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History in the service of politics:

Constructing narratives of history during the European refugee 'crisis'

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Abstract

It is common for politicians to refer to 'our proud history of supporting refugees', yet the historical record regarding responses to refugees is not straightforwardly positive. So how is history drawn upon in political debates regarding refugees? Applying discursive psychology, this article analyses the use of history in five United Kingdom parliamentary debates that took place from September 2015 to January 2016 on the European refugee 'crisis'. The analysis identifies six 'functions' of the use of the history: resonance, continuity, reciprocity, posterity, responsibility and redemption. It shows how reference to historical events create narratives regarding the UK's history of supporting refugees in order to construct the nation in particular ways, mobilise collective identities and legitimise or criticise political actions. Specifically, references to the UK's role in providing refuge to Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany functions as a hegemonic narrative that reinforces the UK's 'heroic' position, constructs the Syrian conflict as involving an oppressive dictator and innocent refugees in need to help, thereby legitimising support for Syrian refugees. The analysis demonstrates the flexibility of historical narratives, reformulates the distinction between 'psychological'

and 'rhetorical' uses of historical analogies and reflects on the social and political

implications of such uses of history.

Key words: refugees, asylum, history, discursive psychology, social representations

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Introduction – refugees and history

Politicians around the world often refer to 'our proud history of supporting refugees'

(Taylor, 2017). However, there is no inherent reason why politicians must refer to history in

deciding the response to refugees and the historical record regarding responses to refugees

is not straightforwardly positive. So how is history drawn upon in political debates regarding

refugees? This article addresses this question through analysing politicians' references to

history in such debates. The aim is to contribute to political, psychological and historical

work by developing a framework for examining the discursive functions of history,

reformulating the distinction between 'psychological' and 'rhetorical' functions of historical

analogies and reflecting on the implications of hegemonic historical narratives for refugee

history and policy making.

Taylor (2017) explained that reference to the UK's 'tradition of welcome' is routinely

used and misused in political debates on refugees, both for and against supporting larger

numbers of refugees. However, her historical analysis shows that Britain's official response

to refugees since the 20th Century has been grudging and reluctant, whereas a more

welcoming response characterised the actions of certain individuals, communities and

charitable organisations. While countries vary greatly in their histories in relation to

refugees, it is notable that similar political rhetoric can be found in very different national

contexts. For example, in the Australian context, Every and Augoustinos (2008) showed how

references to a 'generous record' of supporting refugees in the past was used to argue

either for or against supporting more refugees. Neumann (2009) illustrated that such

references had obvious omissions, inaccuracies and glossed over details. He suggested

'those formulating and debating public policy do not look back at the past, but draw on

histories and memories of that past' (Neumann, 2009, p. 62). That is, they do not draw on records of the past as it happened, but rather make use of the past as remembered as part of the nation's narrative of itself. In this regard, Marfleet (2007) argued that historical work on refugees' experiences is often absent, due in part to 'methodological nationalism' that often ignores those, such as refugees, who do not fit neatly within national boundaries (although such scholarship does exist and is growing: Gatrell, 2016; refugeehistory.org). Neumann suggests that one reason why these histories do not appear is that they do not fit with the nation's narrative of having a 'generous' and 'proud' history of supporting refugees. Clearly, history is used within political discourse to justify responses to refugees and the psychological dimensions of these processes deserve greater attention. This article aims to contribute to this gap in knowledge by examining how politicians' references to history function, using the specific example of UK parliamentary debates on the European refugee 'crisis'.

Understanding history in the service of politics

How is history used within political discourse? In this regard, Lowenthal (1998) makes an important distinction between history and heritage. Whereas history relates to the seeking of details regarding the past, heritage is the story we tell about ourselves in a way that gives meaning to our existence over time, explains the way we are now and guides for the future. This fits with the way history is drawn upon in debates about refugees, where such references are often brief, vague, partial or inaccurate, yet give the sense that the nation has a history of asylum of which its members should be proud (Every & Augoustinos, 2008; Kushner, 2003; Marfleet, 2013; Neumann, 2009; Schech, 2010). Events that reflect less well

on the nation's heritage are forgotten, avoided or smoothed over, lest they suggest that the nation has been anything but generous. Conversely, London (2000, p. 18) explained that 'even if it isn't proud, even it doesn't fit the political message, this country [the UK] also has a history of not taking in refugees.'

This suggests that history, as heritage, plays an important role in the shaping of national identities. In this regard, Liu and Hilton (2005) developed an influential framework – social representations of history – for examining how historical events shape national identities. They drew on the work of Moscovici (1984, 1988) on social representations, which consist of shared ways of understanding and discussing the world, which both bring the social world into reality and guide our engagement with the world. Similar to notions of 'heritage', they suggested these consist of partial narratives about the past and may be geared towards present day concerns and politics, guiding towards future actions. They drew on international research showing World War II is consistently rated as the most influential event in world history (Liu et al., 2005; Pennebaker, Paez, & Deschamps, 2006), arguing that this plays a key role in international relations. Social representations of history helps to understand how politicians may interpret and present political strategies in light of past events, particularly international conflicts and refugee flows and especially in relation to World War II.

However, the social representations approach has limitations, in that it tends to pay insufficient attention to the social actions people make when they interact, how these representations actively constitute social reality, the struggles over different ways of understanding the world or how certain representations come to be hegemonic (Howarth, 2006; Potter & Edwards, 1999). Specifically in relation to social representations of history, Gibson (2012, p. 6, emphasis in original) argued that this research tends not to examine how

people actually use social representations in interaction and ought to move 'away from the focus on the relatively static *representations* towards questions of how people actively *represent* history in order to *do* things.'

Accepting these critiques of the social representations approach, the present article treats research on social representations of history as providing a background to widely shared understandings of history, and moves beyond this to examine the specific, occasioned, contextualised uses of history, in line with discursive psychology (McKinlay & McVittie, 2009; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). As argued by Augoustinos (2001), history can be treated as a 'rhetorical resource' that functions as an explanatory narrative people can use to support their arguments. For instance, discursive psychological research has shown how politicians and members of the public draw on particular narratives of history and constructions of the nation that allow present-day members of the majority groups in Australia and New Zealand to deny responsibility for past injustices (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Rapley, 1999; Kirkwood, Liu, & Weatherall, 2005; Wetherell & Potter, 1992).

As argued by Wallwork and Dixon (2004), discursive constructions of the nation, and its history, are used rhetorically, and often imaginatively, to support particular political projects. For instance, they illustrated how advocates of fox hunting have attempted to present it as a quintessentially British activity in order to recruit support for its protection. Similarly, Andrews (2007) has illustrated the flexible and imaginative dimensions of historical narratives and constructions of the nation, such as the American flag being used by both supporters and protestors of the Gulf War, respectively representing being 'patriotic' in support of troops going to war or supporting freedom of speech. Returning to Liu and Hilton's (2005) point regarding the importance of World War II in international relations, Gibson (2012) illustrated how references to this war functioned discursively to

legitimise the UK's military invasion of Iraq in 2003 by way of analogy, simultaneously constructing the present situation in a way that justified such action, while derogating critics. In the context of refugee politics, Every and Augoustinos (2008a) showed how the flexible references to Australia's 'generous' history of supporting refugees can be used either to support or resist anti-asylum seeker legislation, demonstrating that it is not simply the content of the historical reference that is important, but more so how the constructions of the nation are used in particular discursive contexts.

These examples illustrate how aspects of history, as heritage, are upgraded, updated or omitted (Lowenthal, 1998) to produce self-serving historical narratives. Although wide ranging in their topics and contexts, collectively they illustrate that such references to history can be usefully understood as occasioned discursive actions that simultaneously construct the speakers, audience, contexts and topics in ways that legitimise particular political projects (Augoustinos, 2001; Gibson, 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001). In order to examine political uses of history, the present study applies discursive psychology (McKinlay & McVittie, 2009; Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to explore the ways that politicians use constructions of history in political debates, focusing on the example of UK parliamentary debates on the European refugee 'crisis'.

Methodology

Data

The data are transcripts of five UK parliamentary debates that took place in September 2015 to January 2016 relating to the European refugee 'crisis' (see table 1 for details). These

occurred in the House of Commons (the lower house at the Palace of Westminster, dealing with 'reserved matters' relating to the whole of the UK) and the devolved administrations of the Scottish Parliament, Northern Irish Assembly and Welsh Assembly, and comprise approximately 13 hours of debate in total. These debates were selected for analysis as they are generally representative of political positions on the 'crisis', given the wide inclusion of politicians from a range of political parties and across the constitutive parts of the UK, allowing for in-depth analysis of how UK politicians formulate responses to refugees. 146 politicians contributed to the debates, 118 of whom were from the three largest parties (Conservative Party (39), Labour Party (40) and Scottish National Party (39)) with a further 27 from nine other parties, plus one independent politician. The analysis is based on the official reports of the debates. While official parliamentary transcripts diverge slightly from the spoken originals, particularly in terms of 'performance characteristics' such as hesitations and repetitions (Mollin, 2007), their status as official reports makes them worthy of analysis in themselves, as well as being sufficiently accurate for analysis of the references to history that constitute the focus of this article. The transcripts and video recordings of these debates are publically available (see appendix A).

The parliamentary debates were in response to the growing number of people entering Europe in search of asylum in 2015, particularly those coming from Syria, and focused on how the UK ought to respond to the 'crisis'. The UK Government's initial response was a scheme for assisting Syrian refugees and a focus on humanitarian aid in the region (Cameron, 2015). However, in early September 2015, after Germany suspended the Dublin Regulation (which requires asylum seekers to apply for asylum in the first European Union member state they enter) and the worldwide circulation of a photograph of the dead body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy who died on the journey from Turkey to

Greece (El-Enany, 2016), the Prime Minister pledged to provide refuge for up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years (UK Parliament, 2015).

Coding and analysis

I watched the video recordings of the debates and read through the transcripts. I used NVivo qualitative data analysis software to code each paragraph that referred to history. I re-read these paragraphs in detail and coded them in terms of the ways in which history was used and the historical events to which they referred. Representative extracts are presented below for detailed analysis.

The data are analysed from the perspective of discursive psychology (McKinlay & McVittie, 2009; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins, 2017) and rhetorical psychology (Billig, 1996), particularly as applied to historical narratives (Gibson, 2012; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Tileagă, 2009). This involves the qualitative analysis of the form and function of discourse, in this case examining the specific narratives of history, and related identity categories that are invoked, to identify the nature of social realities that are constructed and the social functions these fulfil. Following the work of Reicher and Hopkins (2001), I examined how historical narratives simultaneously construct the context, speaker and audience in order to mobilise collective identities and support political projects.

Analysis

Description of the data

[Insert table 1]

Although the references to the past were varied, there were many common topics (see table 2). Consistent with the work of Liu and colleagues (Liu et al., 2005, 2008; Liu & Hilton, 2005), the most commonly mentioned events related to World War II, including the Holocaust, Jewish refugees, the movement of other European refugees in the 1930s and the aftermath of the war. Politicians referred to a range of other conflicts and groups of people who sought sanctuary, particularly in the UK. A further 13 references were in relation to a general historical record of the UK providing sanctuary in the past. Other references to the past were varied and included: Europe having past refugee crises; the UK being a country of immigration and / or emigration; reference to how the future may judge current day actions; past acts of resistance to oppressive regimes and persecution; and Britain as a colonial power.

[Insert table 2]

I have grouped the references in terms of 'functions' (i.e., the relationships with history that they construct) under six broad headings: 1) resonance (35 references); 2) continuity (62 references); 3) reciprocity (22 references); 4) posterity (5 references); 5) responsibility (9 references); 6) redemption (2 references).

Resonance

One function of the discourse was to highlight the *resonance* between the current

circumstances and those of the past, most commonly in relation to World War II.

Extract 1

Scottish Parliament: Anne McTaggart (Labour)

I am pleased to have the opportunity to speak on what has become Europe's worst refugee crisis since the second world war, but saddened that I have to do so.

Extract 2

House of Commons Opposition Debate: Caroline Ansell (Conservative)

Yesterday, the shadow Home Secretary closed with a call to each of us to remember the Kindertransport and everything it meant. There are huge parallels with that moment in history—the tyranny, persecution and crisis—but there is a further parallel to draw that has significant resonance to the matter at hand: people being driven from their homes and communities and separated from their families. That is what we are seeing today.

These references *make history relevant* so as to provide a context in which the UK's response, and the identity which is drawn upon, may be read against this particular background of history. As argued by Reicher and Hopkins (1996), the way the context of a debate is constructed works to make certain categorisations, identities and hence different arguments and interpretations available. This particular context makes the current events interpretable in terms of a *severe global refugee situation where the UK providing sanctuary is the right thing to do*.

The speaker in extract 1 compares the current situation to the 'second world war'.

As Bottici and Challand (2006) explain in their discussion of 'political myth', through synecdoche, references invoke related discourses and narratives, so that other events become interpreted through this lens. Here, the comparison relates not only to the scale of events, but associates the broader connotations of World War II with the current situation, particularly in terms of the great need people face.

In extract 2, the speaker highlights three aspects that make the current situation comparable to the past: 'the tyranny, persecution and crisis'. These three aspects, which emphasise the oppressive nature of the regime, the damage caused to people, and the urgency associated with the situation, work to interpret the current events in an historical frame specifically associated with the lead-up to World War II. The connection to Kindertransport (discussed further below), and the Shadow Home Secretary's references to the parliamentary debate that led to this response, presents the current situation as one in which an ethical response of protection is both possible and necessary. Moreover, it directs the discussion towards the parliamentarians, rather than an abstract notion of the nation, and therefore implies that such a response is necessitated from them.

Drawing parallels between Syrian refugees and Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany makes the situation *reprehensible and morally accountable*. Moreover, connecting present day politicians with politicians of the past makes their responses interpretable in these terms (i.e., in terms of having to make an ethical response to those in need and fleeing a tyranny comparable to Nazi Germany). It is this presentation of the context as one that *resonates* with events of the past that makes the nation's identity, as portrayed and understood in an historical narrative of past world conflicts and refugee flows, relevant to the current situation and therefore as a way of interpreting and responding to the present events.

Continuity

The most common way that politicians used history was to highlight *continuity* between the past and present. One of the most frequent ways of doing so was to make reference to the UK's 'proud' history of 'welcoming' refugees (24 speakers described this history as 'proud').

Extract 3

House of Commons Emergency Debate: Stephen Twigg (Labour and Co-operative Party)

The United Kingdom has a long and distinguished history of helping those who are most in need, as we have heard from others this afternoon, from Jewish refugees fleeing the horrors of Nazi Germany to Hungarian refugees following the crushing of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet tanks in 1956 and those fleeing the clutches and horrors of the Idi Amin regime in Uganda. We have always, as a nation, helped those who have desperately needed to flee the persecution and terror of different conflicts and regimes.

Extract 4

Scottish Parliament: John Lamont (Conservative)

Britain has a long and proud record of assisting those who are in need and it is a record that must continue.

Extract 5

Scottish Parliament: Claire Baker (Labour)

History has shown that Britain has been ready and willing to act in the past. In the lead-up to the second world war, 10,000 Jewish children arrived in this country. That was the right thing to do then; with 3,000 unaccompanied children in Europe now, it is again the right thing to do.

These extracts illustrate a narrative of the UK *as a place that provides refuge and welcomes refugees*. Extract 3 makes reference to three historical events: 1) 'Jewish refugees fleeing the horrors of Nazi Germany'; 2) 'Hungarian refugees following the crushing of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet tanks in 1956'; and 3) 'those fleeing the clutches and horrors of the Idi Amin regime in Uganda'. As illustrated by Jefferson (1990), a three part list is a way of demonstrating completeness, therefore this does more than highlight that the UK provided sanctuary on these particular occasions: it portrays the UK *as a nation that regularly provides assistance to refugees*. Moreover, the extreme case formulation – 'We have always' – which emphasises the moral rightness of the response (Pomerantz, 1986), portrays the UK's response as normal and therefore legitimate. The historical narrative matched with the normative response works to present the provision of sanctuary as *an enduring character of the UK*. Such category based accounts, whereby the UK is construed as a nation that is always on the side of providing sanctuary to those who need it, functions to reinforce its moral integrity and buttress against claims to the contrary (see Stokoe, 2010). The construction of place functions to portray those seeking asylum as clearly in need of protection, through repeated reference to the 'horrors' of Nazi Germany and 'the Idi Amin regime in Uganda', as well as 'the crushing of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet tanks', such that people have no choice but to flee, and therefore are constituted as 'genuine'

refugees in need of protection (Kirkwood, McKinlay, & McVittie, 2013). The first person plural, 'we', connects people of the past with people of the present, such that a single (British) identity is presented as existing through time, making present day actions interpretable in reference to the past (Condor, 2006).

In extract 4, the evaluation 'proud' gives weight to the account by suggesting it has a certain moral character (i.e., it is the 'right' course of action). Pride is a 'self-conscious emotion' that implicates a connection to the self (Sullivan, 2007), therefore describing a nation as having a 'proud history' connects oneself with that nation and its history (justifying the pride). The historic frame suggests present and future actions ought to be connected to past actions, and in this sense constructs *continuity*. In this way, the UK's character as one that provides sanctuary to those who need it is upheld, while present day political activities are legitimised through connecting them with this past and ongoing history of providing assistance to refugees.

Stating 'Britain has been ready and willing to act in the past' is a vague way of portraying the nation as doing the right thing. Details of how this support was provided – e.g., that it was provided through charitable agencies and associations, that the children were guaranteed to not be a burden on the state, and that the debate regarding the provision of sanctuary was struck through with concerns for self-interest and economics (London, 2000a; Sharples, 2006; Vonberg, 2015) – are absent. This allows the speaker to *imply* that the UK was proactively involved in the rescue of these refugees, while avoiding any specific claims regarding the UK's role, including things that may complicate the picture of the UK as providing sanctuary to those who needed it in the past. Moreover, this is constituted as a *moral* act – 'the right thing to do' – which sidesteps issues around the UK's self-interest or economic concerns at the time. Comparing Jewish refugee children with the

unaccompanied children in Europe presents the two situations as morally equivalent, allowing the speaker to state: 'That was the right thing to do then [...] it is again the right thing to do.' The numbers stated by the speaker – '3,000 unaccompanied children' and '10,000 Jewish children' – imply that the number of children to be accepted in the current crisis are notably fewer than were accepted during World War II, adding to the reasonableness of the claim. As argued by Yuval-Davis (2010), narrative identities cannot be reduced to a simple dichotomy of 'us' and 'them' nor can particular identities (e.g., 'British') be treated as denoting particular values across people. In this example, while it works to present the 'we' as constituted by the people of the UK, the references to oppressive regimes imply (without specifying) that the 'others' are defined not necessarily by their national identity, but more so by their humane or inhumane treatment of people.

These arguments work both through constituting the UK as having a particular character – a stable character of helping those in need – throughout history (Anderson, 2006; Condor, 2006; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001) and through portraying the current situation as directly comparable with, and having the moral equivalency of, past situations where people were in need of protection. This allows speakers to suggest that the current crisis is more manageable than those of the past and that the government's proposed actions compare unfavourably, being both more limited and morally inadequate.

While historical comparisons could emphasise continuity in terms of providing asylum to refugees, they could serve other purposes.

Extract 6

House of Commons Emergency Debate: Tom Tugendhat (Conservative)

I stand here proudly as the grandson of a refugee who came here in the 1920s.

When my great uncle came as a Jewish refugee from Austria later in the late 1930s, the nation's security was in such question that he was interned, as was every other adult Jew leaving Austria or Germany. I therefore welcome the Government's efforts to take the nation's security seriously while not damaging the right of refugees to come. It is right that, as we have done in the past, we balance our security with our generosity.

The speaker in extract 6 presents a *personal narrative of history* as well as a *national* one. Presenting himself as 'the grandson of a refugee' functions as a warrant against any claims that his statements might be negative for refugees. Claiming such category entitlement (Potter, 1996) allows the speaker both to produce an account about the experiences of refugees in the past and to manage his stake in the issue. The reference to refugees being interned could seem to contradict the historical narrative of the UK as being 'welcoming' towards refugees. However, internment is presented as an issue of the 'nation's security', which both aligns it with the national interests and portrays it as inherently defensible. The speaker presents historical continuity as not simply being 'welcoming' of refugees, but as 'tak[ing] the nation's security seriously while not damaging the right of refugees to come'. The story of internment and concerns with security are *incorporated into the historical narrative* of the UK as a place that supports refugees. This illustrates that *narratives of continuity are flexible* in the sense that they may be used to reflect different inherent aspects of national identity to justify different political agendas.

As shown, history may be used in a way to emphasise *continuity* between the past and the present. Constructing a common 'we' that continues through time makes the identity of the nation, as bound up with key events in the past, relevant to people and acts

of the present (Anderson, 2006; Condor, 2006; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Sani et al., 2007). The historical narrative and the national identity are mutually constituted in moral terms such that the UK is portrayed as always providing safety for refugees therefore necessitating a supportive political response to refugees in the present, although with flexibility in the details of the proposed response.

Reciprocity

An alternative use of history was to invoke notions of *reciprocity*, suggesting that due to events of the past the UK is *indebted* and must now pay back that debt.

Extract 7

House of Commons Opposition Debate: Angus Robertson (Scottish National Party)
For the world, it is a matter of humanity and human dignity. For Europe, it is a matter for historical fairness. Europe is a continent where people from nearly all countries at some point have been refugees at one time, fleeing war, dictatorship or oppression.

Extract 8

Northern Ireland Assembly: Colum Eastwood (Social Democratic and Labour Party)
It [the Great Famine] is a major event in our history, one that we should never forget. We should not forget it because, in the immediate aftermath of the Great Famine, one million people died. One million people travelled to other parts of the world, many of whom died on coffin ships. [...] If America, for example, had been

closed to Irish refugees — refugees is what they were — what would have happened to all those people? People were dying in the ocean, and now, in 2015, people are dying in the ocean. It is not good enough.

In extract 7, the speaker invokes a supranational entity: 'Europe'. It may be difficult to present a narrative whereby 'the UK' has been the historical origin of refugees. Making use of 'Europe' positions the UK within this category and connects it to the origin of refugees while avoiding details of the UK's specific history in this regard. Reference to 'historical fairness' presents the UK, as part of Europe, as having a reciprocal duty to assist refugees in the present. The political 'level' is important; for some countries in Europe (e.g., Germany), invocation of the national level may be effective regarding the reciprocal responsibility to refugees, whereas for the UK reference to 'Europe' provides a coherent narrative.

Extract 8 demonstrates that different national histories are available to be used in political debates. The speaker connects the present situation with the Great Famine that affected Ireland in the 19th century, highlighting the large number of people forced to flee and many dying in the process. Constructing these Irish nationals as 'refugees' makes the narrative relevant and comparable to the present situation, suggesting it should be interpreted in similar terms. The hypothetical situation of the past – 'If America, for example, had been closed to Irish refugees' – emphasises the potential human costs, and ethical consequences, of not providing sanctuary to refugees. Overall, this narrative uses particular categories and descriptions of events that draw strong parallels between the response to Irish people fleeing the Great Famine and (implicitly) Syrian refugees to argue that Ireland has a reciprocal duty to refugees in the present.

Posterity

Politicians also referred to what people in the *future* might think when reflecting on and judging the *present* (as *history in the making*) in terms of the UK's legacy as a moral nation on the world stage.

> *Extract 9*
>
> *Scottish Parliament: Humza Yousaf (Scottish National Party)*
>
> If there is one thing that I want our nation to be known for, let it be as the most compassionate country in the world, so that, when history judges us on how we responded to the humanitarian crisis, and history will judge us, our future generations will look back and say that, when the world needed leadership, courage and compassion, Scotland—all of us together—stood at the front of the queue and did not cower away in the background.

Extract 9 portrays the current political action within a historical narrative that is not only about what happened in the *past* but also what will happen in the *future*. Here, history is attributed with agency in itself; it is presented as something which 'judges'. This account highlights the moral dimensions of the political decisions, suggesting that the portrayal of Scotland as a 'compassionate country' is at stake, and therefore that this judgment is explicitly *moral*. The nation is anthropomorphised (O'Doherty & Augoustinos, 2008; Wallwork & Dixon, 2004) as something which can be seen to have 'stood at the front of the queue and did not cower away in the background.' In this way, the moral dimensions and choices – between courage and compassion on one hand, and cowardice on the other – are

made clear. Furthermore, while other accounts emphasise continuity between *present and past generations*, here the speaker emphasises the continuity between *present and future generations*. This makes the present generation accountable to future generations if they are seen to be part of the same group (the nation).

Responsibility

References to history could also emphasise *responsibility on people and nations in the present due to their actions in the past.*

> *Extract 10*
>
> *Northern Ireland Assembly: Colum Eastwood (Social Democratic and Labour Party)*
> They are fleeing a manmade crisis, whether it is the evil of Assad's regime, the evil of ISIS or the stupidity of Western Governments and their interventions in places like Iraq. We helped to create this crisis. We need to help to solve the problem as it stands.

In extract 10, events in Syria are connected to situations in other countries. The 'Western Governments' are presented as having a role in the creation of the problematic situations. By enlarging the scope of the responsible power, and the relevant geographic area, the UK is portrayed as part of the problem, and Syria as suffering from such actions, overall making the UK Government responsible for the situation. Such a construction works up a relatively recent history of relations between the UK and the Middle East in such a way to present the

UK as responsible for dealing constructively with the consequences of the conflict in Syria, including supporting refugees.

Redemption

Although the vast majority of references to history in the data implicitly or explicitly supported the narrative of the UK having a 'proud history' of supporting and welcoming refugee, it was not uniform. As stated by Billig (1995, p. 71): 'Nations often do not typically have a single history, but there are competing tales to be told.'

> *Extract 11*
>
> *Scottish Parliament: Richard Simpson (Labour)*
>
> Our response now reminds me of our previous patchy response to Jewish immigration. We have heard in recent days about the Kindertransport and how wonderful it was when we took in some 10,000 children. However, we fail to recognise the pogrom that condemned six million Jews, Gypsy Travellers, homosexuals and others to death.
>
> I have a relative by marriage who, along with his brother, fled to Canada while much of his extended family died in the camps. I remember in primary school hearing testimony about the ship with 900 Jews that was turned back because they did not have the right paperwork. We are hearing that again today. Back then, our Government responded only to public pressure; it did not take a principled stand. Is it really much different now?

In extract 11, reference to 'our previous patchy response to Jewish immigration' locates these actions in the past, but also presents them in a way that is negative, although somewhat hedged. 'Patchy' suggests that it was uneven or variable, rather than it being 'bad' as such. However, the description can still be read as a criticism, especially when considered in the light of the more positive evaluations in the data. The use of 'our' connects these past actions to the present response, and therefore suggests a form of continuity that stands in contrast to more favourable accounts; that is, the UK is continuing with (some of) its questionable response to refugees. Whereas other accounts of Kindertransport referred to '10,000' children to highlight the large number of children saved, here the number is contrasted with the 'six million' who died during the holocaust. In this way, the Kindertransport response is implicitly criticised or belittled, although the point is managed sensitively and indirectly. Saying 'fail to recognise' makes reference to events that have gone unappreciated in accounts, rather than, for example, making an explicit claim about the UK's responsibility in this regard.

The speaker refers to a 'ship' that is presumably the *St Louis*, which carried 937 refugees from Nazi Germany, most of whom were Jewish, and was refused entry at various ports (London, 2000b). Stating 'they did not have the right paperwork' places the accountability for the situation with the refugees – as 'they' are the ones who allegedly lacked this 'paperwork'. It also suggests that the problem was administrative rather than relating to UK people or government (e.g., in terms of 'refusing' to help them) or antisemitism, thereby hiding or avoiding blame. However, stating the government 'responded only to public pressure' suggests that the response was limited ('only') and that its source was external ('public pressure'). This is contrasted with other possible motivations: taking 'a principled stand'. The contrast implies that the second response is

more favourable than the first, and in this way the account does moral work in terms of implying that the government's actions were worthy of criticism. Asking 'Is it really much different now?' implies that the situation is not different, although the hypothetical question allows the speaker to imply this without having to tie himself to a particular criticism of the current government or be explicit about how the two scenarios are equivalent. In this way, the speaker's account works up a narrative of the past that is different to others presented above, and more negative of the UK, yet is notable for managing the sensitivity of this issue, particularly through the use of vagueness, omitting agency, the use of footing in managing accounts, and posing hypothetical questions. As argued by Yuval-Davis (2010), such vagueness also operates in relation to the use of pronouns ('me' 'we', 'our'), providing shifting possibilities not only in relation to membership of the nation, but more importantly in terms of the moral evaluation of the identity narrative and the social actions it rejects or supports.

Discussion and conclusions

As shown, references to history allow politicians to place the current situation in a historical narrative that can be used to mobilise social identities that legitimise or criticise particular political responses. As demonstrated by Liu and colleagues (Liu et al., 2005, 2008; Liu & Hilton, 2005), international, and especially global, conflicts have a particular cache when it comes to shared understandings of national identities. Being a result of the Syrian civil war, the European refugee 'crisis' lends itself to being interpreted within historical narratives of international conflict, and as shown this has been framed particularly in terms of WWII, the holocaust and Jewish people fleeing Nazi Germany. Given the UK's firm position within the

narrative of WWII as a 'heroic' nation that provided sanctuary to many people fleeing Nazi Germany, this simultaneously constitutes Syrian refugees as deserving and needing protection, and the UK as a country that should and must provide such protection. This provides a powerful way of justifying a supportive response to Syrian refugees, embedded in widely shared understandings of history.

Moving beyond a static treatment of social representations of history to a discursive psychological approach, the analysis demonstrates how these references to history functioned in several ways, which I have referred to as resonance, continuity, reciprocity, posterity, responsibility and redemption. *Resonance* refers to the way in which history was made relevant to the political debate, particularly through making comparisons between the current situation and previous conflicts and refugee flows, notably WWII. This laid the ground for drawing on references to history in arguing for or against various political strategies, and was most explicit in the way that the House of Commons emergency debate was framed in relation to the UK Parliament's response to those fleeing Nazi Germany. *Continuity* was the most common way in which history functioned, in terms of drawing connections between the past and the present, especially in ways that presented an essentialised British identity that persists through time and is defined by consistently providing sanctuary to those fleeing war and persecution. Embedding this identity, and the connected political response, within this narrative is a rhetorically powerful way of legitimising support for Syrian refugees. However, as argued by Reicher and Hopkins (2001), even though the importance of historical events may have relative consensus, the meaning of events is open to interpretation, such that the UK's history of responding to refugees could be construed as exemplifying both compassion and concerns for security, thereby rationalising political strategies that combine support with restriction.

Reciprocity refers to the way that narratives of history present particular constituencies as having benefited in the past so as to present particular political responses as justified on the grounds of fairness. As was shown, neither 'the UK' nor 'England' as such was presented as being in this situation, but rather 'Europe' and 'Ireland' were constituencies that were drawn upon in these arguments, connected with narratives and identities of refugee flows. This highlights the specificity of national historical narratives and the hegemonic status of the UK's role as 'hero', rather than 'villain' or 'victim', in the global narrative of international relations (Liu & Hilton, 2005), at least as drawn upon by UK politicians.

Posterity refers to the way people of the present could be judged by an imagined future generation, particularly in moral terms, which highlights the way the treatment of history can be both backward and forward looking, as well as functioning to present the current situation in terms of an historically important moment that further justifies it being considered in the light of past well-known conflicts and refugee flows. This demonstrates the creative and imaginative dimensions of such narratives (Andrews, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2011), not only in terms of the past, but also in terms of an imagined future history. *Responsibility* was a way of tying the UK to past events that highlighted culpability for the current situation and therefore a moral obligation to support refugees. *Redemption* was a way of inferring negative aspects of the UK's past response to refugees so as to imply that support for refugees in the present might contribute towards righting the historical record and re-establishing the UK's position as a moral leader on the international stage. That these last two ways of drawing on history were relatively infrequent in the data suggests that they do not tap into the hegemonic narrative of the UK's history to the same extent as

those narratives that emphasise continuity between the UK's past role as a saviour for refugees and its current role in providing sanctuary to refugees.

The analysis highlights the role of emotions in political discourse, notably the role of 'pride' and 'shame'. Referring to the UK's history of supporting refugees as 'proud' not only describes the past in positive ways but implicates the self in this evaluation, as being a part of this national group (see Condor & Abell, 2006; Sullivan, 2007). Moreover, potential 'shame' can be leveraged against those who supposedly risk tarnishing the UK's proud history as a strategy for discrediting political opponents and pressuring them to support the proposed political response (Every, 2013). This means that the narrative of the nation's history is not simply a story about how it acted in the past and should therefore act in the present, but more so it functions as a morality tale, combining moral and emotional evaluations to necessitate particular social and political responses. As explained by Every (2013, p. 679), pride acts as a rallying point for collective action whereas shame is exclusionary, 'constructing an intellectually and emotionally unacceptable 'them' and, by comparison, an acceptable 'us'.' For politicians, shame is toxic in the sense that it positions them as unrepresentative of the collective and therefore unlikely to garner support. However, as highlighted by Every, shaming can also provoke anger, denial or avoidance, which helps explain why the narratives shown here tended to be rooted in 'proud' rather than 'shameful' histories.

The analysis touches on the various political projects being pursued by different political actors. While the response to Syrian refugees can be treated as a specific issue, the responses, including the narratives of history and constructions of the nation, may connect with much broader political objectives. These include a Conservative MP constructing a national identity that emphasises security (extract 6), members of the Scottish National

Party emphasising distinctive Scottish and European dimensions (extracts 7 & 9) and a member of an Irish nationalist party focusing on particular aspects of Ireland's history (extract 8) and critiquing the UK's military interventions in Iraq (extract 10). The references to history are therefore not simply standalone analogies, but rather are aspects of narratives that function to justify the actions of particular political actors and parties in a more comprehensive way. Moreover, narratives are not equally available to all speakers, but are dependent on both the particular national contexts invoked (e.g., Scotland or Ireland) and at times the highly personal nature of certain narratives (e.g., extract 6), being relevant to the extent that speakers can portray themselves as representative of the category being invoked (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Yuval-Davis, 2011).

Research on the use of historical narratives in politics is important for understanding how particular political strategies are proposed, supported or discredited. In this way it connects with research and theory on 'political myth' (Bottici & Challand, 2006; Esch, 2010) and historical analogies (Kaarbo & Kenealy, 2017), showing not just how historical events provide frames for interpreting present day events, but also demonstrating how politicians can use historical narratives to mobilise social identities and legitimise certain political strategies. In Mumford's (2015) terms, it is not possible to say whether they are most relevant in relation to decision making, rhetoric or both. Indeed, from a discursive psychological perspective the distinction between intentions and accounts is problematic (Edwards & Potter, 1992). What it does demonstrate is that references to history constitute 'rhetorical resources' (Augoustinos, 2001) or 'symbolic reserves' (Hilton & Liu, 2017) for political actors that work to actively create meaning and shape social reality (Elcheroth, Doise, & Reicher, 2011).

This analysis is not comprehensive and other uses are history are possible. For example, Kirkwood et al. (2005) showed how some speakers might portray those who live in the present as disconnected from those in past, thus disrupting ideas of historical continuity, in order to both suggest that certain issues belong in the past and that those alive in the present bear no responsibilities for the causes of these problems nor their resolution, constituting what Sibley and Liu (2012) refer to as 'historical negation'.

The analysis illustrates that the place of 'refugees' in historical references is such that they are fitted within hegemonic national narratives, whereby their past and ongoing experiences are subsumed, distorted, hidden and discounted (Kushner, 2003, 2006; London, 2000a; Sharples, 2006). This is consistent with Lowenthal's (1998) distinction between history and heritage, as such narratives distort history in favour of a mythic heritage that presents the nation in a positive light. As this study has shown, the way in which historical narratives function in debates regarding refugees focus on prototypical conflicts and refugee flows that reinforce the UK's hegemonic status as 'hero' rather than 'villain', which minimises or hides past negative responses to refugees, disguises or reinterprets past events to portray the UK in a positive light, and largely directs attention away the everyday experiences of many asylum seekers and refugees and from those refugee situations that do not fit this hegemonic narrative.

Despite the general consensus expressed in the debates for supporting refugees in this particular context, and as linked to these historical narratives, the central points made by opposition politicians – that the Government should accept more than 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years, and accept refugees who had already travelled to EU countries – made no tangible difference to the overall response to refugees. This suggests that while historical narratives hold power for broad political responses, that does not necessarily

translate into more specific changes in policy details. A notable exception is that Lord Alfred

Dubs – who had benefited from Kindertransport as a child - was effective in bringing in an

amendment to the Immigration Act 2016 to permit unaccompanied refugee children to be

relocated from European countries to the UK. This example seemingly demonstrates how

someone can draw on a personal identity embedded in an historical narrative to leverage

political action.

The present research provides a framework for analysing the response to a range of

other political contexts, including other refugee situations, but also circumstances including

military interventions, peace initiatives and responses to historical injustices. It moves

beyond static approaches to social representations of history, contributing to the growing

discursive psychological scholarship on how people actively represent history. Such an

approach enriches our understanding of the nature of historical narratives and their social

and political consequences.

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Table 1. *Descriptive information for the UK parliamentary debate data.*

Location	Date	Length	References to history	% of debate on history
House of Commons Emergency debate	08-Sep-15	3 hours	37	14%
House of Commons Opposition debate	09-Sep-15	6 hours	36	8%
Scottish Parliament	15-Sep-15	2 hours	33	11%
Northern Irish Assembly	22-Sep-15	90 minutes	8	9%
Welsh Assembly	13-Jan-16	25 minutes	7	26%
TOTAL		**Approx. 13 hours**	**121**	**12%**

Table 2. *References to history in the parliamentary debate data.*

Historical event	References
WWII / Holocaust / Nazi Germany	44
UK history of supporting refugees	13
Asian Ugandans	8
Vietnam War	7
Kosovo war 1998-1999	5
Irish Famine	5
Huguenots 15th century	4
Jewish Russians 19th century	3
Bosnian War 1992-1995	3
Jewish Eastern Europeans	2
Hungarian Uprising 1956	2
Other	25
TOTAL	**121**

Appendix A: Sources for parliamentary debates

House of Commons: Emergency debate: The refugee crisis in Europe (8 September 2015, 3 hours) http://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2015/september/emergency-debate-the-refugee-crisis-in-europe/

House of Commons: Opposition debate on the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and Europe (9 September 2015, 6 hours)

https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2015/september/mps-debate-humanitarian-crisis-in-the-mediterranean-and-europe/

Scottish Parliament: Debate on responding to the global refugee crisis (15 September 2015, 2 hours)

http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/report.aspx?r=10084&i=93110

Northern Ireland Assembly: Debate on the ongoing international humanitarian crisis in Syria (22 September 2015, 90 minutes) https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2015-09-22.3.4

Welsh Assembly: Short debate: A nation of sanctuary? The role that Wales can play in the refugee crisis (13 January 2016, 25 minutes)

https://yoursenedd.wales/debates/2016-01-13-6-short-debate-a-nation-of-sanctuary-the-role-that-wales-can-play-in-the-refugee-crisis