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A narrative theory of history and identity:

Social identity, social representations, society and the individual

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The concept of social identity, as described by social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and its subsequent elaboration self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) provides a nucleus from which psychologists can understand the relationship between individuals and the social worlds they inhabit. Identity from this perspective is not something *belonging* to the individual, as a set of fixed traits, but something that *emerges* out of an interaction between the person and the situation. The interplay between a person's self-concept and the situation, containing the social forces emanating from other people and institutions that direct them how to think, feel, and behave is at the heart of the process of identification (Reicher &

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Hopkins, 2001; Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994; Turner et al., 1987). A person has a fluid repertoire of self-categorizations that enable self-positioning as “one” with different in-groups, and responses to being positioned as “other” by other people (Dresler-Hawke & Liu, 2006). Self-categorization activates socially shared cultural knowledge that allows the individual to conform to situation appropriate group norms for behaviour. The same person may sometimes act as a mother, as a social worker, or a nationalist. A person’s subjective sense of social identification provides a navigation system for dealing with the different demands of these different in-groups and enables differentiation from various out-groups. This fluidity in social identification allows a person to sometimes activate maternal norms for caring, other times conform to nationalistic beliefs about defending the motherland, and still other times react against prejudice, and so on.

Most of the literature on social identity and self-categorization theory has focused on individual-level processes, examining how a person’s sense of self-identification is primed or made salient by different situational factors, along with subsequent implications for thinking, feeling, and acting. Through social comparison, a person strives for positive distinctiveness, coming to understand him or herself as part of a group or category that is distinct from out-groups, and has positive value relative to them. Self-categorization appears to be both a cause and consequence of socially shared beliefs among group members (Bar-Tal, 2000), and is associated with a move towards the homogenization of beliefs within the group and an enhanced polarization of differences between groups (Turner et al., 1987).

By contrast, less effort has been devoted to theorizing about the societal factors at play shaping the *content* of social norms or societal beliefs for appropriate group behaviour. Because the situation consists of a multi-level and complex aggregate of social forces, in experimental social psychology the situation is treated as an impenetrable “black box” with functions corresponding to experimental analogues (e.g., majority/minority status, high/low power, etc.) whose distribution, content, and structure in society is either unknown or assumed to consist of abstract universal.

Recent work in the area of social representations (Moscovici, 1988, 1984; for a comprehensive review see Wagner & Hayes, 2005), the “other” great European theory of social psychology, has demonstrated that behaviour in culture-specific inter-group situations may be more precisely delineated by analysis of the content and sources of relevant collectively shared systems of knowledge and belief. In particular, Liu and Hilton (2005) have outlined the ways that socially shared representations of history condition nations and peoples with objectively similar interests to take qualitatively different actions and attitudes with respect to international relations and issues of internal diversity. Borrowing from dynamical systems theory, Liu and colleagues (under review) have argued for a “sensitive dependence on initial conditions” for collective actions. That is, the same political situation could engender quite a different probability space for responses from different peoples at different moment in time, depending on their social representations of history.

History endows certain peoples (and nations) with “charters” (Malinowski, 1926) that use the accumulated wisdom of the past to justify societal arrangements for the distribution of resources and the allocation of social roles both internally and internationally. It provides legitimizing myths or ideologies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999) that explain how things are and ought to be based on different forms of collective remembering (Halbwachs, 1950/1980; Pennebaker, Paez, & Rimé, 1997) and their application to current situations (Spellman & Holyoak, 1993; Southgate, 2005). Moreover, cumulative historical experience can result in the formation of cognitive narrative templates (Wertsch, 2002) or a societal ethos (Bar-Tal, 2000) that structure and interpret new experiences based on recurring historical patterns. In this way, social representations of history structure the “objective” situation through a process of selective interpretation, biased attribution, restricted assessment of legitimacy and agency, and by privileging certain historically warranted social categories and category systems above other alternatives. They provide an important avenue of integration between universal theories of identity and inter-group relations and culture-specific formulations based on the specific *content* of knowledge and beliefs.

Following Bruner (1986, 1990), authors such as Jovchelovitch (2002), Laszlo (1997), and Flick (1997) suggest that social representations are organized not simply as cognitive categories, but contain narrative forms as well. Historical narratives are stories that communicate symbolic and practical meaning over and above the “bare facts” of history. The validity of narrative hinges on its credibility, authenticity, relevance, and coherence, which in turn are dependent

on the proper use of narrative features – time, plot, characters, perspective, narrative intentions and evaluation. The paradox of narrative is that it is a universally human mechanism of communication and cognition, but at the same time, the form of knowledge created by this mechanism is validated and maintained in time and space as a part of particular society's beliefs. This dual nature of narrative has created productive points of contact between history and social psychology, beginning with Dilthey's work on the history of ideas (Blanco & Rosa, 1997). This interface allows the introduction of cognitive structures with psychological content into the analysis of historical narrative as explanation or interpretation.

Bruner (1986, p. 43) views narrative as a medium for constructing psychological and cultural reality so that history may be "brought to life". Through such devices as perspective and story structure, narrative connects individuals to a collective through symbols, knowledge, and meaning. Studying how people tell and understand stories, including performances of their own history or mythology, enlightens us about the process of how a group creates a social reality (Shore, 1996, Ch 9 & 10). The process of how these stories collide or collude with stories told by others, especially other groups enables a person to construct a personal sense of self amidst this confluence of story elements, collective and private, accepted and rejected (McAdams, 1993). One of the major lessons of social psychology is that behaviour is not consistent across situations; what a narrative approach asserts is that our systems of meaning are well-adapted to make sense of

such incongruities, by telling stories of how these different realities we encounter cohere from a subjective point of view.

Assmann (1992) offers a synthetic theoretical framework for collective memories and identity that explicitly relates past and present representational processes to group identity. He distinguishes *cultural* versus *communicative* memory. Communicative memory embraces memories from the proximate past, shared with contemporaries. A characteristic example is generational memory that emerges in time and decays with time, i.e. with the death of its carriers. The span of communicative memory is thus about 60-80 years, or three to four generations. Studies of autobiographical memory that concern the communicative memory of a society from the perspective of the individual have found that events experienced in late adolescence-early adulthood (between age 11-20, see the reminiscence phenomenon, Fitzgerald, 1988; Schuman & Rodgers, 2004) prove to be the most memorable for each generation. Forty years, i.e., half of the communicative memory period is again a critical threshold. After elapsing forty years, those who experienced a significant event early in their adulthood, fearing that their memories will disappear when they have departed, feel motivated to record and transmit their experiences. A salient example is the proliferation of the holocaust literature from the mid-eighties.

Cultural memory, on the other hand, goes back to the supposed origins of the group. Culture objectifies memories that have proven to be important to the group, it encodes these memories into stories, preserves them as public

narratives, and makes it possible for new members to share group history. In modern societies, the task of generating cultural memory is often assigned to professionals (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Southgate, 2005, chapters 3 & 4). Some, like historians and museum curators adhere to disciplinary standards of objectivity and fact-finding. Others, like politicians, use the past for different purposes, such as motivating and justifying political actions. Hence it behoves us to understand the content of lay representations of history and their potential for maintaining group identity and mobilizing political action.

The content of socially shared beliefs about history

The central characteristic of lay conceptions of history is that they privilege recent events (e.g., last 100 years) in politics and war. Liu et al. (2005)'s survey research found that over two-thirds of both the people and events nominated as the most important in world history across 12 cultures concerned politics and war, with war taking up the lion's share (see Pennebaker et al., 2006 for similar findings). This pattern is repeated with variation for national histories; for New Zealand (Liu, Wilson, McClure, & Higgins, 1999), Malaysia and Singapore (Liu, Lawrence, Ward, & Abraham, 2002), and Taiwan (Huang, Liu, & Chang, 2004), political events are again dominant, but as relatively peaceful young nations the percentages devoted to war are lower. Hungary, on the other hand (László, Ehmann, and Imre, 2002) shows a popular history that is dominated by warfare and violent revolution, and draws more deeply from the distant past where the Magyar nation was formed. The topics of technological and economic advance, which are often

central to expert histories (e.g., Hart, 1992; Kennedy, 1987), are almost invisible in lay histories (where ordinary people nominate events or figures and importance is determined by consensus). The implication of these data is that according to the popular imagination, history and the peoples inhabiting it are created by the politics of warfare. The idea put forward by sociologists of history (e.g., Anderson, 1983) that the modern nation-state is a product of the collective imagination made possible by advances in literacy and mass communication has no currency among lay peoples. Rather, they believe the alternative theory that, "The growth of the modern state, as measured by its finances, is explained primarily not in domestic terms but in terms of geopolitical relations of violence" (Mann, 1986, p. 490)

Politicians, media, and lay people alike appear to act under the premise that war is what makes the nation-state. It is no wonder that war is glorified in the collective memory of victorious nations (see Olick, 2003) and that the availability of such memories is correlated with willingness to fight in future conflict (Paez, Liu, Techio, Slawuta, Zlobina, & Cabecinhas, under review). The phenomenon of "rallying around the flag" during conflict with another nation must also be considered as normative. Selective recall of historical events appears to be essential for legitimizing myths or ideologies that portray objection to war as illegitimate, disloyal, or incorrect; such arguments were employed repeatedly by British Prime Minister Blair in justifying the invasion of Iraq (Southgate, 2005, pg. 60). Collective memories of war are refreshed by new conflicts (Schuman & Rodgers, 2004), and behavior in war weighs heavily on attitudes towards nationalities, as illustrated by internationally

negative perceptions of America in the wake of the Iraq War (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2006). In extreme cases of protracted conflict, as in Israel, the collective emotional orientation may become contaminated by fear, producing a societal ethos characterized by deep mistrust of the out-group and perpetual readiness for conflict (Bar-Tal, 2001; see also Staub, 1988). More generally, the extent to which the social identities of peoples are forged in the crucible of conflict and defined by their behavior in war may be a product of long-term trends in the evolution of social power, particularly the development of the state (Mann, 1986). Tilly (1975) may be read from a psychological perspective to suggest that the preparation, prosecution and consequences of war drove the development of European societies to become the first capable of producing mass identification with the state. At present, it is primarily nationalities, ethnicities, and religions can mobilize collectivities to kill *en* masse, and it cannot be coincidental that these are the groups for which history, and its promise of immortality (see Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) matters most.

On the other hand, there is great variation in the type of event that is nominated as the most important in a single nation's history. This has definite implications for a whole range of group-specific attitudes and behaviours, particularly in managing internal diversity. First, certain events predispose the use of certain category systems. The status of the Treaty of Waitangi as the most important historical event in New Zealand(NZ) privileges the signatories of the Treaty, Maori and the Crown, representing NZ Europeans, above other social categories. Numerous historical accounts (e.g., King, 2004) portray the

nation as a “partnership” established between members of these groups dating back to the colonial era (Liu, 2005). Even in the domain of implicit associations these two groups are closer to national symbols than other demographically numerous ethnicities in NZ, such as Asians (Sibley & Liu, in press). Similarly, the status of Mingnan Chinese as the prototype for Taiwanese national identity is bolstered by their status as the aggrieved party in the February 28th incident, the most important event in Taiwanese history. Outside province Chinese, who arrived from the mainland to Taiwan following WWII may see their demographic heritage as a “problem”, and some young outside province people prefer to call themselves “New Taiwanese” to avoid the taint of the Feb 28, 1947 legacy (where mainland Chinese soldiers in the Kuomingtang (KMT) killed and imprisoned large numbers of Mingnan people to establish political control, see Huang, Liu & Chang, 2004).

Second, history privileges certain political issues as perennially central to the national identity. For NZ, Maori-Pakeha issues are often center stage, whereas in Taiwan the cross-straits relationship with the mainland is never far from public consciousness. These two factors predispose an ethno-cultural frame of reference in Taiwan and NZ that contrasts sharply with the category system privileged under a communist reading of history, where the dialectics of class (i.e., workers vs. owners) rather than ethnicity predominate (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). Liu & Atsumi (in press) found in their review of contemporary Chinese history that Maoist readings of history officially endorsed by the Communist state focused on the international solidarity of workers, collaboration between the military industrial complexes of Japan and

the United States, and collusion between ethnic Chinese (such as those in the KMT) and Japanese imperialism. Under such a narrative, class struggle rather than nationality is privileged. The collapse of global communism has been associated with increased national tensions between China and Japan regarding the historical remembrances of war, as China reasserts a more nationalistic narrative of history, where Japanese war crimes are more central (Liu & Atsumi, in press). Similarly, religious readings of history of the variety advocated by extreme fundamentalists like Al-Queda (Al-Zawahiri, 2001) prioritize religious categories and Islamic unity in direct contradiction to competing secular, ethno-cultural, and national categories.

Wertsch (2002) proposes that certain peoples derive cognitive narrative templates that summarize in a general way the major historical dilemmas that have faced them throughout history. According to Wertsch, schematic narrative templates emerge out of repeated use of standard narrative forms produced by history instruction in schools, the popular media, and so forth. The narrative templates that emerge from this process are effective in shaping what we can say and think because: a) they are largely unnoticed, or "transparent" to those employing them, and b) they are a fundamental part of the identity claims of a group. They can be said to impose a plot structure on a range of specific characters, events and circumstances. His work, focused on the former Soviet Union, has identified the following sequence of moves resulting in a cognitive narrative template for Russian history: 1. An initial situation in which the Russian people are living in a peaceful setting where they are no threat to others is disrupted by, 2. The initiation of trouble or

aggression by alien forces which leads to, 3. A time of crisis and great suffering for the Russian people which is, 4. Overcome by the triumph over the alien force by the Russian people, acting heroically and alone. This template has been used to provide explanatory insight into the actions of Russia in signing the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact partitioning the states between the Soviet Union and Germany at the beginning of World War II; Stalin was not being malevolent or aggressive, just acting defensively to bide time before the inevitable battle with Hitler for the survival of the Russian people. This template can be applied to make sense of any number of conflicts involving Russia, from WWII to the Napoleonic Wars to wars with the Mongols, Poles, and Swedes, and they are a model for the sturdiness of Russian identity when faced by external threat.

László, Ehmann and Imre (2002) showed how narrative schemes predict events that are "elevated" in collective memory. In their study, participants had to name and briefly narrate positive and negative events in Hungarian history. There were three typical patterns of events: "Long term victory" (up until the sixteenth century) when Hungarians were victorious, "First victory then defeat" when Hungarians won battles for freedom and independence but eventually failed (in wars of independence against the Turks and then the Habsburgs), and "Long term defeats" when Hungarians only lost (e.g., 1st and 2nd World Wars). It turned out that the "First defeat, than victory" schema was missing from the Hungarian collective memory. This missing schema at least partly explains why Hungarians mentioned the regime change marking the end of Russian occupation in 1989 at a very low frequency among positive events. A

more discursive approach has been used to establish bicultural versus liberal democratic accounts of NZ nationhood (Liu, 2005).

The process of constructing socially shared beliefs about history

There are at least two fundamental reasons for the pre-eminence of warfare in lay histories. The first is its narratability. Socially shared beliefs are above all communicated, and the basic template for human story-telling, as shown in Propp's (1968) classic work on folktales, is conflict. Propp showed that he could decompose the basic structure of collected Russian folktales into 30 or so "moves". While these contained a rich tapestry of events, including support from helpers, gifts from donors, missions from rulers, and obstacles to test worthiness, the basic story-arc of every folktale involved conflict between a protagonist (hero) and antagonist (villain) from an initial state of affairs to a resolution. Stories of conflict channel our hopes and fears into a system of meaning where they can be managed and sometimes resolved. A similar narrative structure of conflict for mythological and religious stories has been theorized by Campbell (1949).

Given how basic folktales and mythology are to human narrative, there is reason to believe that this is the type of story that people tell one another when they gather around the campfire. Lyons and Kashima's (2001, 2003) findings using Bartlett's serial reproduction paradigm suggest that the prototypical form of folktales may be a product of social features of story transmission. They found that when a short written narrative is passed along a

dyadic communication chain, stereotype inconsistent information is filtered out, leaving predominantly stereotype consistent information after about 3-4 transmissions of the story. This effect is due to communication goals (e.g., high stereotype endorsement and stereotype sharedness) rather than memory biases. Peripheral information is very quickly lost in a communication chain. The essential organizing features of a plot, involving the major story arc of conflict between the protagonist and antagonist are likely, however, to be retained. Marques, Paez, Valencia, & Vincze (2006) used a similar paradigm to show that negative historical information (a massacre of Native Americans committed either by Portuguese or Spanish colonists) dropped out more over the course of a communication chain if the massacre was reported as having been committed by the in-group compared to the outgroup.

Second, conflict generates emotion, and collective remembrances are keyed around extreme emotion, both positive and negative (Bar-Tal, 2001; Cabecinhas, 2006; Rimé, 1997). Rimé (in press) reports that people share an emotional event by talking about it to someone else after the episode 80-90% of the time, and this is repeated more often for intense emotions. When an emotional event happens in a person's life, it ripples through that person's community. Once an emotional event is shared once, it is quite likely to be shared again by the listener to a new hearer; Rimé estimates that 50-60 people in a social network may learn about an emotional event affecting one of its members within hours. Collectively shared events, like the September 11 terror bombing, are like a thousand stones hitting the community lake all at once, with ripples of emotional sharing carrying seeds of information to create

a shared new representation at speed (Rimé, 1997). The paradox of socially shared emotions according to Rimé (in press) is that people willingly share a negative emotion even when it reactivates an aversive experience. Because the evidence suggests that socially sharing negative emotions does *not* aid a person's recovery from a traumatic event, it appears that the function of the social sharing of emotions is purely social: it is about community-building and showing empathy rather than instrumental action. Negative events function no less effectively in this regard than positive. Emotions live in the present. Hence, the relative preponderance of recent and negative events in representations of world history (Liu et al., 2005) may be a function of the social sharing of emotions.

Nevertheless, there are not strongly instrumental motives at work in the production of lay perceptions of history. Some theorists have argued that war made the nation-state, and the nation-state thrived on war (Tilly, 1975; Winter & Sivan, 1999). Perhaps the most concentrated nexus of social science research on collective memory concerns the influence of the state on institutional forms of remembering such as those exhibited at museums and enacted at commemorations (e.g., LeGoff, 1992; Olick, 1993; Linsroth, 2002; Schwartz, 1997). Theorists in this area tend to see memory as mediated by institutions that are subject to manipulation and control by the state. The past is mobilized in the service of political agendas such as promoting national unity, and it is not so much recalled as performed through rituals such as parades or docent tours. Paez et al. (under review) characterized the collective remembering of war as institutionally-mediated in-group favoritism,

grounded in dominant values and mobilized by present-day political issues; they viewed biases in this recollection as constrained by inter-state/inter-group power relations as well as personal experiences and word of mouth. Research on commemoration reminds us of the dynamic influence of the present in recreating an idealized past, and the central role of artefacts and social practices in communicating these reconstructions in societal processes.

The Relationship between Individual and Society

In comparison to social identity theory, social representations theory (SRT) has struggled to define the relationship between the individual and society (see Wagner & Hayes, 2005, Ch 10). The problem is that social representations reside at the level of the collective, whereas what is to be explained in psychology is generally at the individual level. No one person could be said to have a "social representation of history", but social representations of history are argued to influence behavior and cognition at the individual level. A simple semantic solution offered by Sibley, Liu, & Kirkwood (2006) is to refer to attitudes or arguments *derived from* social representations when talking about history used to causally influence opinions at the individual level. Liu & Sibley (2006) argue that an individual's attitudes are anchored to not only an intra-personal set of beliefs, but also to an inter-personal network of communications and contacts. An even more theoretically sophisticated solution is provided by Doise (1986), who divides social research into four levels from intra-individual to ideological and is cautious about using data or theory from one level to explain phenomena at another

level. However, such an analysis led Wagner & Hayes (2005) to eschew causal explanation for SRT altogether, and to consider it as a circular theory "in which theoretical terms mutually presuppose each other" (p. 312: a reflexive group maintains a discursive representation and thereby determines its identity and belongingness). Such a stand is entirely incompatible with a mainstream psychology that privileges experimentally derived causal inferences as the most valuable form of knowledge.

Perhaps a more satisfactory solution can be generated from the fact that social representations of history are by definition temporal structures that relate occurrences linked together thematically through time. This means that they can be approached as *narratives*, or stories of events with a temporal structure that can be related thematically from a particular point of view (see Wyer, Adaval, & Colcombe, 2002 for more sharply limited definition). Bruner (1986, 1990) argues that narrative is a fundamental mode of human thinking that is predicated on the pragmatic considerations of communication rather than the dictates of formal logic.

If social representations of history are considered as narratives, then two key properties of narratives, perspective and the ability to generate empathy, can be enlisted to bridge the gulf between the individual, as the recipient of narrative, and the society that is the repository of narratives. Moreover, composition and discursive features of narratives such as coherence, evaluation, agency, spatial-temporal organization are indicative of the psychological orientation and identity of the narrator. In the case of historical narratives, these stories

reflect group (national or ethnic) identity on the one hand, and connect individuals to the group on the other. In this sense, not only can historical texts be analysed as carriers or vehicles of national identity, but other forms of narratives, such as romance or heroic fiction, can be as well. For example, László and colleagues studied the five most popular Hungarian historical novels (László, Kovarine Somogyvary, & Vincze, 2003, László and Vincze, 2004) and pinpointed the role these novels play in the transmission of basic features of Hungarian national identity, like prototypical heroic traits and coping strategies.

Narrative Perspective

The content of a narrative, including elements such as events, characters and circumstances, must be presented from a point of view (Prince, 1987). The only truly omniscient third person voice belongs to God and to authors of fiction. Historians as august as Jacob Burckhardt (1979) in the 19th century wrestled with the problem of narrative perspective being part of the craft, and those following Hayden White (1981, 1987) acknowledge that despite the best of academic intentions to honor truth, history inevitably involves the selection and interpretation of events. It includes a story-telling element that can at best be minimized through careful adherence to explicit disciplinary practices, and at worst can include wilful distortions in the service of a national unity projected by the state (Hein & Selden, 2000; Hobsbawm, 1990; Kohl & Fawcett, 1996). While the invention of tradition (Hobsbawn & Ranger, 1983) and the projection of nationalism into history are problem areas for historians

(Burke, 1989), they are grist for the mill of social psychologists, who see in these distortions manifestations of the interaction between processes of social identity and social representation.

Narrative perspective can be thought of as a relational concept (Bal, 1985) between the producer and the recipient of narrative. According to Wiebe (1991), this is communicated by the distance in time and space the author takes vis-à-vis the content, and by the possibility that the narrator may express a character's beliefs, emotions or evaluations. This latter component of a perspective is sometimes called a psychological perspective (e.g. Uspensky, 1974). Through these components, narrative perspective establishes a *surface structure empathy hierarchy* (Kuno, 1976) that influences how the reader or listener constructs the meaning of the narrated event and it opens the way for *participatory affective responses* (Gerrig, 1996). For instance, Tóth, Vincze, and László (2005) compared the depictions of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy in contemporary Austrian and Hungarian textbooks. One of the major differences they found was that the Hungarian texts included more personal agents as opposed to institutional agents, and mental inferences (e.g., knew, thought, felt etc.) as opposed to direct actions or statements. These narrative devices lead the reader to form the landscape of action according to the landscape of consciousness (Bruner, 1986, p.16), thereby facilitating interpretation and empathy from a Hungarian point of view, effectively personalizing the events. These results could be interpreted in terms of the historical tradition of the Habsburg-imperial versus Hungarian small-state identity, with the former requiring a comparatively

stronger and more personalized adherence to the nation. Also, the longer-established and stronger democratic traditions, and more institutionalized view of Austrian society may be reflected in the way historical events are selected and reported, as the impersonal actions of institutions rather than the agency of individuals.

How the narrator relates past events to the current situation has significant influence on impression formation and identity judgments about the narrator even when the same events are described. Polya, László, Forgas (2005) found that narrators using a retrospective perspective to describe autobiographical events were generally judged to be better adjusted, more desirable socially and less anxious than narrators describing the same events in the present tense, as though they were re-experiencing the events. Similar results were obtained by Ehmann, Kis, Naszodi and László (2006) when a linear retrospective time perspective was judged to better reflect trauma elaboration after the event. For historical narratives, particularly when relatively recent traumas are narrated, time perspective can be a sensitive indicator of elaboration and coping.

What efforts such as these do is allow us to ascribe influence to society from non-human agents. Artifacts such as textbooks communicate narratives in sometimes subtle ways that suggest a relationship between the subjects of the text and the readers, and the authors of the text and its readers. So by examining textbooks designated by the state to teach history in schools and institutions of public commemoration, such as museums and national holidays

(LeGoff, 1992), we can probe into the influence of institutional agents of collective remembering and social representation without requiring a "group mind" (Wilson, 2004). By tracing the production and effects of institutional forms of reminding, we can examine specific components of how societies communicate their traditions, the psychological reactions to these narratives, and the rise and fall in popularity of different representations over time.

For it has been established that from time to time collective memory and the social representation of history are revised in communicative memory. These representations appear in a narrative shape and work as folk histories in accordance with the identity needs of groups. Narrative is not merely a natural, economical cognitive tool for preserving information; it is a form that is suitable for establishing a personal relationship with an audience and identifying oneself with something. As Ricoeur (1991) writes, identifying the self proceeds through identification with others –through history grounded in reality and through fictional narratives taking off from the imagination.

By means of empirical studies, we can reveal the characteristic features of group identity in the language of social psychology from professional and folk historical history-stories. Thus, the question is not in what way and to what extent these stories correspond to a scientifically reconstructed reality (although this may also be an interesting question); what we want to know is what psychological state of being balanced or imbalanced, what sense of security or being threatened, what sort of continuity or discontinuity, temporal orientation, inter-group relationships, motivation and evaluation are reflected by

the stories (László, 2006). In other words, what types of collective symbolic coping (Wagner, Kronberger, & Seifert, 2002) are taking place?

Narrative Empathy

The fact that narratives are produced from a particular perspective or point of view suggests that there will be individual differences in how they will be received. One way to characterize the reception of narrative by audiences is to consider how much empathy they have for the characters, events, and point of view expressed. This conceptualization capitalizes on the property of narrative that its comprehension is enhanced by momentarily yielding to its premises, and suspending disbelief about its reality (Gilbert, 1991). If Bruner (1986, 1990) is correct in asserting that narrative thinking is driven by a search for plausible, life-like connections between events, establishing verisimilitude rather than truth, then empathy would appear to be the key mediator of narrative impact.

Preston & de Waal's (2002) provide a broad definition, claiming that empathy is any process of attending to another's state in a way that induces a state in oneself more appropriate to the situation of the object attended to than to one's own situation (see Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987 for additional perspectives). Such experiences as laughter, tears, joy, anger, fear, hope, and frustration are not uncommon to readers of books or watchers of movies. The reader, viewer or listener momentarily suspends disbelief and participates vicariously in the narrative to the extent that he or she shows empathy for the

point of view expressed and the characters and situations depicted. Alternatively, the audience may find the narrative lacking in coherence and verisimilitude, and fail to relate to it for any number of reasons ranging from aesthetic to political. Many officially sanctioned histories must surely have provoked apathy rather than empathy among their adolescent readers; indeed, Liu & Atsumi (in press) found that many best-selling authors providing influential accounts about the Sino-Japanese War in Japan were non-historians happy to employ narrative devices and factual distortions eschewed by professional historians. For narrative representations to have influence on the individual, there must be some degree of sympathy for the situation or empathy for some of the characters or the situation. The degree of empathy provides a measure of the extent to which the individual relates to representational aspects of the narrative, bridging the gap between individual and society.

Not only does this link the subjectivity of the individual to societal narratives rich in social axioms (Leung & Bond, 2004) and normative beliefs (Bar-tal, 2000), but it does so in a way that expands our vocabulary beyond that of social identity theory. The key point is that empathy does not require identity between the individual and the characters or situation with which he or she empathizes, though it is certainly facilitated by similarity and familiarity. It does not require a homogenization of attitudes and conformity of opinion, though there may be empirical tendencies in that direction. The capacity to respond empathetically is a fundamental biological heritage shared among higher social animals enabling the coordination of behavior with those clearly

different than oneself (sometimes even belonging to different species, see Preston & de Waal, 2002). Empathy according to the perception-action model of Preston and de Waal (2002) contains a predisposition for action common to a complex of states including sympathy, emotional contagion, and pro-social behavior. What the concept of narrative empathy does is extend the perception-action model to situations of vicarious learning and cognitive sympathy mediated by narration rather than personal experience. Such learning is the hallmark of culture and central to what makes human society a "thinking society" (Billig, 1993)—its reliance on the accumulated wisdom of the past transferred through such processes as modelling and narrative agency (Bandura, 2004) rather than personal trial and error.

Some narratives will achieve great empathy with audiences, over time becoming canonical for a particular genre. By furnishing an alternative operationalization of social representations as narratives widely known and accepted in society, SRT can avoid the problem of hermeneutic circularity (see Ricoeur, 1974; Wagner & Hayes, 2005). Survey data involving aggregate analyses of individual data can continue to be used to identify how social representations are collectively shared, but this can be corroborated at the individual level by measuring the empathy for particular societal narratives embodying core features of these representations. For instance, degree of empathy for characters or actions in canonical historical narratives (e.g., László & Vincze, 2004), or degree of sympathy for events described using different writing styles inferring alternative relationships with the past could reveal how prototypical individuals are in their orientation towards canonical

narratives for the group. We might be able to see an individual drawing on representational resources from different groups producing a “laminated self” that draws together in personal layers canonical elements from diverse cultural traditions. Investigations of the interaction between canonical histories produced by professionals and personal memories and oral accounts transmitted by families would appear to be an ideal site to elucidate the relationship between individual and collective memory (see Halbwachs, 1950/1980; Wilson, 2005).

Such an approach avoids the problem of circularity, where theoretical terms as social identity and representation mutually presuppose one another. An individual may have empathy for historical narratives that stand well outside the boundaries of his or her social identities, and the representations dominant in society; he or she may have a self repertoire that is more complex than the homogenized accounts that can be produced when a dominant identity is made salient. A narrative approach employing indicators of empathy opens up a new frontier for group and inter-group psychology by enabling theorists to establish linkages at the individual-level *between* the content of manifestly different identities and social representations.

For instance, audiences around the world participated vicariously in the narrative of the young star-crossed lovers of different social classes in the blockbuster movie *Titanic*. Some of these viewers would have been members of groups with social representations of sex and marriage at odds with the individualistic and sexually permissive point of view presented in the movie.

Yet, the popularity of the film, a canonical representative of the Hollywood genre of disaster-romance, was unprecedented in countries in Asia and the Middle-East where having pre-marital sex and going against parents in marital choice would have been counter-normative. Investigating the extent of empathy for the old mother, trying to save her family fortunes by marrying her daughter into a wealthy but cold family, versus that for the young lovers would go a long way towards establishing the personal orientation of individuals towards societally normative representations of sex and marriage. Research along these lines would bring SRT into dialogue with the burgeoning area of acculturation (Ward, Furnham, & Bochner, 2001) and bring a further element of dynamism into the study of social representations.

Further down the line, research should examine whether the action propensities of empathy are reduced for reactions to narrative compared to first hand experiences. It may also be appropriate to investigate other states, particularly inter-group emotions such as guilt or hatred (Branscombe & Doosje, 2004; Smith & Mackie, 2005), but these may not be as generally relevant to narrative as the family of emotions related to empathy.

Empathy is in some sense prototypical of a fundamentally civic orientation among human beings, an ability to put oneself in the place of another and to feel what they would feel, and act how they might want us to act. In this era of multi-cultural and multi-ethnic societies, an understanding of how empathy functions to maintain a sense of civil society among people very different in background would seem to be essential. The literature on inter-group relations

is dark, rife with concepts as social dominance orientation (SDO), right wing authoritarianism (RWA), prejudice, in-group favouritism, stereotypes, conformity, representations of war, and other constructs that emphasize the exclusive and closed nature of human groups. But from another perspective, inter-group relations seems as much borrowing as purifying, as much fascination as repulsion, and as much inter-mixing as exclusion. While it is true that the latter of these pairs is highlighted during violent and oppressive periods, and while it is entirely appropriate to describe the limits to empathy (see for instance, Bar-Tal, 2001; Opotow, 1994), such an approach cannot describe all that is happening in terms of inter-group and inter-cultural relations. A more expansive "dual process model" of inter-group relations involves the differential impacts of empathy and authoritarianism, rather than close cousins SDO and RWA (see Duckitt, 2001; Altemeyer, 1998). Theorizing about the narrative construction and empathic reception of socially shared systems of belief is a first step in towards constructing theory that weighs equally the light side and the dark side of group and inter-group behavior.

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