

History as a ‘GPS’: On the uses of historical narrative for French Canadian students’ life orientation and identity

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Abstract

This article presents the results of a study that analyses students’ historical narratives of the nation in relation to historical consciousness and how their sense of self-identification with groups affects their narrative structure and orientation. This study was conducted with French Canadian students registered in two high schools (n=58) and one university (n=18) in Ottawa, the federal capital of Canada. I found that a strong sense of identification leads young people to construct more engaging and militant stories of the collective past, with greater historical appropriation (using the collective ‘we’) and a sense of continuity with past actualities. I then discuss the implications of this study for research on the narrative competence of historical consciousness and what history education might do in school to promote historical consciousness in Canada.

Keywords: historical consciousness; historical narrative; national identity; history education

Introduction

To raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and, possibly, even on the nature of humanity itself.

(White, 1980: 5)

Recent theories of historical consciousness focus on the role that narrative plays in contemporary peoples’ attempts to orient themselves in time and space (Reich *et al.*, 2015; Rüsen, 2005; Seixas, 2004). Using German historian Jörn Rüsen’s theory, I present the results of a study conducted with French Canadian students’ narratives of the collective past. Around the world, public education has traditionally played a key role in the teaching of national history and the construction of national identity (Barton, 2012; Carretero *et al.*, 2012; Tutiaux-Guillon and Nourrisson, 2003). National narratives attempt to create continuity between the past and present by adjusting the experience of time to collective memories and expectations of a common ‘people’ (Renan, 1994). These stories also serve to establish the identity of the group in the *longue durée* of time. In this age of globalization (Nora, 2002; Whitehouse, 2015), national narratives are increasingly challenged both from within and without. But, interestingly, they have not disappeared yet because they continue to act as ‘big pictures’ of the past that provide schematic interpretative frameworks (narrative templates) for structuring people’s ways of thinking (Wertsch, 2012).

Yet, the long-established link between education and national history has been a source of contention in Canada. Born out of a nineteenth-century compact between the founding

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nations (French, English, Aboriginals), the Canadian Federation is *de facto* a multinational state, with historical groups claiming nationhood well before the creation of the federation in 1867 (Kymlicka, 1998). Many of the pivotal moments in Canadian history have centred on divisions between these groups. In particular, the French/English divide has been expressed in different historiographical narrations and ways of conceiving the nation as 'two solitudes' (Taylor, 1993). Public education, which is constitutionally separated between French-speaking and English-speaking schools, has mirrored these historical interpretative disagreements. As a consequence of this, the emplotment of Canadian history differs significantly between the two school systems and emphasizes distinctive forms of national identification (Francis, 1997; Osborne, 2000). As young French Canadians graduate from high schools and emerge as adult citizens, they construct narratives of the national past that they use to orient their lives. These narratives are shaped by various encounters with sources of information from historical culture including, but not limited to, school history.

Recent studies have explored the relationship between students' ethnic and religious identities and national history (Barton, 1996; Epstein, 1998; Barton and McCully, 2005, 2010; Carretero *et al.*, 2012; Peck, 2010; Sáiz Serrano and López Facal, 2016). Their findings yield important insight into how history and identity work in school and other cultural settings. They show, among other things, that positive emotional ties to the nation make students accept more readily the dominant national narrative, often in terms of collective membership and mutual experiences (e.g. *our country, we won*). Carla Peck's (2010) study with English Canadian students in multicultural contexts goes further, suggesting that ethnic identities seriously affect how young people ascribe significance to events and adopt narratives of the collective past. Yet, there are important differences between 'ethnic' and 'national' identity groups that are often overlooked in the literature. As Will Kymlicka (1995) argues, ethnic groups are made up of individuals and families, often as a result of personal immigration, who share common ethnocultural traits. They wish to preserve these traits as part of their heritage and identity but within the public institutions, laws and principles of the state. National groups are historical communities with a societal culture, more or less institutionally complete, claiming self-governing rights to ensure the full development of their culture over time. Following the political theory of Kymlicka (1998: 27), I define 'societal culture' as a culture (set of beliefs, social forms, traits and common language) shared and used in a wide range of societal institutions, including schools, media, law, economy and government, and which provides people with meaningful ways of life across the full range of human activities, encompassing both public and private spheres. While most ethnic minorities seek cultural accommodation and more equitable inclusion within the dominant national narrative so as to avoid exclusion (Stanley, 2006), national groups want to maintain distinctive cultures and historiographical narrations because they constitute the essence of their community identity.

Few studies have focused explicitly on the particular question of national narrative with students in Canada's multinational setting (Duquette, 2011; Létourneau, 2014; Robichaud, 2011). How do young French Canadians narrate the history of the nation? What impact, if any, does identity have on their visions of the past? Are there significant differences between the views of younger and older students? What role should school history play in a multinational state? In this article, I explore these questions through the historical narratives produced by a group of French Canadian students at two high schools and one university located in the federal capital of Canada.

Narrative as a competence of historical consciousness

According to Rüsen (2005: 26), historical consciousness is defined as the human understanding of temporality. It is characterized by the ability of the human mind 'to carry out procedures which make sense of the past, effecting a temporal orientation in the present practical life by means of the recollection of past actuality' (Rüsen, 2005: 26). This general ability to 'make sense of the past' for contemporary life purposes is divided into three specific competencies: historical experience, historical interpretation and historical orientation. The competence of historical *experience* deals with the ability to have temporal experience. It involves the capacity to understand the difference between past and present and the nature of temporal change in human affairs. It is with such a competence that individuals can develop their historical sensibilities and empathetic understanding of predecessors' actions and thinking. Historical consciousness is also characterized by the competence of *interpretation*, which allows individuals to grasp the interconnectedness of the three dimensions of time (past, present and envisioned future). This ability to organize the internal unity of time via a concept of continuity makes the experiences of the past relevant for present-day purposes and influences the shaping of the future. In practical terms, it entails the competence to evaluate the significance of the past for understanding the present. Finally, historical consciousness is characterized by the competence of *orientation*. Such a competence entails the capacity to mobilize historical experiences and interpretations for the purpose of life-orientation. It involves 'guiding action by means of notions of temporal change, articulating human identity with historical knowledge, interweaving one's own identity into the concrete warp and woof of historical knowledge' (Rüsen, 2005: 27). It is with the competence of orientation that people can connect with the past and determine their own course of action.

Rüsen (2005: 81) contends that the fundamental form within which historical consciousness realizes its function of orientation is that of the narrative. The purpose of narrative, in Rüsen's view, is to transform the past into meaningful history by giving a direction, sense and coherence to otherwise disorganized past actions and events. He writes:

What historical narration is: it is a system of mental operations defining the field of historical consciousness The most radical experience of time is death. History is a response to this challenge: it is an interpretation of the threatening experience of time. It overcomes uncertainty by seeing a meaningful pattern in the course of time, a pattern responding to human hopes and intentions. This pattern gives a sense to history.

(Rüsen, 2005: 10)

Far from being an oversimplification of realities, narrative would be a solution to how we translate knowing into telling. From this perspective, our ability to make sense of the past for contemporary life purposes would inevitably be connected to narrative acts, or what Jürgen Straub (2005: 54) calls 'narrative competence'. Such competence can be loosely defined in Straub's terms as the 'linguistic and cognitive ability to structure a text as a story' (Straub, 2005: 55). In recent years, history educators in Germany, Sweden and other European nations have explored the importance of narrative competence, looking at learners' ability to develop historical narratives and their ability to critically analyse the deep structure of historical narratives (Eliasson *et al.*, 2015; Kölbl and Konrad, 2015; Waldis *et al.*, 2015).

Probing students' narrative competence, not factual ignorance

Unfortunately, Canadian educators are only now starting to investigate these narrative aspects of historical consciousness. Until recently, the focus was placed instead on questions of national belonging, citizenship and master narratives of the nation (Granatstein, 1998; Osborne, 2000;

Sandwell, 2012). Indeed, it is generally thought in Canada that young people know very little about their history. The argument is framed around public survey results showing poor recall of specific narrative knowledge of the nation. The underlying assumption held publicly is that the purpose of schooling is to transmit a master narrative that will unify the diverse population under a community of memory. As such, students are expected to remember important facts and defining events and characters – the ‘mythhistories’ – of this master narrative (Francis, 1997; Létourneau, 2006). The poor performance of young and adult citizens on these surveys serves to demonstrate the *soi-disant* abysmal historical knowledge of Canadians and the necessity of reinforcing national history in school.

Unfortunately, Canadians spend so much time surveying students on narrative content knowledge they *don’t* know that we completely overlook what it is that they *do* know about history. The result is that, until recently, we knew precious little about how young Canadians create narrative understandings of their national community. But things are now gradually changing, at least in our scholarly understanding of students’ thinking (Duquette, 2015; Létourneau and Moisan, 2004; Létourneau and Caritey, 2008; Robichaud, 2011; Lévesque *et al.*, 2013; Zanazanian, 2015). Instead of assessing the mastery of content knowledge, this research addressed a more fundamental question about young people’s historical consciousness: how do students narrate the history of the nation?

Through such a question, it becomes possible to venture into the thinking of learners (on the positive link between ‘narrative’ and ‘thinking’, see the rich literature in the field of narratology providing strong arguments, including Gérard Genette (1983), Gerald Prince (1982), and Paul Ricoeur (1983–1985). See also the didactical implications of narrative writing in the work of Bruno Garnier (2016)). Questions of memory recall contribute to an important facet of historical consciousness, but unfortunately they do not tell us in any sophisticated way how this knowledge is acquired and used for contemporary life purposes. To discover this, we need to consider strategies and tasks that are designed to study both narrative knowledge and thinking jointly. This approach, as Kadriye Ercikan and Peter Seixas (2015: 5) note, is seen in assessments of cognition that ‘do not separate out content and skills’.

In an attempt to operationalize historical consciousness for research purposes, our research team has turned to the question of narrative competence. In doing so, we chose to investigate how French Canadian students create stories of the national past by providing them with the following task: *Please tell us the history of the nation, as you know it.* The exact question presented to students in the study we consider here was as follows: ‘Tell us the history of Ontario as you know it.’ In the previous two studies (conducted in Québec and New Brunswick (NB)) the exact wording changed according to the historical community in question. In Québec, the task was ‘Please account for the history of Québec since the beginning the way you see it, remember it, or understand it.’ In NB it was ‘Present or tell, as you know it or remember it, the history of Acadia from the beginning.’ While a satisfactory account of why each study adopted a regional approach to the nation would require a more detailed explanation, suffice to say that Canada has, from the beginning, been imagined as a federal state created in reference to different founding nations with a clear sense of regional identity, as exemplified in the terms ‘Acadians’, ‘Québécois’ and ‘Franco-Ontarian’.

While this undertaking may initially appear banal, it is far more complex and powerful than anticipated. As Rüsen (2005) stresses, the active reconstruction of the past as narrative is the core of engagement with history (see Waldis *et al.*, 2015). Narration is thus a particularly relevant tool for this research. First, it places students in the role of narrators who have to mobilize historical knowledge in the form of a story that gives a particular orientation and meaning to the collective past – a sort of global positioning system (GPS) for history purposes.

The task is thus meant to empower them through the use of a meaning-making tool. Second, it engages students in a cognitive task that is already familiar to them (Bruner, 1985; Carr, 1986). Studies have shown that children, particularly in North America, are exposed to narratives very early in their life, from bedtime stories to textbooks to cartoons, movies, and family and oral accounts (Barton and Levstik, 2004; Egan, 1989; Levstik, 2008). Using narrative to make sense of history, then, does not require the mastery of a new form of thinking and writing about the past. Finally, asking students to tell us the history of the national community makes it possible to study the quality of students' narratives and, at the same time, the various ideas they use to construct their story. As the task was presented in class but not as a school assignment, students could choose to write their story in their own personal way, with reference to sources from, but not limited to, school history. This research offers additional results to previous studies conducted with Francophones in Québec (Létourneau and Moisan, 2004; Létourneau and Caritey, 2008) and in New Brunswick (NB) (Robichaud, 2011).

Methods

The findings presented in this article are based on a study with young French Canadians living in Ottawa, Ontario (Lévesque *et al.*, 2015). The city of Ottawa is the federal capital of Canada with an urban population of over one million habitants. Of this total, 152,000 persons claim to be French-speaking Canadians. As per the Ontario School Act, French Canadians of Ontario (also known as 'Franco-Ontarians') are entitled to French-language education in the province. There are ten Francophone secondary schools in the greater Ottawa region as well as one bilingual university. Voluntary participants from two Ottawa high schools (average age: 16.5) ($n=58$) and from the University of Ottawa (average age: 26) ($n=18$) who had successfully completed their compulsory courses in national history (offered in Grades 7, 8 and 10) were invited to complete a short questionnaire on historical consciousness. In terms of demographics, 53 participants claimed French as first language, 7 claimed English, 1 claimed French/English, and 15 indicated another first language. A total of 43 participants were born in the province of Ontario, 19 in Québec, 2 in other Canadian provinces, 11 in other countries, and 1 unknown. All stories were produced in the French language but for the purpose of this article excerpts are presented in English. Participants were given one hour to complete the questionnaire in class without the help of their teacher or any source of historical information. Students were told that the task of writing a history of their national community was for research purposes only, with no 'right or wrong' answer. In other words, we told them we were not fishing for their factual knowledge recall nor their ability to search the internet. Rather, the goal was to understand how the historical knowledge they had acquired was mobilized for structuring a narrative vision of the collective past; that is, effecting a temporal orientation in the present by means of using past realities. The questionnaire also included some demographic and identity questions. In particular, students had to choose on a scale (from 0 to 7) their self-identification with collective groups (Canada, French Canada/French Ontario). This approach made it possible to identify students' self-asserting sense of belonging and membership to particular historical groups; that is to say, their sense of national identification.

All data was coded by three separate raters using an inductive-deductive method of analysis. General categories of narrative orientations were initially informed by a literature review. Through an iterative process, we revised the categories to reflect the dominant themes, recurrent constant features, and visions expressed in students' narratives. Stories were coded on two separate levels: intra-narrative (sentence) and overall narrative (dominant orientation) (Propp, 2003; Wertsch, 2008). As narratives can be polythetic in nature, and borrow from

different perspectives, the overall orientation was determined by the preponderance of internal sentence coding combined with a synoptic analysis of the dominant vision expressed by the narrator in the story. Table I presents the different categories and descriptors used for the analysis. To assess the impact of identity on narrative orientation, we combined results from questions on self-identification with narrative orientations using QDA Miner, a powerful software application for mixed-methods research. Findings for this paper deal with the content and overall orientations of the narratives and the impact of identity on narrative structure. Given the small number of volunteer participants, results of this study do not claim to represent all young French Canadians' historical perspectives. That being said, the study offers new findings on French Canadian students' historical consciousness and raises key issues that are critical for the future of history education in Canada, and possibly in other multinational countries.

Table I: Narrative orientations and descriptors

Categories	Descriptors
Story of French Canadian survival	<p>Narrative vision centred on the historical development of French Canadians in Canada. This vision presents three possible variations:</p> <p><i>Juste cause:</i> Narrative vision centred on French Canadian positive struggles for nationhood. Focus is placed on activism and militancy and the collective desire to construct a distinctive national community over time. This narrative orientation highlights the exploits of (past/current) figures who have played a vital role in the survival of French Canadian culture and identity. The future of the community is presented in positive terms (e.g. 'We fought for our rights and we are now recognized in Canada').</p> <p><i>Adversity:</i> Narrative vision centred on French Canadian difficulties (struggles, threats) and successes (victories) over time. This story emphasizes the various challenges and contradictions pertaining to the historical development of French Canadians in Canada. The future is unclear and uncertain. Vigilance is <i>de rigueur</i> for collective survival (e.g. 'French Canadians have displayed a lot of courage but the threat of assimilation still weighs on our shoulders').</p> <p><i>Victimhood:</i> Narrative centred on a pessimistic vision of French Canadian historical development. Focus is placed on stories of collective oppression, marginalization and victimization. The narrative presents either a negative vision for the future (assimilation) or a radical solution (rebellion) to resolve the collective fate of French Canadians (e.g. 'English is the dominant language in the country and French Canadians continue to be assimilated').</p>
Story of Canadian nation-building	<p>Narrative vision framed on the historical development of Canada from colony to sovereign nation and focused on Canadian institutions, rights, economy and/or geography. Canada is presented as an independent North American nation state made up of different provinces and groups, including French Canadians. Little emphasis is placed on distinctive memories and identities, which are subsumed to the Canadian historical community. Contemporary views can also include reference to Canadian democracy, peace and way of life (e.g. 'Leaders such as Baldwin and Lafontaine played a key role in the establishment of Canadian institutions and responsible government which are symbols of Canada today').</p>

Categories	Descriptors
Story of modernity	Narrative vision of the collective past inspired by social history and presenting the development of Canadian society in terms of social interactions and/or progress. Emphasis is placed on processes of industrialization, urbanization, immigration, unionization, schooling and so on. In this narrative, the state plays a key institutional role for economic prosperity and social justice through various mechanisms (taxation, redistributive policies, healthcare, public schooling, etc.) (e.g. 'Canada was strongly affected by the Depression and the two world wars, industries were transformed and women took a greater place in the workforce').
Story of communities and diversity	Narrative vision of the collective past centred on the historical experiences of minority and cultural groups in Canada (the 'Canadian mosaic'). Emphasis is placed on the dynamics of these groups and their struggle for cultural recognition and social acceptance. In its <i>positive</i> version, the story presents the progress of community interaction and integration, notably through policies such as multiculturalism. In its <i>negative</i> version, emphasis is placed on systemic issues of racism, discrimination, inequality and pressure for assimilation (e.g. 'Europeans came to Canada, interacted with Aboriginal people and managed to destroy their culture').
Neutral or descriptive story	Narrative presenting various events from the past without any coherent or explicit interpretative vision of history. This type of narrative can also offer a presentist perspective, looking exclusively at present-day developments in Canada (e.g. 'Canada is a large country made up of ten provinces and Ottawa is the national capital of Canada').
Life story	Narrative centred on personal/family history, often in reference to larger historical developments such as immigration or schooling. This type of story not only presents life experiences but also serves to define the personal identity of the narrator. The story becomes a way to express who the person is (e.g. 'I was born in Mexico and came to Canada with my parents. French is my second language').
Undetermined	Texts presenting no narrative information or information irrelevant to the task of telling the history of the nation (e.g. 'I don't remember anything!').

Students' narrative orientations: The struggle for survival

This study reveals that young French Canadians are far from being historical amnesiacs, as often portrayed publicly. The great majority (76 per cent) produced coherent narratives using temporal experience and imputing a particular orientation to past realities. Few participants presented descriptive (17 per cent) or unclear (7 per cent) stories on the history of the nation. As might be expected, the length and depth of narratives varied significantly between high school and university students. The former produced relatively shorter stories (average: 106 words) compared with the latter (average: 462 words). High school students also included less historiographical information than their university counterparts, relying more extensively on one or two broader historical trends (e.g. colonization, war) and citing simplified periods of historical development (e.g. discovery, French/English wars, Francophone school question). From this analysis, it is clear that younger students had more difficulty producing a comprehensive narrative of the historical development of the nation. Their use of past events contain significant 'gaps in history' which amount to what Denis Shemilt (2000: 90) calls the syndrome of the 'volcano eruptions' – some 'event-space' changes, separated by long periods of quiescence in

which nothing happens. The following excerpt offers a typical example of students' simplifications of event-space changes in national history:

First of all, I don't remember much of what I learned in history. All I remember is that English and French were at war over the colonization of Canada. The English beat the French and colonized Ontario. In spite of this, there are still Francophones in the province.

While the length and depth of stories differ between younger and older students, there is an interesting parallel in terms of narrative patterns and frameworks. The majority of participants (57 per cent) produced stories informed by the narrative orientation of 'French Canadian survival'. Few wrote narratives on Canadian nation-building (11 per cent), modernity (5 per cent) or diversity (3 per cent).¹ The following are typical examples of narratives produced by participants:

French Canadian survival:

In 1912, Regulation 17 is imposed: French will no longer be taught in schools (except for the first two years). We teach only in English. Various movements of resistance and fights will lead a change of Regulation 17 around 1927.

These days, we are a much larger population with an increasing number of French schools but the struggle to preserve our status as a minority with collective rights and an official language is still present.

Canadian nation-building:

On the political side, we can identify intense debates between parties such as the Family Compact and the Liberals of Baldwin who is associated with Lafontaine in Québec. Together, they will play a significant role in the establishment of institutions for building the country such as responsible government. Ontario is also a key promoter of the Canadian Confederation of 1867.

Modernity:

In the 20th century, Ontario is affected by the Great Depression and the two World Wars. Its industries are transformed and women enter the workforce to replace men who have left for the war effort. The end of the Second World War changes social relations – women want labour rights and modern struggles emerge (equality, segregation, etc.).

Communities and diversity:

With the American revolution, many loyalists choose to leave the 13 colonies as a result of anti-loyalists movements. They receive the promise of free land in Canada, notably in the Maritimes and in the Great Lakes region. Ontario will witness a growth in British population, loyal to the crown and willing to leave the United-States. Some American slaves will also take the opportunity to escape and settle freely in southern Ontario in places like Princetown? Or Princeville?

In line with the findings on narrative orientations, the most cited events in the texts are not about the development of the country; they deal mostly with historical tensions or conflicts between French and English Canadians: the Seven Years' War, Conquest of New France, abolition of French language education (known as 'Regulation XVII') in 1912, and civil protests

¹ The complete breakdown for students' narrative orientations is as follows: French Canadian survival (57%), Canadian nation-building (11%), modernity (5%), diversity (3%), descriptive (17%) and undetermined (7%). It is worth noting that descriptive stories were found exclusively in high school students' narratives.

to prevent the closure of the only Francophone hospital in Ontario, Montfort, in the 1990s. These key episodes in national history are not presented as isolated incidents. Rather, they are part of a distinctive emplotment, as recurrent elements of tension and rupture for the development of the collective life of French Canadians. The conclusion of their stories is equally affected by this narrative emplotment. In organizing the internal unity of their stories via a concept of continuous French/English struggle, students made the experiences of the collective past relevant for present-day purposes. While some had distinctively positive/negative visions of French Canada, the majority opted for the perspective of 'adversity' (see also Létourneau, 2006, 2014). This particular concept of militancy refers to a permanent state of struggle to make the most of adverse life situations. Stories of adversity are not exclusively about a negative vision of the past. Instead they bridge time differences with a conception of human experiences characterized by a societal condition of serious and continuous difficulty; vigilance is *de rigueur*. The following excerpt is an example of an adversity perspective:

I know that, to protect themselves, Francophones developed strategies to preserve their language, their culture, and their religion with the establishment of Catholic school boards. With these, the French population of Ontario is still alive today because people have always fought tooth and nail for survival despite strong assimilation pressure.

Why use the narrative orientation of French Canadian survival?

Our participants could structure the history of the nation in many different ways. After all, there are multiple stories of the nation to which students are exposed and that they could draw from in Canadian society. Yet, the majority preferred to structure their narratives along the storyline of French Canadian collective memory. Unlike ethnic groups, Canadian national minorities possess a more or less complete culture, with a shared language and collective memory, that preceded the creation of the country. For French Canadians, their historical culture has benefited from well-established collective rights and institutions making it possible to preserve and diffuse this culture over time. So it is very likely that young Francophones from Ottawa, like their counterparts in Québec (see Létourneau, 2006), made use of historical references, teleological schemes and representations of the nation that are salient in French Canadian popular culture, remembrance and flag ceremonies, films, television, heritage sites, community activities and family stories.

School history also plays a key role in this process. Indeed, students in Francophone schools in Ontario learn Canadian history from the perspective of French Canadian development in the country. Curricular objectives explicitly promote 'Francophone culture' and 'identity-building' (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) as a way to counter the dominant influence of English Canadian cultural identity. Public schooling is clearly not neutral with regard to the common good of French Canadian culture. To be 'good citizens' in the Ontario French-speaking curriculum is not equated with Canadian citizenship; it means being part of a historical culture based on French language, memory and identity.

The overt relationship between school history and identity raises the question of national identification. What impact, if any, does identity have on historical consciousness and narratives of the nation? This is an important question as research reveals something novel in the study of narrative competence: the impact of the narrator's identity on the structure of narrative. Works in narratology have suggested that what narrators say is as much about themselves as about the world they wish to describe (Carr, 1961; Carr, 1986). Yet, to this day, we lack empirical knowledge on this particular relationship between identity and national narration in Canadian education.

What we found is telling. How students define themselves in reference to particular communities seriously affects the structure and content of their narrative. On the one hand, the more strongly students identified with the national community, the more detailed was the story. For instance, we found (in our intra-textual analysis) that students who identified strongly with either 'Canada' or 'French Canada' produced narratives with significantly richer content, including more events, concepts and personages and having stories infused with more extensive historiographical knowledge. This means that national identification not only enhances community belonging but also confers certain cognitive and emotional benefits to students. Those who feel more strongly attached to the nation wrote stories with a richer set of events that constitute elements of their identity in the realm of historical consciousness (Rüsen, 2005).

Yet besides this, a strong sense of collective identification affects significantly the *structure* of students' narratives. Those who identified strongly with a national community were more likely (63 per cent) to produce narrow, militant stories that mobilize certain past experiences (conflicts, humiliations and traumas) engraved in the collective memory of French Canada and to use them as a moral and orientation mode in reference to present-day situations. Their narrative visions were not only about the collective past, but also the present and future of the community:

In my opinion, the history of Francophones in Ontario is the most important. Even today, we still fight every day to keep our own identity as French Canadians.

French in Canada was originally the first language. But things changed when control over the country passed from France to Great Britain. However, there are still Francophone regions such as Montréal, Québec and elsewhere in Canada. At one point, they [English] tried to abolish French language in schools but women [teachers] like Béatrice Desloges and Jeanne Sauvé continued to teach French in clandestine schools. The Francophone community also united when they tried to close Montfort Hospital, one of the rare French-speaking hospitals and again the people rebelled.

Students who identified strongly with a particular national group were also more inclined to write stories in the first person plural ('we' and 'our') and make use of particular concepts such as 'community,' 'culture' and 'history' (Lévesque *et al.*, 2015). By doing so, these students purposely defined themselves in reference to a community of memory to which they claim to belong. In establishing a continuous temporal connection with the past, they were thus able to identify with bygone strangers. Hence, a European voyager such as Étienne Brûlé, who visited the Ottawa region in the 1600s, was identified as the first 'Franco-Ontarian'—an identity concept that would have been completely foreign to him:

The history of Franco-Ontarians is characterized by many historical events and actors. One of them is Étienne Brûlé who, for many, is the very first Franco-Ontarian person.

While the analysis is still at an early stage, what we have found so far indicates that the ability to create a narrative of the nation and ascribe to it a particular historical orientation visibly entails the interweaving of one's own identity 'into the concrete warp and woof of historical knowledge' (Rüsen, 2005: 70). History, from this view, is clearly an authored narrative (Munslow, 2007). Works on the nature of the narrative competence need to take into account students' own identity, and ultimately their willingness to scrutinize their own sense of belonging. Indeed, the students who felt most attached to a historical community were equally those who produced the most fervent, militant historical narratives, often phrased in the first person plural. These were largely informed by a single historical interpretation of Canadian history. Of course, history is always a process of making sense of the past in relation to the present. But it could be very misleading if 'we,' contemporary citizens, think that historical actors of the time were

just like 'us'. This presentist conflation is highly problematic and contrary to historical thinking, perspective-taking and empathy (Ashby and Lee, 1987; Davis *et al.*, 2001; Lévesque, 2008).

Interestingly, our results present little variation between a strong identification with 'Canada' and 'French Canada'. This is surprising, as a strong sense of identification with the country as a nation would normally favour a Canadian nation-building type of narrative. But few students (6 per cent) followed this pattern. What this suggests is that our participants did not see the two communities as mutually exclusive. In fact, Francophone students considered Canadian identity as a conduit for structuring a French Canadian narrative of the nation. This is an important finding that refutes accepted nationalist views of history education. Canadian identity can function as a convenient standpoint for people to narrate different histories of the nation. Identity-building is a complex process, and in multicultural states it is hazardous to pretend that national belonging can be understood in only one singular way by its members, or that we should generate only one national narrative to promote solidarity and social cohesion. While the interpretative work of historical consciousness is tied to a procedure of identity-building, this process is always relational between the individual and the collective self. Human agency is thus important for understanding historical learning. As Rüsen reminds us, 'the constitutive role of needs and interests in dealing with the past, and the function of remembering in orienting human activity and forming all kinds of identity are of constitutive importance for historical studies' (Rüsen, 2005: 131).

Discussion and conclusion

In this article, I argued that historical narratives are central to our ability to make sense of the past and orient ourselves in the course of time. Studies of young people's narratives of the collective past offer important findings for the development of the narrative competence. Interestingly, I suggested that the bulk of studies conducted on students' narrative competence have examined the substantive knowledge of their stories and, to a lesser degree, their narrative orientation and identity. Little has been said on the nature of historical narrative and the process of narrating the history of the nation. This is ironic. Many historians and educators use narrative in their respective works, whether it is in the books they use, the movies they show, the exhibits they visit or the lectures they perform.

Unfortunately, school history programmes in Canada do not problematize the notion of historical narrative in any disciplinary way. This means, on the one hand, that students do not get extensive familiarity with what historical narratives are, how they are constructed, and for what purpose. Even when school programmes explicitly adopt a disciplinary approach and urge students to 'think like a historian' or use 'historical thinking skills' (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2013) rarely do they explain how narratives are constructed in terms of perspective, interpretation and orientation. Because the narrative thinking process is not rendered transparent to students, they are thus unlikely to understand why stories of the nation are told in a particular way (the *contingency* of historical claims) and how they could be narrated in other justifiable ways (the *agency* of the narrator). For instance, this critical process would allow French Canadian students to understand that their narratives privilege some historical experiences at the expense of others. In structuring the national past in terms of French/English dichotomy and struggles between monolithic groups (us vs. them), students oversimplify historical interpretation in the name of identity-building. History educators might reveal explicitly these 'identity effects' and encourage them to consider alternative narratives (e.g. looking at English Canadians who supported French Canadian claims, considering the perspectives of other 'national' groups within Canada such as Aboriginal people).

On the other hand, students do not get many opportunities to generate their own narratives of the national past. Canadian history curricula include ‘communications’ as a cross-disciplinary competence; however, the use of narrative writing is not a requirement. As such, history teachers do not feel compelled to teach and evaluate narrative competence. In fact, narrative writing is seen as a literacy skill (taught in language arts), not a fundamental feature of historical consciousness. As Ercikan and Seixas note, one clear difference between North American and European models of cognition ‘can be seen in respect to the “narrative competence” in historical thinking’ (Ercikan and Seixas, 2015: 3). Cognition models influenced by German writings on historical consciousness make the relationship between historical thinking and narrative more explicit and teachable (Körber and Meyer-Hamme, 2015). The result of this divide in education is consequential. Canadian students are not exposed to the critical analysis and writing of historical narratives. Studies suggest that (1) young learners have great familiarity with narratives in their daily lives; that (2) they can gradually develop a sophisticated understanding of narratives; that (3) particular narrative problems and misconceptions are common among learners; and that (4) these problems need to be addressed if learners are to progress in their narrative competence (Barton, 1996; Lee and Shemilt, 2004; VanSledright and Brophy, 1992; Voss and Wiley, 2000; Waldis *et al.*, 2015).

In a multinational state like Canada, we cannot expect national groups to be neutral on issues of history and identity as these are vital to the survival of their societal culture. Yet, the simplified narratives of the nation that public schools convey to students, notably the French Canadian survival narrative, do not equip them to live and orient themselves in a highly diverse country made up of differing memories and histories. To be truly usable, students’ stories of Canada must be more complex and multidimensional in nature. In order to play a more productive role in this process, history educators need to be more conscious of and proactive in providing students with what I call engagement in narrative competence. Any sound approach to helping students develop this competence must give them not a preferred national narrative to orient their lives (which is traditionally the role of collective memory), but the scholastic opportunities and tools for making sense of multiple narratives of the nation. Students must come to understand and appreciate that there are diverse, and possibly contradictory, narratives of the collective past that coexist within a national historical culture. Students’ own stories must ultimately be ‘polythetic and admit alternative narratives’ (Shemilt, 2000: 98). Indeed, what defines Canadian citizens is not a shared collective memory but their historical commitment to a distinctively Canadian deliberation about the past and future of the country (Taylor, 1993; Webber, 1994). That deliberative process is only possible – and viable – if citizens have the dispositions, abilities and tools to understand one another and build a democratic society founded on mutual respect and accommodation of differing narratives of the nation (Sears, 2010). Simplified national narratives create memory silos and breed exclusion and mutual ignorance (Hodgetts, 1968; Moisan, 2016). If school history is to play a meaningful role in shaping the historical consciousness of young French Canadians, it must find better ways to orient them in these global times.

Acknowledgement

This study was conducted by Stéphane Lévesque, Jean-Philippe Croteau and Raphaël Gani and financed by the University of Ottawa. I owe special thanks to all the participants and their classroom teachers who volunteered for this project.

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