diverse meanings by different disciplines. For instance, in the field of psychology empathy is defined in seventeen separate ways.² Whether any of the meanings that psychologists assign to empathy can be applicable to the study of history is discussed by education researchers. It is argued that all of psychologists' assigned meanings of the term empathy are of limited use in history in that there is a conceptual difference between historians' and psychologists' intended use of the term. While historians are concerned with understanding the past or the distance between the past and present, psychologists are concerned with the present world, and thus are able to establish a reciprocal context for a contemporary relationship.³

For historians, empathy refers to a combination of intellectual and imaginative capacity.⁴ The term sometimes is used as a synonym for "perspective taking."⁵ Making a connection between historical empathy and historical understanding, Lee and Ashby define the term as "the ability to see and entertain as conditionally appropriate, connections between intentions, circumstances, and actions, and to see how any particular perspective would actually have affected actions in particular circumstances."⁶ According to Barton, historical empathy is the skill to recognize how people in the past viewed their circumstances, evaluated their opinions, made decisions, and how their perceptions were shaped by their values, beliefs, and attitudes.⁷ Likewise, Downey, who prefers the term "perspective taking" to the term historical empathy, defines the term as the ability to understand historical characters' frames of reference on the basis of historical facts and events without trying to identify or sympathize with their feelings.⁸

Viewing empathy as a second-order, structural, and metahistorical concept, Lee states that "empathy tends to be used to mean the explanation either of action itself, or of the ideas, beliefs and values that lie behind actions and social institutions."⁹ VanSledright explains historical empathy in terms of what it is not: "Empathy does not take the form of a simple and temporary propensity 'to feel like' or 'walk in the shoes of' those who lived before us 'as though they were us.' Rather historical empathy demands considerable thoughtful effort."¹⁰ In the National Standards for history, empathy is defined as "the ability to describe the past through the eyes and experiences of those who were there, as revealed through their literature, art, artifacts, and the like, and to avoid 'present-mindedness,'

judging the past solely in terms of the norms and values of today.”¹¹

The Nature and Characteristic Features of Historical Empathy

Education researchers have usually explained the nature of historical empathy within the context of historical inquiry and historical understanding. They have referred to and made use of disciplinary history perspective in elucidating the characteristic features of historical empathy. That is, their frames of reference with respect to historical empathy are generally based on disciplinary history. For instance, Foster has claimed that historical empathy lies at the core of historical inquiry.¹² Similarly, Davis has argued, “Empathy constitutes one of the essential elements of historical thinking and rigorous historical inquiry that result in deepened understanding within context. For the most part, it is intellectual in nature, but certainly it may include emotional dimensions.”¹³ Asserting that historical empathy should not be based simply on exercises in imagination, overidentification, or sympathy, Foster and Yeager state, “The development of historical empathy in students is a considered and active process, embedded in the historical method.”¹⁴ Taking into account the nature, processes, and purposes of disciplinary history and historical inquiry within the context of secondary school classrooms, Foster has identified six characteristics or components of historical empathy in terms of what empathy involves or does not involve. His points are as follows. Historical empathy:

- does not involve imagination, identification, or sympathy,
- involves understanding people’s actions in the past,
- involves a through appreciation of historical context,
- demands multiple forms of evidence and perspective,
- requires students to examine their own perspectives,
- encourages well-grounded but tentative conclusions.¹⁵

What Does It Take to Engage in Historical Empathy?

Engaging in historical empathy is both demanding and challenging for students even at the knowledge level, the lowest rank of educational objectives. First of all, students must know more rather than fewer historical facts, concepts, and interpretations to practice empathy.¹⁶ Likewise, in order to successfully employ and develop historical empathy, students must:

- access authentic historical sources, engaging in critical examination of those sources and understanding the nature of historical conclusions,¹⁷
- have a balance of imaginative speculation and methodical investigation,¹⁸
- relive the thoughts of past individuals through the heuristic of

contextualization,¹⁹

- “examine, appreciate, and understand the perspectives of people in the past and to render them intelligible to contemporary minds,”²⁰
- make reasoned evidential reconstruction in addition to taking a position to reconstruct a set of beliefs, values, goals, and attendant feelings that historical agents had,²¹
- engage in sustained effort and thoughtful strategy to suspend their present world views when examining the past in order to avoid a presentist understanding of the past, i.e., understanding the past events on their own terms without judging them through our contemporary criteria.²²

Theory Into Practice: Practical Suggestions for Exercising Empathy

In addition to approaching the notion of historical empathy from a theoretical perspective, scholars also have dealt with the term at the empirical level. They have provided suggestions about how the history teacher can benefit from historical empathy by employing it as a teaching tool in the classroom. According to Portal, it takes five steps for students to be able to engage in empathy and develop their perspective taking skills. To practice historical empathy, students should be able to:

- 1) project their own thoughts and feelings into a particular historical situation,
- 2) distinguish the historical period under study from their own,
- 3) employ a variety of reference materials and contemporary sources related to the topic they are studying,
- 4) present a particular person or situation in a way that extends beyond the merely typical to encompass the unique circumstances of the case,
- 5) make use of the two-sided narrative to illustrate the role of inadequately empathic relationship between the historical participants in giving rise to misunderstanding, conflict, or tragedy.²³

Concerned with how to translate the constructs of historical empathy into meaningful classroom practices, Foster also has offered valuable suggestions for teachers of history. He recommended that teachers:

- focus on a puzzling and paradoxical situation in the past while practicing empathy exercises in order to initiate curiosity among students and to help them distinguish the remote past period from the recent past,
- provide students with some knowledge of historical context and chronology before delving deeply into the selected topic of study,
- introduce a wide range of primary and secondary sources to students, depending on the cognitive and developmental levels of students,

- encourage students to ask critical questions of sources to help avoid the risk of taking any sources at face value,
- scaffold and build up students' learning to help them develop dispositions to ask more complex and thought-provoking questions,
- urge students to ask questions of themselves when examining historical documents,
- encourage students to identify sources and give reasons why the sources they selected are most useful in shedding light on past events,
- help students be wary of the tentativeness of their final conclusions and interpretations with which others might disagree,
- recognize that engaging students in meaningful empathy inquiry takes substantial classroom time, energy, effort, and resources,
- and understand that the selection of proper materials, asking probing questions, stimulating thoughtful investigation, leading the class discussion, and maintaining the momentum of inquiry are central to the successful implementation of historical empathy exercises in classrooms.²⁴

Likewise, history teachers are suggested to evaluate students' engagement with historical empathy through the following four criteria. Students must: 1) indicate that the past is different from the present and a historical outcome is specific to time and place, 2) explain the perspectives they take and their consequences for the historical participants involved, 3) develop factually accurate perspectives on the basis of historical evidence, and finally, 4) judge whether the student is demonstrating the ability to distinguish between past perspectives and shift skillfully from one perspective to another.²⁵

Conclusion

By discussing the divergent and convergent perspectives on the term empathy, I have tried to document the scholarly efforts to define, conceptualize, and clarify the meaning, nature, and characteristic features of the notion of historical empathy. A review of literature clearly shows that scholars have not yet come to terms with each other about the definition of the term. Empathy still stands as a problematic and ambiguous term, so any given definition of empathy is subject to dispute.²⁶ As Davis confessed, even those researchers who, like him, have attempted to consider empathy in history education do not know enough about it and are doing further research.²⁷ These efforts should be appreciated because they have been contributing to the literature in history teaching and learning by expanding our understanding of how and to what extent students can engage in

historical thinking and reasoning. In light of this review of literature, it is safe to say that the first and most important task before social studies educators is not just to keep refining the precise definition of the term but also trying to come to terms with the conceptual implications of the term. Clearer delineation of the components of historical empathy is needed. If a cumulative knowledge base about historical empathy is to be built, an agreed-upon definition of the term must emerge from diverse studies. To facilitate that process, educational researchers can examine historiography in order to see how different schools of historical thought define and explain the term. Since educational researchers' neglect of historiography is one of the reasons for the shortcomings of the research on history education, I would suggest that new studies be conducted not only on historical empathy but also on the teaching and learning of history by drawing sufficiently on the implications of historiography for the study of school history.

Notes

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2. Stuart J. Foster, "Historical Empathy in Theory and Practice: Some Final Thoughts," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, ed. O. L. Davis, Elizabeth A. Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 167.
3. Foster, "Historical Empathy;" Denis Shelmit, "Adolescent Ideas About Evidence and Methodology in History," in *The History of Curriculum for Teachers*, ed. Christopher Portal (London: Palmer Press, 1987)," and Peter Knight, "Empathy: Concept, Confusion, and Consequences in a National Curriculum," *Oxford Review of Education* 15 (1989): 44.
4. Foster, "Historical Empathy;" and Rosalyn Ashby and Peter Lee, "Children's Concepts of Empathy and Understanding in History," in *The History Curriculum for Teachers*, ed. Christopher Portal (London: Palmer Press, 1987), 62-88.
5. Keith C. Barton, "Did the Evil Just Run Out of Justice? Historical Perspective Taking Among Elementary Students," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York, 1996.
6. Peter J. Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, "Empathy, Perspective Taking, and Rational Understanding," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, ed. O. L. Davis, Elizabeth A. Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 25.
7. Barton, 4.
8. Matthew T. Downey, "Perspective Taking and *Historical* Thinking: Doing History in a Fifth-Grade Classroom," paper presented at the annual meeting

of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, 1995.

9. Peter Lee, "Walking Backwards into Tomorrow: Historical Consciousness and Understanding History," paper presented at annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, 2002.

10. Bruce A. VanSledright, "From Emphatic Regard to Self Understanding: Impositionality, Empathy, and Historical Contextualization," in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*, ed. O. L. Davis, Elizabeth A. Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 55.

11. National Center for History in the Schools, *The National Standards for History*, <<http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/nchs/standards>> (accessed 10 April 2004).

12. Foster, 175.

13. Davis, 3.

14. Elizabeth A. Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, "The Roles of Empathy in the Development of Historical Understanding," *International Journal of Social Education* 13 (1998): 1-7.

15. Foster, 169-175.

16. Davis, 6.

17. K. L. Riley, "Historical Empathy and the Holocaust: Theory into Practice," *International Journal of Social Education* 13 (1998): 32-42.

18. Christopher Portal, "Empathy as an Objective for History Teaching," in *The History of Curriculum for Teachers*, ed. Christopher Portal (London: Palmer Press, 1987), 83-133.

19. Mimi H. Lee, "Promoting Historical Inquiry Using Secondary Sources: Exploring the Promise and Possibilities in New Genres of Historical Writing," paper presented at the annual meeting of American Educational Research Association, San Diego, 2004.

20. Foster, 175.

21. Ashby and Lee, 63.

22. Lee and Ashby, 21-50; Yeager, and Foster, 1-7.

23. Portal, 83-133.

24. Foster, 175-178.

25. Downey.

26. Foster, 169.

27. Davis, 10.

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