Boundaries of historical consciousness: a Western cultural achievement or an anthropological universal?

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Boundaries of historical consciousness: a Western cultural achievement or an anthropological universal?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores an underlying tension between two understandings of historical consciousness. On one hand, the concept is often perceived as a specific ability to historicize the world and thus appears as a modern cultural achievement. On the other hand, it is also conceptualized as an anthropological universal as the ability to make sense out of time seems to be a basic feature in all human societies. The basic aim here is to analyse both positions as theoretical constructs with implications for educational research and curriculum making. In order to frame how these ontological positions on historical consciousness have consequences at an operational level, the Goertz framework for complex concepts is used. This framework is applied to two previous studies that explored students’ historical consciousness. The methodical assumption is that both the studies serve as exemplary indicators for the two different positions. My analysis of the studies shows how their conceptualization of historical consciousness restricts how they define their research interests. In the concluding part of this article, the analysis is used as a stepping stone to a broad and normative discussion on how historical consciousness could influence history education.

KEYWORDS

Historical consciousness; historical culture; history education; use of history

Introduction

This article explores an underlying tension in how historical consciousness has been conceptualized in historiography and in educational research, which is the focal point here. The exploration is guided by two questions, where the first is a straightforward, analytical question about the rationales behind defining historical consciousness either as narrowed down to a specific ability grounded in a rational and modern culture, or in a broad anthropological sense, being a trans-historical mode of how humans relate to time and the world. The second question is more normatively founded, as it seeks a conceptualization that corresponds to educational demands in the contemporary history culture.

The period that followed the late eighteenth century and its intense industrialization, European colonial system and institutionalization of modern science profoundly transformed life conditions worldwide. Scholars such as Hegel, Gadamer, Koselleck and Arendt conceptualized new ways of thinking about time and change based in the notion of process, as a modern ‘historical consciousness’. For example, Arendt (1961/1993) has described this new secular way of understanding history as something that separates the modern age from earlier understandings of the past on a deeper level than any other individual idea.

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Another approach in the discussion about historical consciousness can be traced from an anthropological interest in how humans give order and meaning to experiences of temporal estrangement. Scholars such as Levi-Strauss, Assmann and Rüsen have, from different perspectives, explored or conceptualized how communities and individuals in different times and places perceive categories such as past, present and future. Stewart (2017) formulates his anthropological position like this:

In order to capture indigenous histories and historical consciousness I have found it necessary to define ‘histories’ very generally as ‘representations of the past’ or even ‘communications of the past’, since in dreams and other altered states of consciousness the past may at first be sensed non-objectively. The essential criterion for a ‘history’ is communication about the past. It need not necessarily be ‘true’ in the sense of ‘verifiable by Western canons of evidence’. (p. 3)

We thus have two different positions, one that defines a specific ability that has emerged through the specific historical process of Western modernity, and another, which from more general observations, seeks to understand how people, at different times and in different cultures, create meaning through experiences of continuity and change.

This tension between a cultural achievement and an anthropologist position, I suggest, formulates a sort of intellectual stumbling block that needs to be considered in the discourse of contemporary research in order to achieve a more transparent and consistent use of the concept. In relation to history education, the absence of an articulated reflection on this tension is a key problem, as the implicit logics are reproduced, creating misunderstandings and ambiguities both in the formulations of problem areas and in normative proposals for solutions.

These different positions will be further unpacked, but a working characterization is that, from the cultural achievement perspective, historical consciousness is a specific ability and presumes a culture with a developed idea of modern history and historicity (Kölbl & Straub, 2001; Körber, 2016). Modern and modernity are terms used to delineate an accelerated revolution of production, science and trade that began in the mid-18th century, as well as a new awareness that the historical process is continually developing (cf. Koselleck, 2004). The anthropological perspective takes another position and regards historical consciousness as a general or universal human capacity. According to Rüsen, basic mental operations constituting historical consciousness are universal, as all cultures have some elements of cultural memory (Rüsen, 1996). Although the term anthropological universal can be problematic due to underlying pretentions of homogenization, it should be noted that what is presumed here is not a specific or institutionalized regime of historicity, but the human possibility and need for relating to the contingency of time (cf. Balibar, 2012; Brown, 2004).

The first aim of this article is to explore the hypothesis that these two different ontological assumptions about historical consciousness have conceptual consequences when applied in educational research. This exploration is addressed through an analysis of two previous studies that are used as representations of the two positions. A second aim is to discuss aspects of the concept as a curricular goal. This will be addressed in the last section of this article, where the initial conceptual investigation becomes the starting point for a wider and normative discussion on the role of primary the anthropological position.

The problem

The problem is twofold: firstly, it is necessary to sketch out why this exploration is important for educational research and curricular goals; secondly, the already ascribed ambiguity of the concept needs to be further addressed. The recent conversation in the Journal of Curriculum Studies between the two distinguished historical educators and researchers Peter Seixas (2016) and Andreas Körber (2016) is an excellent introduction to this problem. For Seixas (2016), the question of educational relevance goes to the crux of how modern historical awareness can interact in a multicultural society and with other more traditional beliefs.
'Historical consciousness' is an achievement of cultures—or individuals—who comprehend the historicity of their own circumstances, the mutability of their identities and the contingency of their traditions. Historical consciousness in these terms is the antithesis of cultural tribalism and religious fundamentalism, and a reasonable goal for history education in liberal democracies. And yet, in the postcolonial, postmodern era, the imperative of a cosmopolitan historical consciousness must make room for dialogue across cultural difference. (p. 3)

Seixas expresses the assumption that historical learning also involves a political lineage. However, this merging creates, as he points out, a dilemma for a diverse society, since the trajectory is understood in geo-political terms. For Körber (2016), such a direct parallel to a Western achievement becomes an overly narrow definition. Instead, he stresses that the concept should be open for comparative approaches:

Within this concept, people can be said to have ‘non-Western’, ‘non-modern’, ‘non-elaborated’ ‘historical consciousness’ without regarding them incomplete, inferior, or else. (p. 447)

Körber’s broader position does not make any normative or hierarchical distinctions between different systems of thought, which can solve some dilemmas, but possibly create others by not giving any normative direction. Thus, one reason to take an interest in this discussion is the role of history education in a diverse society and the bearing it has for any intercultural or cosmopolitan ambitions for education (e.g. Clark & Grever, 2018; Clark & Peck, 2018; Körber, 2011; Nordgren, 2017; Seixas, 2017). However, in order to link history education to such life orientation purposes, there is an even more profound aspect to consider. While both Seixas and Körber, in these passages, address the problem as an interrelation between binary systems of thought (modern and non-modern), I would suggest that attention should be drawn to tensions that occur also within any such systems of thoughts. For instance, Bacigalupo (2013) describes how the Mapuche community in southern Chile in the late 1800s expressed a ‘shamanic historical consciousness’ that was simultaneously linear and cyclical and had the potential to challenge their traumatic history. Likewise, Anderson (1991) and Hobsbawm and Ranger (1992) classical studies have shown how mythological origins and invented traditions are not alien to modernity. On the contrary, mass production, science and educational institutions are prerequisites for contemporary forms of imagined communities. People in all societies seem to turn to the past and use it, not for the sake of what has been, but to address something immediate or oncoming. Using history for orientation means using experiences beyond its historical context to gain a foothold in relation to the world and to the self (Rüsen, 2017). When it comes to this constant need to make meaning from experience, the differences between the modern and the premodern are perhaps more of degree than of kind.

Such an understanding of historical consciousness opens the subject of history to the tensions and contradictions within and across historical cultures where the line between facts and myth, the unique and the exemplary, the distanced and the moral is crossed. In other words, what is at stake here is not a mere ‘philosophical itch’, but the very conceptualization of history and the reasons for studying it.

The discussion between Seixas and Körber also embraces the growing exchange between history educators and researchers from two main traditions, linked to ‘historical consciousness’ and ‘historical thinking’. This vital international exchange has effectively established new perspectives on conceptual and experiential worlds. The growing assertiveness among educational researchers who work to advance history teaching promotes a theoretical development, combining aspects of historical consciousness and historical thinking (cf. Clark & Grever, 2018; Johansson, 2019; Körber, 2011; Seixas, 2004). However, concepts like historical consciousness and historical thinking both represent traditions that are diverse (Körber, 2011; Lévesque & Clark, 2018; Seixas, 2017). As Lévesque and Clark (2018) clearly demonstrate, historical thinking is a tradition with many facets, but also with a common core, which Seixas (2000) captures in relation to disciplinary history, which ‘provides students with standards for inquiry, investigation, and debate’ (p. 34). Hence, a translation of a theoretical concept from one cultural context to another risks, as both Seixas and Körber have pointed out, losing track of what is central. While historical consciousness is an attempt to conceptualize how we understand and relate to
history, historical thinking takes a more instructional approach, searching to re-contextualize the systematic approach of the discipline to relevant learning objectives.

When complex concepts intermingle, any unclear supposition will inevitably impact theoretical reasoning, as well as applications done in relation to them. When it comes to historical consciousness, its perceived ambiguity seems to be an obligatory topic: How should the concept be empirically interpreted? What objectives should be formulated? How can historical consciousness be measured? In the extensive literature on historical consciousness, there are lexical as well as ontological differences. This should come as no surprise as the conceptualization takes place at the crossroads where history meets anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, education, neuroscience and other disciplines. Compounding two such all-embracing terms as history and consciousness provides almost endless opportunities to associate perspectives and manifestations. According to the historian and philosopher Collingwood, 1994, history is human self-knowledge; the History Department at Harvard University recently upped the ante on its website, suggesting that ‘history is everything—everything is history’. When it comes to defining ‘consciousness’, the scope of meaning is no less complex. Physicist Erwin Schrödinger described consciousness as something that cannot be accounted for in terms of anything else. Freud took a stab at it, nevertheless, comparing it to an iceberg—awareness is what we see, while the preconscious and the unconscious are spread out under the surface.

The heuristic richness of a concept does not have to be regarded as a problem per se. I believe it is more fruitful to approach the multifaceted interpretation of historical consciousness as the outcome of a complex phenomenon rather than as an ambiguous concept in need of a firm definition. This is because it denotes both cognitive capacity and emotionally tinged beliefs. It is culturally and collectively situated, and changeable, filtered through individual experiences (Rüsen, 2017). This can seem all-encompassing, but the claim concerns the temporal dimension of human perception and targets the capacity to create meaning from experiences of continuity and change. Empirical research can further develop our understanding of the phenomenon, but this will probably not make the conceptualization less complex. When reviewing scholarly as well as curricular use of historical consciousness, we probably need to accept that there are different ways of understanding the concept; however, what we should not accept is a lack of inner coherence and an implicit vacillation between ontological positions. The methodological approach in this article is to offer an analytical framework for detecting relationships between levels of defining and operationalising historical consciousness. In what follows, I will first explain the theoretical and methodological framework, and then present the analytical results. The results are summarized and discussed. Finally, the conclusions made are linked to possible consequences for history education.

Analytical framework

Two previous studies will be analysed as general examples of how different understandings of historical consciousness are defined and operationalised. I will juxtapose an article by Kölbl and Straub (2001) and one of my own (Nordgren, 2006, 2011). The rationale for choosing these studies is not because of their specific academic impact, as such, but their potential as rather clear-cut examples of the respective positions. They are also methodologically and conceptually comparable. Both explore how students make sense of history in contemporary situations, but in different contexts. Kölbl and Straub focus on how students talk about history as knowledge about the past and as family memories, whereas in the Nordgren study, the focus is on how students use history to understand a recent critical event.

Kölbl and Straub (2001, p.1) article contains criticism of what they term ‘the anthropological universal’. They argue, on the basis of Gadamer, 1994, Jeismann (1979) and Koselleck, 2004, that historical consciousness is a Western cultural achievement and has a paradigmatic distance from earlier or other cultural forms of thinking about the past. It is also an account of empirical evidence to support their argumentation. The aim was to describe students’ understandings of historical questions and relevance, according to their own priorities. Using group interviews, they showed
that young students from 13 to 14 years of age can have an advanced awareness of history and are able to both relate to and maintain a distance from the past.

Nordgren's work (2006, 2011) is primarily an empirical study based on an anthropological approach. Historical consciousness is here applicable to different times and cultures, referring to Jensen (1997) and Rüsen (2005), and the study is based on two focus group interviews with students who all were 17 years old. The theme of the interview was the terrorist attack in the USA on 11 September 2001. The aim was to explore how students used history to make sense of what happened. The study indicated that the students shifted between a syncretised self-insight and a more essential discourse on identity. While trying to understand an event such as 9/11, they used history both to critically examine possible explanations, as well as to reduce complexity and confirm pre-existing interpretations as timeless examples. To summarize: both studies share a similar interest in how historical consciousness can be an object for analysis; nevertheless, they make different operationalisations and come up with contradictory results.

The Goertz framework

To compare these two articles, I utilized Goertz's (2006) framework to analyse their conceptual coherence. Goertz is interested in how quantitative and qualitative studies define and operationalise their concepts, and on how validity can be maintained from definition to empirical measurability. According to Goertz, defining concepts is not so much a matter of semantics, but one of deciding what is important about an entity. He proposes an ontological, causal and realist view of concepts:

> It is an ontological view because it focuses on what constitutes a phenomenon. It is causal because it identifies ontological attributes that play a key role in causal hypothesis, explanations, and mechanism. It is realist because it involves an empirical analysis of the phenomenon. (p. 5)

This understanding is also the position I take here. Ontology is about the qualities needed to separate and think about a concept, not to determine or uncover an inner or metaphysical ‘truth’. To conceptualize is to identify what ‘there is’ (cf. Quine, 1948). Let me recontextualise this: when we define historical consciousness, we designate its core characteristics. This selection has causal implications, as the attributes that are chosen limit what hypotheses and explanations can be made. This is crucial for building consistency when operationalising the concept for empirical research. Thus, the Goertz framework divides complex concepts into three levels: the first and basic level is the lexical definition where the nouns that describe the concepts are defined. The second level contains the constitutive dimensions or fundamental attributes of the concept. These first two levels outline the theoretical foundation. The third indicator/data level is the set of indicators necessary for empirical observations. In the following empirical analysis of the two studies, this trisection will govern the disposition by deconstructing, in turn, first the basic level of how Kölbl and Straub define historical consciousness as a cultural achievement, and then the basic level for the anthropological position according to Nordgren’s study. This is followed by the secondary and third level where the two studies constitutive dimensions, respectively, their chosen indicators is deconstructed in the same way. However, before we go into the analysis, it is necessary to also distinguish between two underlying logics. First, classical logic defines concepts through necessary and sufficient conditions and dichotomies. The premise is that categories that are linked to a concept have negative poles. To exemplify: if the bases for historical thinking are evidence, this should exclude a mythological understanding of the past. Necessary conditions for making such a distinction are the precenscientific methods and critical communities. The second logic, which Goertz calls ‘fuzzy logic’, perceives categories not as representative of dichotomies, but as dimensions that do not have clear-cut lines of demarcation. For example, without collapsing logos and mythos, the line between them can be fuzzy. Facts can be temporal, contextual or even alternative, while myths can contain correct information or go beyond truth and untruth to deal with profound aspects of the human condition.
One last aspect to consider is what happens when two concepts are compounded (such as historical consciousness). In classical logic, the ideal is that each concept brings with it its full set of necessary and sufficient conditions. For instance, if history is equal to the discipline, and consciousness to self-awareness, then the whole package is brought together in the compound. When applying fuzzy logic to this, each concept brings only a minimum of its original attributes, as the compound can change the conditions for the concepts. So, on which logic should we base an understanding of historical consciousness? According to classical logic, we should identify the necessary conditions for historical consciousness: for example, awareness AND historicity. If we apply fuzzy logic, operationalisation should identify a spectrum of levels of consciousness and historical thinking: for example, sub-consciousness OR awareness, historicity OR mythical thinking. Goertz’s framework will be further unpacked in the analytical results section of this article.

A Western cultural achievement or an anthropological universal?

The analytical section of this article will use Goertz’s framework to deconstruct two studies: one that conceives historical consciousness as a modern cultural achievement, and one that uses an anthropological understanding. Following Goertz’s idea of multilevel concepts, the analysis will first examine the basic level to see if there are differences between how the modern and the anthropological positions choose their fundamental descriptors. For the secondary level, the logic behind the theoretical foundation of these two positions will be analysed. Lastly, the third level will uncover what indicators have been chosen to detect or measure the presence of historical consciousness. Table 1 is an overview of the three levels and summarizes the outcome of the following analysis.

The first level: a basic definition of historical consciousness

On the basic level, this concept is set to distinguish that there is something that can be separated from other phenomena. This indicates that some aspects are more important than others are and, thus, have ontological importance. At the same time, this level can be superficial as the nouns and the adjectives that are chosen to define the concept still have little flesh on their bones. Kölbl and Straub (2001, p. 3) introduced historical consciousness as ‘conceptions of the self and the world that are rooted in variable relations to time’. Nordgren (2006), Nordgren (2011) followed the same line with a definition related to Rüsen (1987), stating that historical consciousness is a mental process of interpreting the past, understanding the present and anticipating the future. At this basic level, any differences between the two positions are not distinguishable, as they both identify the same necessary conditions according to classic logic, as the ability to interpret the relationship between past, AND present, AND future. To

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Conceptualization of historical consciousness (HC), compared using Goertz’s framework.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural achievement</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Basic level</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second level</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Third level</td>
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conclude, a common basic definition can be made: *Historical consciousness is interpretation of the self and the world through time.*

**The secondary level: the constitutive dimensions of historical consciousness**

The secondary level deals with the fundamental attributes of the concept and, thus, deepens the theoretical construct. From this level, it should be possible to identify indicators to measure the phenomena. If the basic level ‘is the interpretations of the self and the world through time’, what does that mean? If interpretation is central, what cognitive processes does this require? If consciousness is directed towards the *self and the world*, what degree of reflexivity is needed, and through what standard of validity should it be measured? If *time* is the lens for this mental operation, what ability to historicize does it require to handle this lens?

**The secondary level: what constitutes a cultural achievement**

Köbl and Straub (2001) emphasized that historical consciousness is a specific way to interpret time that deals with contingency and change. This distinguishes historical consciousness from other and earlier forms of communicative ordering of time and construction of reality. This ability is the result of ‘the development of occidental cultures and societies’ (p. 1). They went on to give a detailed description of the concept:

[Historical consciousness] is a conscious and reflective act and linked to a specific conception of reality, which radically temporalises and dynamises all ‘being’ and views it as a becoming that is saturated with contingency—a becoming that has recently lost any kind of philosophically or scientifically proven telos of historical progress or decay. (p. 5)

Here, the authors anchor the abstract definition on the basic level with distinct attributes. The concept is framed as a cultural achievement linked to ‘a specific conception of reality’. Interpretation is specified as a cognitive and reflective act that has been further qualified by an ability to radically temporalise the experience of time. This ability constitutes the modern way of reflecting upon contingency and change.

However, there is still a missing piece. If historical consciousness is a cultural achievement, do all living, dreaming and suffering people within modernity have this ability? Köbl and Straub (2001) recognize that there is a tension between agents and culture. Their way of overcoming this tension is to define historical consciousness as a specific discourse of knowledge:

Historical consciousness is a certain form of rational construction of reality in this idealised sense, which gives expression to certain values and normative standards of a culture that dominates at least in Germany and other parts of the (Western) world and determines the curricula of schools and other educational establishments. (p. 5)

Historical consciousness is here understood as a cultural outcome of a specific historical process (cf. Grever on this issue). The Western culture enabled a new ability to radically temporalise the experience of time, which set a new standard for measuring the quality of historical interpretations. This mindset is discursive rather than individual and ideal rather than lived. It is, thus, possible to understand both the culture and individuals as diverse and multifaceted. Historical consciousness is a cultural outcome of a specific historical process and, as such, offers an ideal version of a modern self-understanding. Thus, for Köbl and Straub, historical consciousness is a model of higher order thinking that adolescents can gain access to through culture and education (Figure 1).

**The secondary level: what constitutes an anthropological universal**

In Nordgren (2006), Nordgren (2011), historical consciousness is presented both as a heuristic device that can be used to generate new questions and hypotheses and as an analytical approach.

People produce and consume stories about the past. They assess and use them for different purposes. In this perspective, history is above all an expression of a contemporary understanding and use of the past. The
As we can see in this statement, not much direction is given in terms of classical logic (cf. Stewart, 2017, p. 3). The aspect of interpretation appears as an ongoing act of communication and as a meta-perspective on history. Time is a cultural phenomenon and history simply the past or a mediated action involved in the present. The world and the self are open for interpretation and are not qualified in any methodological sense. This seems to support Kölbl and Straub (2001) argument that an anthropological definition ‘does not permit one to categorically grasp and differentially describe varying conceptions of the self and the world that are rooted in variable relations to time’ (p. 3). If we are following a classical way to build concepts with a dichotomous logic, there is little guidance to distinguish history from other forms of communication about the past and consciousness from any other state of mind.

However, if we instead follow fuzzy logic, the clarifications needed are not made by sorting history from myth, awareness from unawareness, etc., but by studying all these positions as relationships that move across a continuum.

By implication, we can only study the expressions of historical consciousness: history cultures and the uses of history. The main point in looking into the use of history is to clarify its ability to engage a number of agents and simultaneously to satisfy even totally opposed needs. Communication always involves several parties. … The study of historical consciousness implies looking back for the storyteller and forward for the recipient, outward for the cultural context, and inward for the patterns that shape the plot of the story. At least three different hermeneutic directions define the analytic perspective. The interpretation may be (1) sender-oriented; (2) receiver-oriented; (3) message-oriented. This model does not rule out a dialogic perspective; on the contrary, it presupposes interaction. Neither does it suppose the dialogue to be symmetrical or impartial. (Nordgren, 2006, p. 227)

The limits of time and history are not predefined but are expressed within a historical culture as vessels used in communication. Accordingly, this use of history must be studied as a hermeneutic process. How, then, can the term consciousness be conceived with the help of fuzzy logic? Freud’s iceberg metaphor, which has already been mentioned, suggests that consciousness can be far more than a reflective act linked to a specific conception of reality. In the quote above, historical consciousness can simultaneously relate to several and even opposing needs. Thus, consciousness is here not equated with a rational construction of reality, but as a continuum (see Figure 2) that
stretches from the preconscious, across the performative consciousness and self-awareness all the way to reflexive thinking (cf. Jensen, 1997, p. 59).

While awareness and reflectivity only focus on one side of the spectrum, historical consciousness, from this perspective, covers the entire scale and moves in both directions. Of fundamental importance is that fuzzy logic allows analysis of how history affects people emotionally and aesthetically: that feelings of belonging and alienation can be inherited and coexist with knowledge and critical abilities, and that consciousness can operate on several levels simultaneously.

Figure 3 is a simple illustration of how historical consciousness is expressed through communication (use of history) in relation to a historical culture. Historical consciousness is thus culturally entangled, not simply the outcome of a cultural process. While the culture influences and sets the delineation of understanding, it never fully restricts the human capacity to think beyond the boundaries of experience. A relevant parallel is how Vygotsky, 1986 argued that speech and thought are not identical. However, they influence each other to the extent that it is not possible to understand higher mental processes without starting the analysis with social factors. The model should not be understood as static, but as an illustration of how a general ability can be related to heterogeneous and changing cultures.

To conclude the second level, the similarities that characterize the first basic level do not persist on the secondary level. When the constitutive dimensions are outlined, the differences between the two perceptions of historical consciousness occur. The cultural achievement is positioned within an ontology that is based on a classical logic, which excludes other conceptions of reality and positions reflection as opposed to the non-reflective, the temporalised to the static and so on. The anthropological defines both history and consciousness by a fuzzy logic, making historical consciousness relative to both cultures and individuals.

**The third level: operationalising historical consciousness**

The third level is the indicator/data level. This is where the theoretical level is operationalised by indicators that can guide a collection of empirical data: How can we (quantitatively or qualitatively)
measure frequencies or qualities in the data? What are relevant categories, and what are the valid indicators? We will now take a closer look at how indicators of both the cultural achievement and the anthropological uses are formulated, respectively. Kölbl and Straub as well as Nordgren worked with grounded approaches as their interviews with students were analysed with narrative methods in order to identify relevant categories or themes.

**The third level: indicating the cultural achievement**

Kölbl and Straub (2001) interest is to study ‘content, structure and development as well as the functions of historical consciousness’ (p. 10). They also aim to study whether historical consciousness emerges both as a personal competence and as a culture-specific expression. The students in their study volunteered for a group discussion on the subject of history, which took about 2 h. The method was selected to enable ‘these young people to articulate their historical knowledge according to their own priorities and in their own language, and they were thus able to relate it to their own life, to the present and to the future’ (p. 11). The students were asked to bring keepsakes from home to facilitate the conversation. Although few did so, they were still able to talk about such objects. The cultural achievement position emphasizes the ability to radically historicize the world. Thus, on the operational level, this involves selecting categories of historicity and identifying indicators of such an ability. Table 2 gives an overview of Kölbl and Straub’s categories (left row) and the concomitant indicators of each category (right row).

The analyses show that the students expressed knowledge about comprehensive historical content. Numerous historical persons and periods were mentioned. The discussion also touched upon history as a discipline and method, as well as history as identity. The study results suggest that there is no reason to presume that students are lacking in knowledge of history. On the contrary, the researchers argued that, for their age, the students engaged in a high-quality discussion. Overall, the indications confirmed their hypothesis:

The group discussion presented by us no doubt testifies to an historical consciousness that is not only ‘vivid’ and varied but also has a certain specific quality. As was explained with the help of several indicators, this awareness is an unmistakably modern phenomenon. (Kölbl & Straub, 2001, p. 25)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Indications</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical content</td>
<td>• Naming historical persons, groups, sites, periods, events, processes, and media of representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining concept of time and history</td>
<td>• Concept of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Present is future past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Differentiate between one’s own history, family history and history of mankind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mere past and history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structuring of history</td>
<td>• Dates and facts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Selectivity of historical representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Public and individual past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of reasons for the validity of historical statements</td>
<td>• Which representations one can trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods of historical understanding</td>
<td>• Reports that prove historical accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts of historical development</td>
<td>• Abstract and tangible past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Past life-forms as traditions, customs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Evolution, progression regression, origin</td>
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The third level: indicating the anthropological universal

Nordgren (2006) studied the role of beliefs about history in a multicultural society. The aim was to explore historical consciousness through reception theory. The data were derived from two focus groups of students. All students had a background in Christian cultures in the Middle East and identified themselves as Assyrians or Syriacs. Most of them grew up in Sweden and had parents who emigrated from Lebanon, Turkey or Syria. The interview was conducted 3 weeks after the terrorist attacks in the USA on 9/11, 2001, and the students had volunteered to engage in a discussion on that theme. The students' narratives about this contemporary, critical event were presumed to reflect how they used history to make sense of what had happened. Table 3 shows the categories focussed on (left row) and what was regarded as an indication of that category (right row).

The categories here are theoretical dimensions of how history can be put to use, while the indicators are practical examples of these dimensions. The students had no problem engaging in a modern historical discourse. They used their beliefs and knowledge about the past to suggest different causes behind the attacks. The students considered a variety of different positions and, based on that, created different interpretations. In the beginning of the interview, they rather neutrally discussed possible motives and circumstances. They also discussed US involvement in the Middle East, and from there, took the position that the US had justly been given a taste of its own medicine. When they related to their own backgrounds as a Christian minority, they described Muslims as a collective entity of perpetrators, drawing analogies between 9/11 and the genocide against Christians during the Ottoman Empire. Further, as members of a minority which had been victimized by genocide, they expressed feelings of being historically neglected and excluded due to the Western world's preoccupation with the Holocaust.

To conclude the third level, I argue that both the cultural achievement and the anthropological position generate different operational rationales. The demarcations that surfaced on the second level have now been operationalised on the third level by two sets of indicators. These indicators reveal differences in the research focus that is in line with their ontological point of departure. I would further argue that this also has consequences for history instruction. The cultural achievement position is sensitive to how students reflect upon the past. However, it does not question the traditional borders of the school subject and its relation to the outside world. The anthropological position is sensitive to how students reflect upon history on different levels and how they orient by it, even in more challenging situations. However, this does not seem to provide any specific rationale of learning trajectories or normative goals. After summarizing this section, this discussion on implication for education will be taken further.

Summarizing conclusions from the first research question

(1) The survey shows how two studies with the intent to explore historical consciousness empirically can work with two different ontological conceptions of what historical consciousness is. However, this fundamental precondition does not become palpable on a basic level of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Indications</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Using history to understand</td>
<td>Relates to historical knowledge, assumptions and experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using tacit knowledge and testing competing narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using history as expression of identity</td>
<td>Identity positions effect the narrative framing of history: e.g. as students, migrants, religious believers, ethnicity, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Using history to orient</td>
<td>Orienting by creating meaning, drawing conclusions, judgments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
definition. The conclusion is obvious; research, as well as curricular practice need to be aware of the tensions between these two positions to avoid the risk of misunderstanding and ambiguity. What such clarifications can have for implications for history education is already indicated in how the two positions have operationalised the historical consciousness.

(2) The study by Kölbl and Straub focused on how students reason about a rather distanced past, whereas in the Nordgren study, the focus was on how students use history to make sense of a recent critical event. This difference is probably not a coincidence, but congruent with their respective conceptualisations of historical consciousness. Understood as a cultural achievement, historical consciousness tends to be operationalised as an ability to think in line with a disciplinary standard, while the anthropological position’s primary interest is how people use history in a broader sense to make meaning of the world and their everyday lives.

Implications for history education

We now turn to the second purpose of this article, which is to discuss implications for curricula and teaching based on a broad understanding of historical consciousness. Seixas (2017) has argued, with an understanding close to Köbl and Straub’s cultural achievement model, that historical consciousness can contribute to history education as it includes contemporary questions and issues of morality. These aspects are not unfamiliar to historical thinking, but historical consciousness has brought them to the foreground. Nevertheless, Seixas emphasizes that historical consciousness and historical thinking are both challenged traditions with a need for rethinking. This challenge comes from the diversity in society and from a changing historical culture that, in terms of Hartog (2015), can be described as a growing presentism and, in terms of Bauman (2013), as a liquid modernity. That is to say, history education cannot, as has previously been the case, take for granted that there is a shared value base on how historical development should be understood, or that there is common value in a shared cultural heritage or framework of reference.

As I have shown in the previous section, historical consciousness is about how history is experienced as a phenomenon. Thus, history is not a pre-given body of knowledge, but something that appears through acts of consciousness. Historical thinking, on the other hand, is concerned with how historical knowledge can be transferred from knowers to learners. It is about how to recontextualise a complex, but predefined body of knowledge and skills, from a disciplinary discourse to a classroom discourse. Understood in this way, historical consciousness directs the interest to the relationship between the experience and the phenomenon, while the focus for historical thinking is the relationship between the phenomenon and teaching.

As also shown in the previous section, the cultural achievement position presupposes necessary qualities in the perception, such as abilities to temporalise, reason about validity and use methods for historical understanding (cf. Clark & Grever, 2018, pp. 189). These conditions can be perceived as an ideal for learning, which is in line with how researchers have operationalised historical thinking through second-order concepts (cf. Seixas & Morton, 2013). The anthropological position, on the other hand, lacks a corresponding list. This does not mean that it is in conflict with the usage of second-order concepts, but it does not offer any obvious governing ideal. However, it does offer a broader understanding of what history is and does, by incorporating how history is used to create meaning in everyday life and in the world of politics. It is quite conceivable that historical thinking tools are useful for exploring such a concept of history, but this presupposes that the ontological starting points are well clarified. Thus, I would like to highlight three conclusions about historical consciousness that can be drawn from the anthropological perspective.
(1) Historical consciousness, as an anthropological position, broadens the aim for teaching history beyond content and skill, as it incorporates the understanding of how history is used in public life.

(2) The anthropological perspective calls into question the relevance of using historical consciousness as a means to discern and measure cognitive levels of students’ historical thinking.

(3) The anthropological perspective can be used to rethink the relevance of contemporary history education.

**Historical consciousness and the aim for history education**

From a cultural achievement position, historical consciousness emerges as an ideal goal for education. The learning trajectory can thus take aim at the ability to radically historicize not only the past but also ongoing life. The position has a clear theoretical basis for distinguishing history from myth and genetic thinking from a traditional mindset. In the anthropological version, historical consciousness is not a goal to be attained, as everybody already has some ability to orient practical life within time. The educational goal is therefore not self-evident but needs a normative standpoint. What it does offer is a way of thinking about history as a form of orientation in relation to the present and the future. If we accept this as something important for historical studies, this will have consequences for both the intended and the implemented curriculum. The concept of history will not be solely fixed on the past, and the past will not solely be mediated through the historian’s gaze. Thus, history education will have to broaden its scope and incorporate how history is used in contemporary life.

Wilschut (2012; and in this JCS issue) raises a warning that such an openness could lead to fragmentation and a postmodernity that undermines the specialized knowledge that has been advanced through the professionalization of history. I agree that it would be a disadvantage if the anthropological position would imply a relativisation of all forms of knowledge. However, this controversy does not follow the dividing lines that distinguish an anthropological position from a cultural achievement. Historical thinking skills can actually be highly important to examine how people use history (Johansson, 2019; Karlsson, 2011; Nordgren, 2016; Nordgren & Johansson, 2015). The anthropological understanding is not incompatible with imparting qualification and powerful knowledge as basic educational goals (cf. Nordgren, 2017; Young & Muller, 2013). On the contrary, specialized knowledge is necessary to understand and explore public uses of history. Education cannot collapse vernacular beliefs with how disciplinary and systematic knowledge works, but giving attention to public uses of history, solely to debunk them as myths, also misses the point.

For example, if we consider 9/11, disciplinary based historical knowledge can help us to deal with such a recent event by exploring causes and consequences in order to contextualize motives and actions, to navigate through conspiracy theories and to gain a broader perspective on our own as well as of others’ moral stances and motives. The use-of-history perspective, however, adds a further dimension as it draws attention to how 9/11 became a catalyst for communications to achieve meaning-making. As a critical event, 9/11 has become narrated and used as an argument in debate. It has functioned as a marker for patriotism and scapegoating. It has influenced political decisions, acts of war as well as popular culture. It is sold on T-shirts and as souvenirs, and it is honoured in an extensive memory culture. Thus, exploring a critical event is not all about interpreting sources, but also about analysing how historical culture is used, not as myths, but as communicative acts to make sense of the unexpected.
Questioning historical consciousness as a means to measure cognitive levels

The influence of historical consciousness in curricular goals and instruction, as well as in the ongoing exchange with historical thinking has been coloured by the pressure on weighing and measuring learning outcomes. Historical consciousness has been employed for identifying levels of progression and even assessment in learning (Duquette, 2015; Eliasson, Alvén, Yngvéus, & Rosenlund, 2015; Körber & Meyer-Hamme, 2015). However, attempts to use historical consciousness to categorize and assess individual students’ knowledge levels seem to struggle with the inherent, but seldom verbalized, conflict between a cultural achievement standard, and anthropological openness (cf. Bain, 2015; Lee, 2012; van Boxtel, 2019). The anthropological position has educational consequences, as it calls into question whether history consciousness is a theory suitable as a basis for assessment models.

The foundation for many attempts to measure the quality of historical consciousness is Rüsen’s (2005, 2017) well-known four-category typology for how people constitute meaning from history: the traditional, the exemplary, the genetic and the critical. Rüsen emphasized that elements of these forms of meaning are universal and exist in parallel to various extents and in various constellations. The typology also describes a historiographical development from a premodern traditional understanding into a genetic modern understanding. The typology provides a basis for studying, in any given context, how a pattern is distributed in a historical culture and how the various types interact in the communication.

As I understand it, this historiographic perspective makes it virtually tautological to claim that students in the twenty-first century have access to genetic thinking as they are brought up in a historicizing culture. With that in mind, it becomes anachronistic to label students’ thinking as primarily traditionalist or exemplary. This would mean that they are living independently of their contemporary culture. An obvious risk is also that this type of ladder-like progression lends itself to a division between pupils belonging to the ‘sophisticated’ Western cultural achievement while the diverse others belong to the outside world of traditionalism.

Nevertheless, Rüsen (2017) argued that the three first forms of meaning (traditional, exemplary, genetic) can be understood as levels of competency in individuals’ historical learning. The critical level is a means of advancing from a lower to a higher level. Rüsen described his four forms in terms of an ontogenetic development (in psychology, the development of the individual in relation to its environment, and in biology, the individual organism’s path from inception to maturity). The assumption is that the ontogenetic development of an individual adolescent contains the stages of the evolutionary development over many generations (phylogenetesis). It seems, therefore, to be a categorization mistake to combine a historiographic model with an individual learning trajectory.

Biology has dismissed the idea that the development of a species is repeated in the development of the individual (Blechschmidt, 1977; Slobin, 2014), and Vygotsky, 1986 rejected a similar idea in psychology that the individual’s development recapitulates sequences or stages that have occurred during the evolution of human history. To frame individuals’ learning trajectory as a microcosm of the evolution of history is quite problematic. Borrowing from the biological tends to reduce human actions into a metaphysical and deterministic theory of development.

The typology, nevertheless, works well for discovering how interwoven our historical thinking is and for seeing differences over time, but it is less suited to measuring the individual’s actual advancement in historical learning. Duquette’s (2015) ambitious attempt to use Rüsen’s typology as a means to assess historical thinking illuminates this problem. The objective to seek tools for evaluating qualities in the students’ historical thinking, rather than strict factual knowledge is, of course, relevant. However, since the cultural achievement position is usually taken for granted, Duquette did not notice the aspect of interrelations within Rüsen’s typology. Instead, they are understood as steps in a learning ladder.

In his categories Rüsen considers that the individual constantly refers to the past when confronted with a contemporary problem in which history is relevant. This does not seem to be the case. … For example,
many students associated third-world poverty with bad climate and did not see the influences of past imperialism or decolonialization on the situation. Because of this, we abandoned Rüsen’s taxonomy. (Duquette, 2015, pp. 54-55)

Here, Duquette goes directly from the lexical basic level of the concept to the operational level, without sorting out its theoretical structure. What an anthropological perspective could have brought to this analysis is the interest in how students actually experience history. First, ‘climate’, in Duquettes example, can actually be a historical category (cf. McNeill & Engelke, 2016), and if it is accepted as such, the students do seem to have a kind of explanation of cause. Second, common sense thinking can both help and hinder more advanced historical thinking, however the way students make sense of the world can be important information for teachers. It is perfectly legitimate to assess whether students have learned to apply the historical concepts that have been taught, but rather than actually applying historical consciousness for this, Duquette renamed categories of historical thinking. From an anthropological position, historical consciousness is a theory on how humans make sense out of time, not a theory on learning trajectories.

Historical consciousness may indeed bring in a contemporary relevance, but it can also draw attention to both the psychological and sociocultural preconditions of learning. The relevance on an instructional level is that an interest in historical consciousness can make the teacher sensitive to the students’ world of experience. Again, this does not make evidence-based knowledge less important, but what is added is an insight that, in order for education to have an impact on how students experience the world, it has to go through the interpretive filter which is part of the historical consciousness (cf. Zanazanian, 2017; and in this JCS issue).

**Problematising the relevance of contemporary history education**

Historical consciousness has been conceptualized by different philosophers and educationalists in relation to their own time and mindset. They have searched to unlock the human relationship to historical meaning as formed in the gap between past and present, as it occurred as their generations struggled with challenges, such as nation-building, modernity, revolution, remembrance of genocide and so forth. The question is for what conversation do we need historical consciousness today.

A cultural achievement position presupposes the idea of modernity, progression and cultural exclusiveness. Then, what is modernity? Susan Stanford Friedman (2010), has provided a variety of answers to that question that do not conceal the presence of historical shifts, but at the same time display the diversity of making sense of the past that goes beyond a specific cultural achievement:

> Modernity is Europe’s Enlightenment, the break from religious hegemonies and the spread of science, technology, and cosmopolitan ideals of freedom and democracy … Modernity is Europe’s brutal colonialism built on the systematic enslavement of Africans, arbitrary and imposed nation-state boundaries, and the formation of modern African identities amidst the legacies of corruption and failed states … Modernity is Indian Independence, born of British rule, bathed in the blood of Partition, and growing as the world’s largest democracy and a technological powerhouse. (pp. 47–49).

The modern prerogative can be blind to rationality and complexity in premodern and non-Western historical thinking, which several historians and anthropologists have pointed out (Bacigalupo, 2013; Stewart, 2017; Thapar, 2002). To frame historical consciousness as a Western cultural achievement could be regarded as exclusive and Eurocentric. It is, however, not that simple. The historical changes from the late eighteenth century onwards have had a defining impact on epistemological discourses on a global scale. Post-colonial criticism is also predicated on the influence of Western modernity (Said, 2003). Rüsen (2002) reminded us that modern disciplinary history, beyond its origin, is not necessarily geographically or culturally bounded but a global movement. On the other hand, as a cultural device for orientation, history does not only define a position of knowledge, but also, analogous to Collingwood, defines what it is to be human. Without giving up the
importance of specialized knowledge, we need to problematise and historicize established narratives that are both culturally and disciplinarily produced.

Migration, for example, is of global concern, but methodological nationalism still resonates as a ghost in the machine of contemporary history and, thus, consolidates traditionalistic and exemplary plots. Consequently, sedentary living and homogeneity still appear as the historical norm, making migration and diversity anomalies (Wimmer & Schiller, 2003). Our societies are multicultural, but history teaching is still oriented towards genetic explanations on the formation of the nation-state (Carretero, Asensio, & Moneo, 2012). The digital revolution has exploded, and it has now produced in a few years more data than in the entire previous history of the human race. Can we as history educators still argue that historical sourcing and evidence can guide future generations to sort information from disinformation? We can broaden the perspective even further: human impact on the climate is affecting the conditions for all life on the planet, but traditional historiography has segregated nature and culture (Chakrabarty, 2009); consequently, we have a problem finding the critical perspective on history that we will need to deal with a threatening future.

Seixas (2016) emphasizes that both traditions of historical thinking and historical consciousness are now being challenged; I would suggest that this insight is linked to their base as western cultural achievements. An understanding of historical consciousness as an interpretive process, which is trans-historical and trans-cultural, does not offer any easy solutions, but it provides us with a way to rethink the rationality behind the questions that guide the historical narratives, as well as an openness to letting the present and the future impose new requirements on the past.

**Conclusion**

In Nietzsche, 2008 ‘On the Use and Abuse of History for Life’, he discusses history as an orientation that is vital for practical life. The new discipline of history, however, is threatening this life force, through its systematic ordering of facts and disenchantment with narrative. Hans Ruin discusses this essay more in detail in this issue of JCS, and he points out that, if we can disregard the rather time-bounded confrontation towards disciplinary history, Nietzsche unveils a field of tensions that is still of great relevance. First, there are still tensions between history as codified knowledge and as life-orienting praxis, but perhaps of a more complex nature, than as opposing forces. They are different but not solely opposing forces. There is, of course, tension between explaining the past, and using it as a recourse to legitimize different agendas and actions in public life. Nevertheless, the codified knowledge and life-orienting praxis also affect each other as they coexist in the same historical culture. To some extent, in the twenty-first century, we are all enculturated in rational ways of thinking about history, but the influences also go the other way. History, as a discipline and as an educational subject, has not yet completely liberated itself from the dark side of the Enlightenment heritage, and is still influenced by a nation-centred and colonial world view.

Nietzsche points is still relevant for addressing the tensions within the life-oriented uses of history as it also have a destructive potential. What can be an inspiring historical example can also be used, to create a mob mentality or legitimize totalitarianism. The reverence and attachment we can feel for the presence of the past can turn into suffocating traditionalism; the revealing of historical injustices can turn into nihilism or moralism as we all are the products of what we turn against. An education with the ambition to advance students’ abilities to orient themselves historically needs to address these fields of tensions. The contribution from the anthropological understanding of historical consciousness is precisely the anthropological interest in the inconsistency and change of any historical culture. It takes an interest in the power balance within the life-oriented uses of history. Hence, an engagement in everyday life uses of history cannot primarily be to judge what is right and what is wrong but to provide tools to participate in and balance the uses of history.
The answers are not to be found beyond subject-specific education and disciplinary thinking, but rather in finding connexions to the tensions within the historical culture and, hence, in re-examining the questions history formulates and the answers that education explores. If they are not found there; then, history education will risk being irrelevant, as there are no reasons to assume that the ongoing historical processes will not affect the coming generations’ way of interpreting themselves and their world through their historical consciousness.

Notes
2. This article has been published in two versions, first, in Swedish as a part of a book in 2006, then in a shorter English version as an article in 2011.
3. Goertz’s (2006) framework also relates to Wittgenstein’s family-resemblance concept. I have, however, chosen not to discuss this part as it does not contribute to the restricted discussion on the underlying logic for constructing multilevel concepts, which is the interest here.
4. Rüsen (2017) puts the critical formation of meaning last among the four types of historical narratives. This is logical because this type is not a historical phase, but a criticism of every other type. This, however, differs from previous publications (1989, 2005).
5. Nathalie Popa, PhD student from McGill University, Canada, suggest in her forthcoming thesis that there is an inconsistency in adopting a competency-based approach towards operationalizing the constructs of historical consciousness for educational purposes, which is, on one hand, conceiving of it as a sense-making capability, yet on the other hand, operationalizing it as a problem-solving procedure.

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