

Azzopardi, S., Buttigieg, E., and Licata, L. (2015). *Xjenza Online*, 3:36–40.

Xjenza Online - Journal of The Malta Chamber of Scientists
www.xjenza.org
DOI: 10.7423/XJENZA.2015.1.05



Review Article

Symbiotics of History and Social Psychology Understanding Social Representations of History in Europe

S. Azzopardi¹, E. Buttigieg¹, L. Licata²

¹University of Malta, Msida MSD 2080, Malta

²Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), avenue Franklin D. Roosevelt 50, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Abstract. COST Action IS1205 aims at advancing knowledge and promoting networking among historians and social psychologists to analyse the role played by social representations of history in Europe. Social representations of history are central to the identity of groups that may or may not form the majority in any given country. In Europe, these representations are at best diverse, at worst fragmented, among various national and ethnic groups, either in the same country or across the continent. If left unexplored and unexplained, these social (mis)representations can incite adverse emotions, in turn influencing group behaviours and possibly leading to intergroup rivalry. Bridging the two disciplines through representatives from 28 countries, Action IS1205 addresses this issue by coordinating research on the role of: social cognitive processes in shaping lay representations of history; lay representation of history through the concepts of nationhood and identities; social-psychological studies of the narrative transmission of history through textbooks and the media; lay representation of history and group-based emotions in shaping attitudes, intergroup conflict and reconciliation processes.

to determine social contexts in such a way as to offer optimal benefits to members of society, predict social behaviour, and reduce conflict Gergen, 1973.

History as a discipline is concerned with the course of international relations, nations and social institutions (political, financial, educational structures), economic and social development, social groups and movements (civil right protestors, student activists, strikers, trade unions), and of groups of people (women, minorities, children, migrant labourers). Historians focus on the history of particular systems, analyse the history of periods and events, and study the processes and actions of men/women cutting across various system levels Runyan, 1988. Therefore, history is fundamentally a study about people, unpredictable beings who make this discipline an investigation of angles and curves, rather than linear developments. Time and place are two crucial factors that any historian has to consider when trying to make sense of the experiences of the past Buttigieg, 2011.

Even from these very broad definitions, the relationship between the two disciplines could be easily drawn. The disciplines of social psychology and history share a fundamental concern with the human condition, be it in the form of ‘individual and collective beliefs, mentalities, human behaviour and motivation, memory, personalities, emotions and feelings.’ Tileagă and Byford, 2014. In spite of the long history of mutual suspicion and interdisciplinary uneasiness, recent works and projects are seeking to underline that the similarities between these two sciences outnumber their differences, and that subsequently, there are more benefits to derive from dialogue than from competition. This is the core remit of COST Action IS1205.

As economic historian Koji Yamamoto and social psy-

1 Introduction

1.1 What is the relationship between History and Social Psychology?

The field of psychology is largely defined as ‘the science of human behaviour’. Social psychology is that branch which deals specifically with human interaction. It seeks to establish general laws which describe and explain social relations. If such general principles of human behaviour could be established, it becomes more possible

Correspondence to: S. Azzopardi (simone.azzopardi@um.edu.mt)

© 2015 Xjenza Online

chologist Vlad Glaveanu note:

Social psychologists can benefit from engaging with historical sources by being able to contextualise their findings and enrich their theoretical models. . . . On the other hand, historians can enhance their analysis of historical sources by drawing upon the conceptual tools developed in social psychology [and] to ‘test’ these tools and contribute to their validation and enrichment from completely different perspectives. Glăveanu and Yamamoto, 2012

The attempt of bridging history and social psychology is not particular to this Action. This exercise of bringing the two disciplines closer together is embedded in a rich academic body of research and analysis from both ends of the spectrum. Scholars in social psychology, such as Münsterberg (1899), Gergen (1973), Runyan (1988), and historians such as Bloch (1924), Scott (2012), Millstone (2012) have long underlined the need of mutual exploration of the two disciplines, primarily in the analysis of collective memory.

These previous attempts notwithstanding, the distance between the two sciences remained, in that the effort was largely made by one side only, and not simultaneously. The process therefore has been fraught with theoretical and epistemological tensions, misunderstandings and mutual suspicion. Indeed, this is the gap that Action IS1205 tries to bridge. By providing a solid framework and forum for experts from both fields, this COST Action is ensuring two-way coordination of the bridging process. Research is still underway. Yet, constructive and promising results already point towards a hopefully successful exercise.

1.2 What is COST and Action IS1205?

COST is an intergovernmental framework for European Cooperation in Science and Technology.¹ Its multidisciplinary element is clearly reflected in the nine key domains which it promotes, ranging from biomedicine and molecular biosciences to transport and urban development, from physics and nano-sciences to individuals, societies, cultures and health. Action IS1205² is specifically on social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union and it aims at advancing knowledge on the role played by social representations of history in processes of ethnic and national constructions of European identities, and intergroup conflicts. The Action is stimulating scientific cooperation among social psychologists and historians from around 27 European countries and Israel, along

¹<http://www.cost.eu/> [Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2014]

²<http://costis1205.wix.com/home> [Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2014]

with the Palestinian Authority, New Zealand, and Argentina.

The Action also plans to influence and shape both scientific and public domains through academic and public dissemination. Throughout the estimated four years allocated for this Action (2012-6), the participating historians and social psychologists seek to: complement and expand existing knowledge regarding the psychological processes involved in the development and maintenance of lay representations of history; understand how representations of the past are collectively elaborated and remembered; complement and expand existing social psychological theories of intergroup relations and prejudice by integrating a historical dimension; identify, through concerted data collection, representations of the past that inform contemporary political conflicts across Europe; provide insight into how group-based emotions influence processes of collective remembering, identities, and intergroup relations; provide guidelines for the teaching of history of intergroup conflicts through reviewed pedagogical methods in the teaching of history; inform political decision-makers about the influence of lay representations of history, and history education on identities and intergroup relations through a brief policy briefing; prepare a concerted research project that will be submitted to a series of research-funding sources, such as Horizon 2020 and Eurocores.

2 Working Groups

2.1 The Working Groups (WGs): Work in Progress

The four working groups (WGs) through which these objectives will be achieved share the ultimate goal of exploring the interplay between lay representations of history, social identities and intergroup conflict. Although working relatively independently to ensure free choice of the most appropriate methods according to the respective group objectives, the four teams are bound by a set of common tasks. All four groups set off by reviewing the relevant literature from both disciplines in a concerted effort to increase mutual awareness of what already exists in the respective fields. This proved crucial to the build-up of ideas and the planning of future projects within the respective remits, while also establishing opportunities of cooperation with the other research groups.

By pooling in the individual research agenda and expertise, the participants collaborated to consolidate common research projects(s) which run in line with the individual area of interests so that contribution would be more forthcoming. It is noteworthy that in all WGs, more than one research project has been identified, which has motivated the formation of subgroups. These

have already developed or are still in the process of developing research methods and designs that would contribute to updating the broader research agenda of each of the WGs.

Indeed, it is an important requisite that all subgroups of each of the WGs meet at the same time and in the same location so that, while getting enough space to work on their own, the subgroups would be able to mutualise their research findings and build a comprehensive and compact picture of their results. In other instances, two WGs may even plan to hold their meetings contemporaneously or to hold joint sessions where necessary. This in turn facilitates coordination of studies among the four WGs. Such orchestrated research is then aimed at informing the public, academics, journalists and decision-makers about the social psychological correlations of lay representation of history.³

2.1.1 Working Group 1

The first WG focuses on the role of social cognitive processes in shaping lay representation of history. It is co-led by social psychologists Olivier Klein, Karen Douglas and Susanne Bruckmüller and includes six subgroups. It investigates the psychological processes that explain how communities forge collective memories around historical events. This in turn is meant to assist historians in avoiding biases in historical accounts.

Subgroup 1 is concerned with ‘examining how ordinary people interpret historical events in a general sense by investigating what in history is considered important and worthy of an explanation – and what is not.’ A study has already been undertaken to gauge how ‘ordinary’ people assess a given set of important events in European history. The second part of the project focuses on people’s construals of the beginning versus the ending of an historical event. The initial hypothesis is that people would attach more importance to the beginnings of the events rather than the endings.

Subgroup 2 examines the influence of labelling a piece of information as a ‘conspiracy theory’ on the way that it is received. In the upcoming studies, the group plans to directly manipulate rationality by instructing participants to behave in a rational versus an intuitive way. This is meant to further explore how ‘people’s self-concepts of rationality interact with the way information is presented’, in turn offering a deeper insight into people’s interpretation of political and historical events.

Subproject 3 is concerned with the epistemic and affiliative functions of collective memory or what has been termed ‘mnemonic neglect’. The main hypothesis is that positive behaviours of in-group members will be better remembered than negative behaviours, especially by

highly identified participants. The tool used in this study is a computer-administered personality inventory, the Michigan Omnibus Personality Inventory (MOPI). Each participant answers a number of items and reads a set of statements about citizens from two different countries: the participant’s country and another country. This survey would then explore the way people process and remember information about their own and other cultural groups.

As for subgroup 4, it is organised in two groups. The first one is concerned with the effects of exposure to counter-stereotypical narratives on attribution. The second deals with the effects of exposure to counter-stereotypical narratives on cognitive processing by exploring the relationship between the commitment to the group narrative and the level of interest in the facts depicted by the narrative.

Subproject 5 is focused on the influence of historical analogies on current political judgement and attitudes. An online study on the current Ukraine conflict (Crimea crisis) has been undertaken. The conclusions allowed for too many interpretations. This has given rise to several follow-up studies during the autumn of 2014.

As for Subproject 6, it has prepared a theoretical paper on historical culture.

2.1.2 Working Group 2

Social psychologist Denis Hilton, and historians Chantal Kesteloot and Alberto Sá head WG2 which deals with lay representation of history in Europe, and focuses on concepts of nationhood and identities. It is concerned with ‘the content, structure, and properties of social representations of history, and how they relate with ethnic, national and European identities.’ A study around this issue has already been undertaken by analysing the conceptions of world history from data collected from 30 countries in Europe, Asia, Australasia, North and South America Liu et al., 2012. This WG2 now aims at conducting a similar study on Europe only.⁴

Three subgroups have been formed to facilitate this exercise, each focusing more specifically on WWI, colonialism and social representations of European history. Jointly, these subgroups are interested in uncovering the commonalities and differences in representations of historical events across Europe; analysing how the identification with the nation and with the continent correlates with differences in conceptions of national and European history, respectively; exploring the ‘moral lessons’ that people draw from historical events; evaluating how conceptions of nationhood and lay representations of national and continental history relate, or otherwise, with existing intergroup attitudes; and exploring how

³<http://costis1205.wix.com/home#!working-groups/ciop>
[Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2014]

⁴<http://costis1205.wix.com/home#!working-groups/ciop>
[Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2014]

these conceptions relate with attitudes towards immigrants and acculturation processes in the receiving countries.

The first subgroup honed in on WWI by launching a Europe-wide survey among the participants and any other interested third parties. The participants collected/are collecting survey data about the way this war is represented nowadays, and how it relates with current attitudes and ideological positioning. This survey will ultimately help members to draw European comparisons, and to assess how commemorations will affect those representations and attitudes. The data is collected from undergraduate psychology ($n \geq 100$) and history ($n \geq 100$) students in each participating country.

Three countries (Serbia, Belgium and Finland) have collected big enough samples to start some analysis work. Although incomplete, preliminary conclusions are indicative of certain results. It turns out that the respondents have very minimal knowledge of WWI, that they believe that the war was the result of animosities between the leaders of different nations rather than a conflict between peoples, and that a nation's people and soldiers were constrained – rather than willing – to live the war and to fight for their country.

Subgroup 2 runs on the same lines as the World History Survey, but is focused on Europe instead. It is in course of drafting a similar survey as that of the World History Survey for circulation among its participants.

The third subgroup is concerned about social representations of colonialism and their implications in contemporary intercultural relationships. Historically, colonialism had a profound impact on the way formerly colonised peoples, as well as formerly colonising ones, represent themselves, the others, and the world Volpato and Licata, 2010. However, the history of colonialism is hardly taught in most European countries. This subgroup is investigating how collective memories of the colonial period in different settings relate with current intergroup representations and attitudes. A text-book analysis in a selection of former colonised and colonising countries is currently underway.

2.1.3 Working Group 3

Co-led by Tibor Polya and Eva Fülöp, WG3 deals with social-psychological studies of the narrative transmission of history. The participants are chiefly working on narratives as presented in history textbooks to study how institutional presentation of the past is diffused and consumed by younger generations. The initial assumptions are two: history textbooks currently used in schools serve as materials of social representations; historical texts, because of their inevitable narrative style, are conducive to evoke empathy. Based on these two points, history textbooks become sources of identifica-

tion, which may project nationalism and therefore create distortions of social identity and representation. To this effect, the group has selected particular events, namely WWI and WWII and the colonial past, and a number of selective media about them, namely novels, movies and textbooks, to study their content and narratives.⁵

This WG is also using computer-assisted techniques of text analysis. This is the linguistic development environment NOOJ that includes large-coverage dictionaries, grammars and parses corpora in real time. Dictionaries and grammars are applied to texts in order to locate morphological, lexical and syntactic patterns and tag simple and compound words. NOOJ dictionaries and grammars can be built by users and they can process a dozen languages, including some Roman, Germanic, Slavic, Semitic and Asian languages, as well as Hungarian. It will be used to analyse various psychological dimensions in history textbooks.⁶

2.1.4 Working Group 4

The fourth and final WG, headed by Michał Bilewicz & Sabina Čehajić-Clancy, covers the roles of lay representations of history and group-based emotions in intergroup conflict and reconciliation processes. This group is working on the interplay between such specific history-related emotions as collective guilt, shame and pride, and intergroup mediation or confrontation.

Research on collective guilt has already yielded important results. What WG4 is in the course of doing is to extend this research further to cover the following areas: the conditions under which intergroup apologies and reparations satisfy their target groups; why some people defend against national guilt and others accept it; how victimisation influences intergroup attitudes; and how to temper the role of historical moral schemes in present day political attitudes.⁷

WG4 has established several project lines: to explore the extent to which and how intergroup relations in ethnically-mixed countries are determined by the different historical beliefs about ownership or autochtony; to look into the adherence to the 'official' historical narrative; to evaluate the dimensions of national identification; to assess the impact of official apologies on victim or perpetrator group members; or to investigate the role played by historical moral exemplars in historical narratives. Besides this, WG4 has also performed several studies in countries where historical genocides took place (Bosnia & Herzegovina, Poland), looking into how perpetrator, victim and bystander groups construe the past, with a view to analyse which strategies can be em-

⁵<http://costis1205.wix.com/home#!working-groups/ciop> [Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2014]

⁶www.noojnl.net/ [Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2014]

⁷<http://costis1205.wix.com/home#!working-groups/ciop> [Last accessed: 28 Aug. 2014]

ployed to foster reconciliation between them. The main subgroups deal with the following specified areas: victims and perpetrators - contemporary social perceptions of Fascism in different European countries; responsibility displacement; moral exemplars in history; historical representations of the Holocaust; parrhesiastic reconciliation.

3 Conclusion

The interaction of history and social psychology in this Action is seeking to find ways in which the past can be better understood in the present, while acknowledging that the present is forever informing perceptions of the past. The work in progress is successfully exploring the healthy symbiosis between the two fields and the participants are already reaping the benefits of this intensive dialogue. Some limitations have emerged, such as the numerical imbalance of social psychologists over historians, and the theoretical versus the interpretational priorities of social psychologists and historians, respectively. However, the increasing mutual awareness of the common grounds between the two disciplines means that the participants are constantly seeking to work on the strong points between them in search of the broader objective of Action IS1205.

Acknowledgements

This work was conducted within the framework of COST Action IS1205: Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union.

The authors would like to thank the working group leaders of Action IS1205 for conceding permission to use the unpublished meeting reports and minutes.

References

- Bloch, M. (1924). *Les Rois Thaumaturges: étude sur le Caractère Surnaturel Attribué à la Puissance Royale, Particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (1st ed.). Strasbourg: Librairie Istra.
- Buttigieg, E. (2011). *Nobility, Faith and Masculinity. The Hospitaller Knights of Malta, c.1580-c.1700* (1st ed.). London: Continuum.
- Gergen, K. J. (1973). Social psychology as history. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.* 26(2), 309–320.
- Glăveanu, V. & Yamamoto, K. (2012). Bridging History and Social Psychology: What, How and Why. *Integr. Psychol. Behav. Sci.* 46(4), 431–439.
- Liu, J. H., Paez, D., Hanke, K., Rosa, A., Hilton, D. J., Sibley, C. G., . . . Suwa, K.-i. (2012). Cross-Cultural Dimensions of Meaning in the Evaluation of Events in World History?: Perceptions of Historical Calamities and Progress in Cross-Cultural Data From Thirty Societies. *J. Cross. Cult. Psychol.* 43(2), 251–272.
- Millstone, N. (2012). 'Historicising Common Sense'. *Integr. Psychol. Behav. Sci.* 46(4), 529–543.
- Münsterberg, H. (1899). Psychology and History. President's Address, American Psychological Association, New York Meeting, December, 1898. *Psychol. Rev.* 6(1), 1–33.
- Runyan, W. M. (1988). *Psychology and Historical Interpretation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Scott, J. W. (2012). The incommensurability of psychoanalysis and history. *Hist. Theory*, 51(1), 63–83.
- Tileagă, C. & Byford, J. (2014). *Psychology and History: Interdisciplinary Explorations*. Cambridge University Press.
- Volpato, C. & Licata, L. (2010). Collective memories of colonial violence: Introduction to the Focus section. *Int. J. Conf. Violence*, 4(1), 4–10.