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From gist of a wink to structural equivalence of meaning:

Towards a cross-cultural psychology of the collective remembering of world history

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RUNNING HEAD:

Cross-Cultural Collective Remembering: Reply to Gibson and Noret

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ABSTRACT

Gibson and Noret's (in press) critique of Paez et al.'s (2008) article on "Remembering" World War II and willingness to fight applies social constructionist epistemologies based on hermeneutics to large scale cross-cultural research. In criticizing our operationalization of historical experience, they privilege micro-analysis of discursive features that cannot be applied equally to different cultures; with regards to remembering, they identify the context-specific evocation of a particular aspect of collective remembering with collective memory in general. Their criticism of the wording of the central question on willingness to fight for one's country is misplaced because this item comes from country-level data from the World Values Survey. Our work, involving 3,322 participants from 22 societies with at least 14 different majority languages provides analysis of a general phenomenon and cannot be expected to incorporate micro-analysis of local discursive features. Cross-cultural psychology has advanced into a position of international prominence by using quantitative measures to construct nomological or associational networks that create complementary (and alternative) conceptions of meaning to the "thick descriptions" of ethnography favored by cultural anthropology. A division of labor with respect to these fields and across projects is recommended.

From gist of a wink to structural equivalence of meaning:

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Psychological research on what has been called collective remembering (Pennebaker, Paez, & Rime, 1997) or social representations of history (Liu & Hilton, 2005) has only begun in earnest the last decade or so. Therefore, we welcome the opportunity to reply to Gibson and Noret's (in press) critique of our work on the collective "remembering" of World War II (WWII) and willingness to fight for one's country (Paez, Liu, Techio, Slawuta, Zlobina, and Cabecinhas, 2008). Gibson and Noret's critique is grounded in contemporary cultural anthropology's approach to methodology. Such an approach, rooted in social constructionist epistemologies and reliant on qualitative methods, can be a useful complement to the standard practices of cross-cultural psychology (see Berry, 2000) when used with a full awareness of the rewards and costs of each approach. But blanket application of a hermeneutical approach, as we shall argue below, would not benefit cross-cultural psychology.

Gibson and Noret open by questioning the appropriateness of using Wikipedia statistics for World War II (WWII) casualties. We agree that Wikipedia's collaborative practices can lead to instability in results and concur that precise reporting of URLs is good practice (the oldest version available of the file that we used can now be found on http://www.truthtalks.org/abortion/WorldWarIIcasualties-Wikipediathefreeencyclopedia). However, replacing the figures we cited with the current figures at Wikipedia (URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_II_casualties) does not change our results or conclusions in any way. Despite the variations reported by Gibson and Noret, the

correlation between the two sets of figures from Wikipedia accessed on February 25, 2009 correlated at Spearman's rho=.93 and Pearson's r=.96, p<.001. So while we agree with Gibson and Noret in principle, in practice the criticism is not substantial.

After this opening move, the deeper conceptual basis of Gibson and Noret's critique becomes more apparent as they question whether coding states as victorious, defeated, or neutral in WWII captures historical experience in "any meaningful sense". Examining the top of Table 1 in Paez et al. (2008), we can see that Australia, Brazil and China, were coded as victorious, Germany, Hungary, and Japan were coded as defeated, and Argentina, Portugal and Spain were coded as neutral. In what way are these categories not meaningful? The only quibble would be Brazil, which sent a few troops to fight on the winning side at the end. Rather than a lack of meaning, there is, if anything, too much common sense in the classification of historical winners, losers, and neutrals of WWII. For China, being on the victorious side meant the end of an era of colonial dismemberment and survival as a nation, whereas Australia gained the benefits being part of the triumphant Anglo-American sphere of influence; Germany, Hungary, and Japan experienced catastrophic defeat that shapes their psyches to this day (Liu & Hilton, 2005), whereas WWII does not loom as large in the national consciousness of the neutrals.

What Gibson and Noret privilege are the subtler forms of meaning articulated most famously by Geertz's (1973) classic work on *The Interpretation of Cultures*. To frame his famous illustration on honor and sheep stealing in a North African colony of France in his first chapter, Geertz points out that the subtlest gesture—a wink— can be an important signifier when packaged as part of a "thick description" of symbolic meaning guiding the interpretation of action in a cultural setting. For cultural anthropologists

following Geertz, or the similarly influential French post-structuralists, attempts to compare, contrast, and generalize meaning across cultures (as exemplified by the Human Relations Area Files, HRAF see www.yale.edu/hraf) fly too high over the details of daily life to be interesting or reliable. Culture is treated as a symbolic universe of gestures and their micro-interpretation within specific contexts, whereas the broader brushstrokes of cross-cultural comparison are suspect[1]. There is no doubt that coding societies into winners, losers, and neutrals in WWII glosses over historical experience. But the largely quantitative methods of cross-cultural psychology require such analytical simplification, because meaning is not produced by qualitative "thick descriptions", but rather by relationships between discrete quantitative variables, whose overall patterning through correlations is described by Bond (in press) as a "nomological" network of meaning (for further reading, Schweder (2000) and Berry's (2000) debate in a special issue of the *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*). In cross-cultural psychology, it is the accumulation of quantitative variables, ideally tested for structural equivalence across cultures versus culture-specific variation in meaning (see Fischer, in press) that is privileged knowledge. So of course victorious, defeated, or neutral is a gloss, but when combined with casualty rates per capita, this yields highly meaningful information differentiating the historical experiences of Germany (loser, high casualties), Japan (loser, medium-high casualties), China (winner, medium-high casualties) and Australia (winner, low casualties), even though this is not as informative about Argentina and Portugal (neutrals, no casualties).

Most of the subsequent criticisms of Gibson and Noret can be treated similarly:

[1] Geertz (1973, p. 5) declared "operationalism" dead in the social sciences except for the "too well swept corners" of Skinnerian behaviorism and intelligence testing.

First, they question as problematic the "assumption" that "those events which feature most prominently in the collective memory will be those to which the most 'importance' is ascribed". It is a well-established dictum in cognitive psychology that context crucially shapes the content and quality of recall (see section 5 in Roediger, Dudai & Fitzpatrick's 2005 sourcebook on memory). We are fully aware that by giving instructions to participants to free recall important events for a seminar on world history we are shaping a particular context for collective remembering, but this is an unavoidable feature of any form of remembering. Our responsibility as researchers is to describe the particular context of recall faithfully (and we did misspell "giving" as noted by Gibson and Noret) to allow replication. We do not equate collective memory with our particular measurement of the collective remembering of WWII. We are evoking a particular aspect of collective memory relevant to the topic at hand. Rhetorically, it is not necessary to reinstate the entire context for remembering each time the variable is mentioned subsequently. Such practices would be cumbersome and violate Gricean norms for communication.

Second, they cite Susan Condor's impressive work to argue that evaluative judgments towards historical events and processes should not be reduced to a single positive-negative dimension. We agree, and in work in progress on the World History Survey we assessed both importance and evaluation of historical events and figures, and found that quantitative ratings of importance do NOT map perfectly onto the free recall of historical events and figures as important (e.g., Hitler and WWII are not as ubiquitous in cued evaluations of importance compared to free recall). However, Condor and Abell (2006) reported interviews of 157 participants from 2 overlapping societies sharing the

same language. When working in a single society, our work has generated similar insight into the local construction of nationality (see Sibley & Liu, 2007); in the World History Survey described above, we also identified specific events that did not fit within universal factors or dimensional spaces. But the sample for Paez et al. (2008) consisted of 3,322 participants from 22 societies with at least 14 different majority languages, and World War II is an event that is meaningful across cultures. Surely the strength of Condor and Abell (2006) must be in micro-analysis of local discursive features whereas Paez et al. (2008) provide the broader brushstrokes of a general cross-cultural phenomenon.

Furthermore, in criticizing willingness to fight for one's country as a "leading question" Gibson and Noret are taking issue with not us, but Ronald Inglehart's World Values Survey, from whence the question comes. The World Values Survey is one the most substantial efforts at cross-cultural data collection in the history of the social sciences (see Inglehart & Baker, 2000, summarizing analysis of two decades of data from 60+ countries): question wordings cannot be changed without removing comparability across time and samples. Unlike anthropology's HRAF, where access to data requires membership and fees, Inglehart and colleagues have made their data freely available (see www.worldvaluessurvey.com). We have now entered into a fully pluralistic and democratic era of cross-cultural social science, where publishing country- or society-level mean scores so that they can be used in subsequent cross-cultural analyses by future researchers is both normative and popular. This cornucopia of freely available data allows researchers to construct meaning through patterns of association, sometimes with other subjective measures like individualism-collectivism, sometimes with more objective indicators like poverty or wartime casualties. Cross-cultural psychologists can

push forward in constructing the nomological networks of meaning across cultures that anthropology has for the most part dismissed[2].

There are useful lessons to be taken from Gibson and Noret's critique. We accept that using WWI as a proxy for wars in general is less than ideal; our only excuse is that we were also drawing from previously published research, and coding for wars in general was not available from Pennebaker et al. (2006). We also agree that the institutional/ cultural transmission component of collective remembering in psychology is under-developed: this was an admirable component of Halbwachs' (1950/1980) original formulation, and sociological research (see Olick & Robbins, 1998) remains more informative than psychology here. We proposed asking questions about societal transmission in a draft version of our World History Survey, but were persuaded by international collaborators to stick with importance and evaluation instead. The lesson here is that quantitative cross-cultural research is constrained by basic features of data collection, particularly space and the requirement for uniformity in question wording.

We close therefore by acknowledging the different contributions from the global village of culture-oriented researchers: there is a place for the micro-analysis of discursive features of culture, there is a place for research on societal forces in cultural transmission, and these are predominantly located in anthropology and sociology respectively. Our work is firmly grounded within the practices of cross-cultural psychology, and while we welcome cross-fertilization from related disciplines, we are content that this area of endeavor is indispensable to global research on culture.

[2] References to the Human Relations Area Files are less salient today than during the heyday of cross-cultural anthropology, in part because of its centralized membership procedures and fees required to access them, but in larger part due to the discursive or constructionist turn anthropology has taken

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