Between discovery and exploitation of history: Lay theories of history and their connections to national identity and interest in history

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Between discovery and exploitation of history: Lay theories of history and their connections to national identity and interest in history

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Abstract

One of the distinctions in modern historiography is that between collective memory and history. Although ideal historical research is presented as objective and driven by the search for accuracy, collective memory is nearly always distorted by the current group's needs. In the current study, we assess whether common people use this professional distinction and whether these two concepts are used by the general population. Our findings are based on several different lines of quantitative studies with a total sample size of 3949: two representative Polish samples, a study of the collective memory of Oświęcim inhabitants and one representative study of inhabitants of six Polish cities. The findings show that laypeople distinguish between three different forms of historical understanding, corresponding to the (1) realistic view of history (history as a search for truth), (2) instrumental view of history (history as a construction in the service of the group's current needs) and (3) relativistic view of history (disbelief in the possibility of historical cognition). The meta-analysis of correlations revealed that instrumental lay theory was positively related to the nationalistic in-group identity that glorifies the in-group. By contrast, realistic theory was positively related to patriotism – a form of in-group attachment that is open to criticism. The realistic theory was positively related, whereas the instrumental view was negatively related to the expressed interest in history. Moreover, the instrumental view of history was positively related to the explicit denial of the value of historical heritage and a strong focus on the present.

Keywords

collective memory, in-group identification, interest in history, lay theories of history, national identity

Social memory is, in fact, often selective, distorted, and inaccurate. None the less, it is important to recognize that it is not necessarily any of these; it can be extremely exact ... the possibility of such accuracy shows that what distorts memory is not some inherent defect in the process of mental recall, but rather a series of external constraints, usually imposed by society – the constraints are the issue

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here, not the accuracy. Indeed the transmission of 'true' information is only one of the many social functions that memory can, in different circumstances, perform.

Fentress and Wickham (1992: xi–xii)

Poland, Polish history, which should be the queen of the world's memory, has become a whipping boy in the last 25 years. It is our national interest to fight for the truth.

Mateusz Morawiecki, *Prime Minister of Poland* (Kancelaria Premiera, 2018)

Introduction

An oft-quoted saying attributed to the novelist Annaïs Nin is that we see the world not the way it is but the way we are. In this saying, it is assumed that human cognition is a subjective construction rather than a veridical testimony, which means that it is driven by individual motives and interests rather than the wish to obtain an accurate picture of the world. This conviction has been a *leitmotiv* of (social) psychological research since the early 1960s. Starting with the seminal theory of personal constructs by George Kelly (1963), through abundant research on the role of social schemas in encoding, storing and retrieving information (Fiske and Linville, 1980; Fiske and Taylor, 1991), up to the more recent works on motivated cognition (Dunning, 1999; Kunda, 1990) and the concept of lay theories that guide people's thinking about almost everything – personality, intelligence, health, and interpersonal relations, among others (Zedelius et al., 2017) – evidence shows that human cognition tends to be biased and deviates from the objective truth. Moreover, as noted by Haslam (2017), these lay theories not only entail cognitions but also drive people's actions, leading to altering the world around and people themselves in line with these beliefs. For example, differences in the conviction that human abilities are either malleable or fixed (incremental vs entity beliefs) were found to have far-reaching consequences for differences in students' aspiration levels, their abilities to cope with failures, and, consequently, their academic achievements (Dweck, 2012). Another well-documented line of research concerns the consequences of lay essentialist theories of intergroup differentiation, which have been found to be a source of prejudice, racism and discriminatory behaviour (Haslam, 2017).

However, taking the assumption that human cognition is purely subjective to its extreme, what is the difference between 'normal' cognition and paranoid delusions? At least a certain degree of realism is necessary for social and personal adjustment. Therefore, it is not surprising that in parallel to research on human biases and motivated cognition, there is a burgeoning research stream dealing with the accuracy of social cognition, such as person perception, emotion recognition and lie detection (Hall et al., 2016). Scholars who explore processes that underlie self-concept show that along with self-enhancement, motives of self-accuracy and self-verification also contribute to people's self-knowledge (Jankowski et al., 2021; Swann, 1990; Wilson, 2009). Self-enhancement and reality-driven accuracy motives interact; which one wins and under what circumstances has been an issue discussed in social and personality psychology literature (Kruglanski, 1999; Vazire and Wilson, 2012). The same distinction may be applied to the perception of groups, particularly one's own group: the in-group bias is driven by the self-enhancement motive, while a critical perception of the groups' drawbacks is influenced by the accuracy motive. The latter dichotomy underlies the well-known distinction between secure group identification and narcissistic identification (Roccas et al., 2006; Sekerdej and Roccas, 2016). When applied to national identification, this distinction has practical implications covering various forms of group and intergroup behaviour (Cichocka, 2016).

Lay theories of history: history in the service of the group self-esteem versus history as a search for truth

The last three decades have witnessed a radical growth of interest among social psychologists in various aspects of social memory. Social psychologists investigate the way people represent history (Lewicka, 2012; Liu et al., 2005), apply psychological constructs and theories to understand people's historical thinking (Bilewicz et al., 2017; Klein, 2013; Pennebaker, 1997), study people's reactions to undesirable information about the group's past behaviour (Branscombe and Doosje, 2004), and investigate the role that perceived group history has in shaping the processes of group identification (Liu and Hilton, 2005). There are probably many factors that have contributed to this rise in interest. One is the proliferation of interdisciplinary studies. The other is a clear shift in social psychology towards studies that have a more ecologically valid character, that is, can be generalized onto phenomena outside laboratory. More importantly, however, there seems to be a growing interest among psychologists in the significance of a temporal perspective in human life. This is seen in the proliferation of research in autobiographical memory (Rubin, 1995), in the adaptive role of nostalgia (Routledge, 2016), functions and correlates of time perspective (Zimbardo and Boyd, 2008), as well as in the role of continuity for group identification (Sani, 2008). The time perspective that reaches beyond the existence of an individual person, that is, the group's history, is another research area that falls within this scope of interest.

Research has shown that perceived group continuity is one of the most important predictors of group identification (Sani et al., 2008). It is no wonder, then, that references to the in-group past are often used to create a sense of historical continuity between the late and current members of the in-group (Paez and Liu, 2012). Studies carried out by Lewicka (2012) and Lewicka and Dobosh (2021) in Polish, Ukrainian and Lithuanian cities that changed nation state and ethnic composition after World War II showed that, almost without exception, the current inhabitants of these cities tend to overestimate the cultural continuity of their places of residency. This ethnocentric bias and perceived place continuity, as measured by the modified Perceived Collective Continuity Scale (Sani et al., 2008), were also found to be positive predictors of identification with the current living place and its community.

History is a resource that can be used for many group purposes. Historical references to the noble and victorious past of the group tend to boost self-esteem, create a positive in-group image and satisfy the group self-enhancement motive (Sedikides et al., 2008; Wohl et al., 2020). Systematic studies of the contents of the national and local memory carried out in consecutive years in Poland and in neighbouring countries (Kwiatkowski, 2018; Lewicka, 2012) revealed a clear bias towards the remembrance of positive events and figures in local and national history (heroes, sources of pride) compared to negative ones (sources of shame). History also plays an essential role in legitimizing and coordinating current in-group actions, which in turn increases group identification (Liu, 2013). It is therefore not surprising that political leaders use historical references to justify current political actions and gain political support.

However, no group has a uniformly noble history; therefore, the historical past may also easily trigger emotional responses, such as collective guilt or shame (Branscombe and Doosje, 2004; Brown et al., 2008; Imhoff, 2010; Iyer et al., 2007). These are unpleasant emotions, and group members usually take various measures that help them change the content of these emotions. For example, people prefer to report regret rather than guilt or shame (Imhoff et al., 2012) or change the attributed causality, for example, by transferring responsibility for actions of the in-group to those of the out-group or to impersonal external factors (Bilewicz et al., 2017). Needless to say, the application of these defensive measures is not always possible and this is often a short-sighted strategy. Our representation of the group's history is therefore a trade-off between constructive

tendencies that help maintain the group's self-esteem and serve its current interests, and a realistic self-critical attitude that may serve the group better in the long run.

In this study, we intend to move the distinction between constructive versus reality-testing cognition, drawn in the previous section, into the realm of history representation. We suggest that along with lay theories of personality, intelligence, health or will power (Zedelius et al., 2017), people also share lay theories of history (LTHs), particularly the history of their own national group. These lay theories are sets of assumptions that define what group history is, how it should be studied, and what function it should serve. The basic distinction that underlies the research presented in this article corresponds to whether history is seen as serving the group's positive self-image, supporting its current interests, and is thus inherently biased, or whether it is seen as a source of veridical information, irrespective of how desirable this information is for the group's self-esteem.

This distinction roughly corresponds to the somewhat naïve distinction that is often drawn between history, assumed to constitute a professional search for true information about the past, and the (social) memory – a product of the identity-driven social construction of the group's past. On the one hand, we have the attitude of a detached scholar who aspires to an objective account of the past, irrespective of its consequences for the group identity, is open to complexities and ambiguities of the historical evidence and is willing to include new factual evidence and revise the existing knowledge accordingly. On the other hand, collective remembering, which is highly subjective, involves an identity project in the form of a narrative that emphasizes group heroism, noble origin, and mission, is intolerant of ambiguity, ignores counterevidence, and is resistant to change in the face of new facts (Wertsch and Roediger, 2008).

This is obviously an idealized picture. Historians are people just like everybody else. They are group members, which makes them prone to a biased representation of the history of their own group. Furthermore, social memories can also differ in the degree to which they are biased; after all, they can also incorporate very accurate testimonies (Fentress and Wickham, 1992; for an extensive treatment of the relations between history and memory, see Burke, 1989; Cubitt, 2007). In this article, we understand these two stances not as descriptions of real behaviour but as two ideal types of attitudes towards the history of one's own group: one that assumes historical realism and the other, a self-serving constructivism. We also assume that this distinction constitutes a variable that differentiates people and groups. This means that some people believe that it is possible and even desirable to sacrifice the historical truth for the sake of maintaining a positive image of their in-group, while others would be willing to sacrifice the positive self-image for a realistic, even if not flattering, picture of the group's past. In reality, both can achieve these two aims to a different degree.

Drawing such a dichotomy does not mean *tertium non datur*. In our case, we would assume that the relativization of history – that is, a 'postmodern' assumption that there is no historical truth since every social group has its own truth – may be a third LTH. The relativization of history may play an important function in being a compromise between a need to accept threatening information and a claim that there is only one group-serving truth. Assuming that every group has its own truth helps to avoid confrontation and maintain the intact self-image of the in-group. The three types of lay theory generally seem congruent with how social scientists see how people think about history (Judt, 2012).

This distinction is not purely academic but is highly relevant to current politics. Populist governments across the world reference the past to mobilize political support by building national self-esteem and uniting societies against 'others' seen as foes. At the same time, they often restrict the freedom of historical research if its findings are seen as threatening to the in-group image. Therefore, we believe that to better understand how history is (mis)used in current political conflicts, it is crucial to study how common people comprehend the major aims of historical

research and how their understanding of history is shaped by the way they identify with their in-group.

History and national identity: does openness to historical facts undermine national identity?

The concept of national identity is rich in meaning. However, for social psychology, there are two forms of national identity that are of particular theoretical interest. These have been labelled differently: patriotism versus chauvinism (Coenders and Scheepers, 2003), patriotism versus nationalism (Blank and Schmidt, 2003), constructive versus blind patriotism (Schatz et al., 1999), attachment to versus glorification of the country (Roccas et al., 2006), and – the recently widely studied – secure and narcissistic group identity (Cichocka and Cislak, 2020). The major difference between these two forms of identification is that the first one describes emotional bonds that connect an individual to a group, a deeply felt attachment and identification, whereas the other is based on a comparison between an in-group and an out-group, along with the conviction about the superiority of one's own group. Both forms share a common core: a positive emotional attitude towards one's own group, but they also have clear specificity. They result in a more (patriotism) or less (nationalism) positive attitude towards members of out-groups and a greater or lesser willingness to accept their perspectives (Roccas et al., 2006). Other studies (Cislak et al., 2018, 2021) have demonstrated that narcissistic group identification has an instrumental character compared to secure identification. The group is treated as an instrument that helps maintain the high self-esteem of its members. This may lead to paradoxical effects, such as when the group members undertake actions that harm the group's long-term interests if this helps them maintain their group pride (Cisłak et al., 2018). The new research also suggests that narcissistic identification is related to over-emphasizing historical events that enhance in-group greatness and dominance (Główczewski et al., in press). Considering all this, one can expect that this form of national identity will be particularly well sealed against negative information about the in-group's past.

What about 'secure' identification? Are people who are emotionally attached to a group able to take a detached indifferent attitude towards how their group's past is evaluated? Or, perhaps, will an open self-critical attitude sooner or later lead to the diminishment of national identification? Studies on group identity have univocally demonstrated that people identify with groups that have an identity of their own, that is, those that are seen as a coherent, unified and meaningful entity (Yzerbyt et al., 2000) or as having a stable essence (Smeekes and Verkuyten, 2014). This means that group features such as perceived cultural continuity, stability, distinctiveness and internal homogeneity should facilitate the identification of the group members (Sani et al., 2008). Historical inquiries that produce ambiguity shatter the validity of the group myths and throw a shadow on its members' noble deeds, undermining perceived group continuity and internal homogeneity. This may be particularly true in Poland, a country with a rich multicultural local history. Before World War II, its cities and towns were inhabited by multiple ethnic groups: Poles, Jews, Ukrainians, Germans and others. Moreover, the mutual relations between the different groups, for example, Poles and Jews, or Poles and Ukrainians, were often tense or even hostile. Studies show that people tend to construct the past of these once multi-ethnic localities in essentialist terms, viewing them as culturally more homogeneous than they really were (Lewicka and Dobosh, 2021). If perceived essentialist continuity is a precondition for identification, then historical searches that may shatter the image of group continuity may also weaken its identity. From this perspective, to protect oneself and maintain a strong national identity, one should avoid digging into historical sources.

As counterevidence to the above, Lewicka (2012) and Lewicka and Dobosh (2021), in a large project carried out in cities and towns that all had a multi-ethnic history, showed that the expressed interest in local history, and thus openness to historical evidence, was a direct negative predictor

of ethnocentric bias and was positively associated with place identity and (indirectly) with the secure form of national identification. Applying a somewhat different approach, Stefaniak et al. (2017) investigated the effects of an intervention targeting high school pupils in small towns that had a large Jewish community before World War II. This discovery led to an increase in place attachment, tolerance and declared social engagement on behalf of the local community among the students. Therefore, it seems that curiosity about 'what was here before' does not necessarily decrease people's emotional bonds with their places of residency and their general identification.

Driven by the desire to investigate the consequences of the expressed interest in history on people's social attitudes and behaviours, we measured either interest in history in general or interest in local history, depending on the study. Moreover, the Interest in Local History Scale contained an additional subscale diagnostic of a conscious attitude towards rejection of the value of historical heritage and a focus on the present.

Research objectives

The objectives of the research presented in this article are twofold. One was to design a convenient measurement instrument that would discriminate between different LTHs. We focused on three lay theories: (1) history as a search for truth (historical realism), (2) history as a construction in the service of the group's positive self-image (historical instrumentalism) and (3) a relativistic image of history as multiple truths (historical relativism). The second objective was to test the relationships between the shared LTHs and (1) the type of national identity and (2) declared interest in history.

In terms of specific hypotheses:

1. Hypothesis 1: We expected that the three different lay theories will form three distinct constructs and that they will differentiate people.
2. Hypothesis 2: We expected that historical instrumentalism will correlate positively and historical realism will correlate negatively with convictions about one's own nation's superiority, that is, with the measure of glorification. With respect to the relationship between secure national identity (attachment) and the type of lay theory, we assumed on the basis of previous research that the correlations will be stronger with historical realism than with historical instrumentalism.
3. Hypothesis 3: We expected that historical realism would correlate positively with the declared interest in history and negatively with the denial of the significance of history and with focus on the present. In light of the previously collected material, we also expected that historical instrumentalism would correlate negatively with the declared interest in history and positively with the denial of the significance of history and with focus on the present.
4. No specific hypotheses were formulated regarding the third lay theory – history as multiple truths (historical relativism) – although, based on the content of this construct, we expected that it would show a much less systematic pattern of correlations than the other two lay theories.

For these purposes, we carried out four studies, covering different samples and using different methodologies of data collection (Internet study and in-home personal interviews).

Research overview

The presented research is based on a series of four survey studies consisting of nine samples that incorporated a total of 3949 participants. The first two studies (Computer-Assisted Web Interview - CAWI 1 and 2, one sample each) were conducted on quota-representative samples of Polish society using the Internet Panel provided by a professional research company. Study 3 (Oświęcim, one sample) was based on a quota-representative sample of the inhabitants of Oświęcim, a town in the south of Poland with a strong Jewish minority before World War II, known for being the site of the infamous Nazi concentration and extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. Finally, the last study (6C, six samples) was based on a series of surveys (home-based personal interviews carried out by a professional research company) in six different cities. The studies investigated city-related collective memory in six Polish cities, selected for the study because of their different pre-war history and ethnic composition. Two of the cities (Wrocław and Olsztyn) were German cities before World War II, three others had very strong Jewish minorities (Kracow, Białystok and Łódź) and the last one (Poznań) had a German history until World War I. Given that the surveys carried out in the six cities were representative at the city level, we decided to treat them in the analysis as six independent samples. Table 1 contains the summary statistics for all the studies conducted within the research project.

All studies included a broad set of questions regarding attitudes towards local and national history. In this article, we focus on reporting measures that were used across most of the studies and that directly refer to the study objectives: lay theories of the history scale, measures of attachment and glorification as two forms of national identity and measures of interest in history (general or local) (please see Table 2 for details).

Table 1. Basic statistics of the samples used in the study.

Study	Sample type	N	M_{age} (SD)	% women
1	CAWI[a]	500	35.02 (13.23)	50.7
2	CAWI[a]	500	34.47 (13.54)	51.2
3	Oświęcim[b]	549	38.07 (16.43)	59.8
4	Six Polish cities[c]	2430		
	6C: Białystok	410	44.94 (16.39)	53.7
	6C: Kraków	414	45.83 (17.05)	53.9
	6C: Łódź	400	48.33 (17.41)	55.8
	6C: Olsztyn	402	44.73 (16.78)	54.2
	6C: Poznań	401	45.40 (16.22)	54.4
	6C: Wrocław	401	46.14 (17.74)	53.9

SD: standard deviation.
[a]Computer Assisted Web Interview -quota-representative samples of Polish society based on gender, age and education.
[b]Quota-representative sample of Oświęcim dwellers based on geographical residence within the city.
[c]Quota-representative sample of each of the six cities based on gender and age. The drawing operand consisted of three consecutive steps; the final step was based on a random walk procedure. Computer-assisted personal interviews were conducted. The study was conducted by a professional survey agency (https://pbs.pl/en/).

Measures
LTHs (Hypothesis 1)

We developed a new scale with items inspired by the three views of the role of history: (1) historical realism, (2) historical constructivism/instrumentalism and (3) historical relativism. Due to space limitations, we do not report the details of the analyses and the complete items' set in the main text, but they may be found in the Supplementary Materials (https://osf.io/stcpy/).

The initial pool of items, using data from the first three studies, was analysed using exploratory factor analysis. This is an analysis that helps identify the structure of a measurement instrument, that is, establish the extent of its homogeneity. If the three lay theories indeed form three different views on history, then factor analysis should reveal three factors. In this analysis, we obtained a three-factor solution, and the composition of items on each factor (factor loading) corresponded to the three constructs (see Supplementary Materials).

In the next step, we confirmed the identified scale structure using a confirmatory factor analysis approach, using data from Study 4. Consequently, we identified three major groups of beliefs regarding history:

1. Historical realism – a set of beliefs congruent with the normative approach to history and the belief that the primary aim of history should be the discovery of truth about the past. The exemplary items are 'In history, the most important thing is to know the truth about the past' and 'We should even remember those historical events that today may give rise to conflicts and disputes'.
2. Historical instrumentalism – a set of beliefs that legitimizes the distortion of history if used to justify a national in-group's current actions. The exemplary items are 'Sometimes, it is better to remain silent about certain historical events to avoid weakening the image of our nation' and 'The knowledge of the past should be communicated in such a way that it serves the interests of our nation today'.
3. Historical relativism – a set of beliefs that treat history as something that may never be fully understood and known. The exemplary items: 'The past can never be fully understood' and 'We will never know the real course of many historical events'.

In further analyses, we used mean scores for items loading predominantly on one of the mentioned factors. Respondents rated their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale in all studies. We have therefore confirmed that the three different lay theories indeed form three distinct constructs. This supports Hypothesis 1.

National identity: attachment versus glorification

Different measures grasp the distinction between 'secure' national identification (attachment, patriotism) and narcissistic identification (nationalism, glorification, collective narcissism). For the present study, we used a scale suggested by Israeli psychologists (Roccas et al., 2006) that distinguishes between emotional attachment to and glorification of a country. The original scale consists of 16 items divided equally between the *attachment* and *glorification* subscales. Participants expressed their agreement/disagreement on a 7-point Likert-type scale (ranging from completely disagree to completely agree). The final scale used in this study consisted of nine items, of which five were diagnostics of attachment to the national in-group (e.g. 'Being Polish is an important part of my identity'; 'It is important to me to contribute to my nation'), and four were related to glorification ('Relative to other nations, we are a very moral nation'; 'Poland is better than other nations in all respects'). The scale's structure and validity has been tested in several other research projects (Lewicka, 2012).

Interest in history

In seven out of the nine studied samples (Oświęcim, six Polish cities), we used the Interest in Local History Scale (Lewicka, 2012). The scale has two factors, with five items diagnostic of the interest in local history (e.g. 'I am interested in the history of my city'; 'I have books at home

that describe the history of my city'), and five others that are diagnostic of an explicit rejection of history and focus on the present (e.g. 'I think that it is more important to care about the comfort of present city residents than about historical monuments'; 'It is better to destroy an old building than to invest lots of money in its restoration'). Participants expressed their opinions on a 7-point Likert-type scale (from completely disagree to completely agree). The scale was previously tested in numerous studies (Lewicka, 2012). Additionally, in Studies 1 and 2, we used a version of the scale that captured interest in Polish history and was based on an analogous set of items as the first subscale. Table 2 contains information on the measures used in specific studies.

Table 2. Summary of variables used in specific studies.

	Glorification	Attachment	Interest in history	Focus on the present
CAWI 1	+	+	+ (Polish)	–
CAWI 2	–	–	+ (Polish)	–
Oświęcim	–	–	+ (Local)	+
Six Polish cities	+	+	+ (Local)	+

Results

The presented analyses are divided into two main parts. In the first part (*Acceptance of different lay theories*), we show which approaches towards history are the most common among laypeople. In subsequent analyses, we show how different LTHs are related to different forms of national identity and interest in history.

Acceptance of different lay theories

In the first step, we analysed the general support for different types of LTHs. Table 3 presents the means of agreement with the items corresponding to the three lay theories.

LTH and in-group glorification or attachment (Hypothesis 2)

We conducted a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs) with repeated measures. This analysis allowed us to test whether people differed in their support for different LTHs. The results are presented in Table 3. We observed that the respondents showed a strong preference for historical realism, whereas the support for historical instrumentalism was the lowest consistently across all studies. These differences were considerable: effect sizes measured by eta^2 varied between .13 and .48 and far exceeded the typical values usually observed in social psychology studies (Richard et al., 2003).

In the second step, we analysed the connections between LTHs and in-group glorification and attachment. To present the data in concise form, we decided to focus on summary analyses (a meta-analysis). This type of analysis allows us to show the relations between different lay theories and other variables across specific studies, as well as to assess the correlation between these variables, pooled across all samples. Therefore, we calculated correlations between LTHs and different forms of in-group identity. In the next step, we estimated the pooled correlation coefficient using a meta-analytical model with an MLR (maximum likelihood with robust standard errors) estimator.

Table 3. ANOVA with repeated measures for support for specific lay theories of history across studies.

Id	Sample	N	M_R (SD)	M_{RT} (SD)	M_I (SD)	F-test	η^2
1	CAWI	500	5.52[a] (1.17)	4.57[b] (1.25)	3.54[c] (1.43)	(2, 998) = 336.96	.40
2	CAWI	500	5.46[a] (0.90)	4.78[b] (1.09)	3.43[c] (1.41)	(2, 998) = 451.41	.48
3	Oświęcim	549	4.80[a] (1.10)	4.45[b] (1.24)	3.76[c] (1.43)	(2, 1066) = 92.77	.15
4	Six Polish cities	2428					
	Bialystok	410	4.86[a] (1.08)	4.19[b] (1.15)	3.90[c] (0.90)	(2, 818) = 100.30	.20
	Krakow	414	4.64[a] (1.13)	4.29[b] (1.24)	3.83[c] (0.92)	(2, 826) = 62.16	.13
	Łódź	400	5.15[a] (0.90)	4.30[b] (0.94)	3.95[c] (0.77)	(2, 798) = 197.54	.33
	Olsztyn	402	5.49[a] (0.86)	4.46[b] (1.15)	4.10[c] (0.73)	(2, 802) = 265.35	.40
	Poznan	401	5.12[a] (0.84)	4.30[b] (1.03)	3.70[c] (0.90)	(2, 800) = 234.65	.37
	Wroclaw	401	5.37[a] (1.21)	4.03[b] (1.34)	3.95[b] (0.91)	(2, 800) = 214.03	.35

ANOVA: analysis of variance; SD: standard deviation; CAWI - Computer-Assisted Web Interview.
Means for: M_R – historical realism, M_I – historical instrumentalism, M_{RT} – historical relativism.
[a,b,c]The means with different superscripts differ significantly.

The forest plots depicting the individual correlations between LTHs and in-group glorification are depicted in Figure 1, and those between LTHs and in-group attachment are depicted in Figure 2. The figures show the correlations for each specific study. The black box shows the correlation coefficient for a specific study, while the diamond box shows the pooled results. The horizontal lines through the boxes show the range of the 95% confidence interval. The longer the lines, the less reliable the study results. The width of the diamond serves the same purpose. If the confidence interval includes 0, the relationship may be treated as non-significant.

The pooled correlation coefficients between the LTHs and the two forms of national identity are presented in Table 4. The analysis showed that in-group glorification was positively related to historical instrumentalism, but no such connection existed between in-group glorification and historical realism, in line with Hypothesis 2. Furthermore, in-group attachment was related most strongly to historical realism and only slightly positively to historical instrumentalism. No connection was found between historical relativism and the two forms of national identity.

More nuanced analyses of the relations between LTH and national identity may be found in the Supplementary Materials (Point 5).

## LTH and interest in history (Hypothesis 3)

To test the last hypothesis, we analysed the relationship between interest in history and LTH. The forest plots depicting the relations between LTHs, interest in history and the focus on the present across all studies are presented in Figures 3 and 4. The notational convention is identical as in Table 2.

The analysis showed that interest in history was positively related to historical realism but not to historical instrumentalism, in line with Hypothesis 3. Interest in history was also weakly related to historical relativism. By contrast, the focus on the present was positively correlated with instrumentalism, weakly negatively with historical realism and weakly positively with historical relativism. The pooled coefficients are presented in Table 5.

More nuanced analyses of the relations between LTH and interest in history may be found in the Supplementary Materials (Point 6).
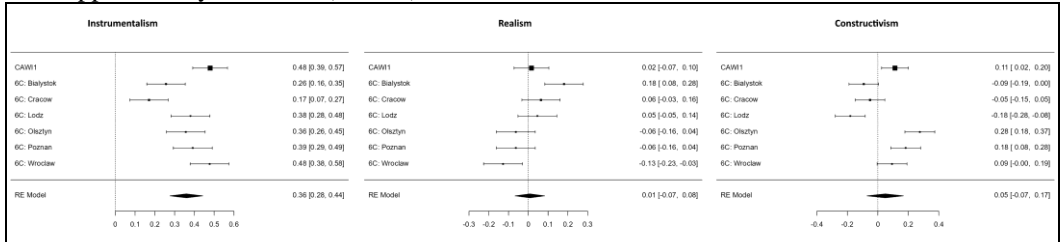
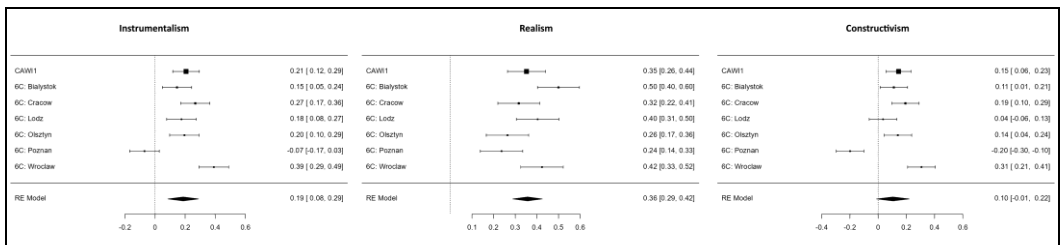**Figure 1.** Correlations between lay theories and glorification.

Figure 2. Correlations between lay theories and attachment.

Table 4. The mean correlation coefficient between the in-group glorification, in-group attachment and different lay theories of history with 95% confidence intervals.

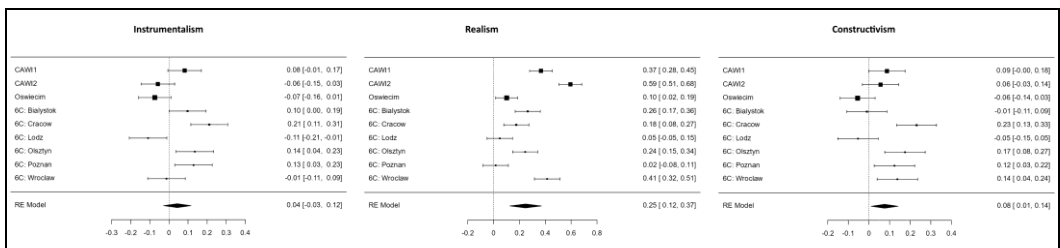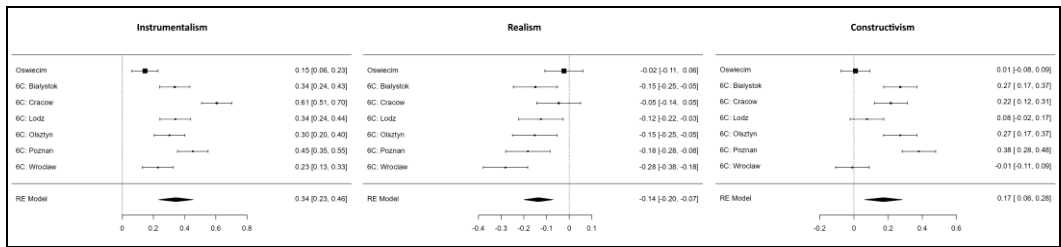|	Instrumentalism	Realism	Relativism
Glorification	.36*** (.28, .44)	.01 (−.07, .08)	.05 (−.07, .17)
Attachment	.19*** (.09, .29)	.36*** (.29, .43)	.11 (−.01, .22)

***p < .001.

Figure 3. Correlations between lay theories and interest in history.

Figure 4. Correlations between lay theories and focus on the present.

Table 5. The mean correlation coefficient between interest in history and different lay theories of history with 95% confidence intervals.

	Instrumentalism	Realism	Relativism
Interest in history	.04 (−.03, .12)	.25*** (.13, .37)	.08* (.01, .14)
Focus on the present	.34 (.23, .46)***	−.14*** (−.20, −.07)	.17** (.06, .28)

*p < .05; ** p < .01; ***p < .001.

Discussion

Studies run on nine different samples demonstrated that people differ in how they understand the role of history. In all samples, the analyses revealed a three-factor structure, corresponding to (1) historical realism (history as a search for truth, even if the truth is uncomfortable); (2) historical constructivism/instrumentalism (history as an instrumentally driven construction – a narrative that serves the present purposes of the group); and (3) historical relativism (multiple truths and historical relativity). Therefore, one of the contributions of the presented studies is the creation of a convenient short measure that differentiates between these three approaches to history. With this study, we also conceptually add to the rich legacy of research in lay theories in psychology.

A comparison of the means of the three lay theories showed that the highest support was for historical realism, and the lowest was for instrumentalism. This suggests that in Poland, at least on the level of open declarations, respect for historical objectivity dominates over the biased vision of history, driven by the current national interests. Nevertheless, caution is needed as this may be an overly optimistic interpretation. The concept of 'truth' is positively loaded, which means that it tends to be subject to social desirability bias. Such is, of course, the case of the majority of declared attitudes; however, the term 'truth' appears to be particularly ambiguous and subject to abuse. As 'truth' cannot be discussed, it often constitutes a final argument in many debates. Consequently, 'truth' is often treated entirely instrumentally. An example of this can be found in the speech given by the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki quoted at the beginning of this article.

How do we know then that our measures of the 'realistic lay theory' are valid, that is, that what people have in mind is indeed the willingness to discover rather than instrumentally construct history? Let us note that the three items that make the subscale of 'history as search for truth' do not refer to 'truth' as an abstract concept; instead, they define its content, emphasizing that true information may actually work against the group's current interests (e.g. 'We should even remember those historical events that today may give rise to conflicts and disputes'). An additional argument for the validity of the LTH scales is the set of consistent correlations between the specific lay theories and the two different forms of national identity that we have obtained and that are supported by the theory. Further findings confirming the validity of the employed measures of

LTH are correlations in the predicted direction of the lay theories with measures of openness to the multicultural city past versus the one-sided perception of the city as uniformly Polish. History as truth correlated positively with acknowledgement of the multi-ethnic history of the cities, and thus acceptance of their 'true' character (Lewicka, 2015). Of course, more effort is needed to corroborate the scale's validity. This may be done through experimental procedures, for example, by testing whether people who are historical realists would be more open than historical instrumentalists to information that is inconsistent with the nationalistic narrative.

In line with our predictions, we obtained a consistent pattern of relationships between the three lay theories, types of national identity and declared interest in history. In-group glorification was related to the instrumental treatment of history, whereas in-group attachment was related to the realistic search for truth. The 'postmodern' approach, which tends to relativize history, was unrelated to national identity.

The studies also revealed an interesting pattern of relationships between LTHs and the measures of declared interest in history, whether general or local. These findings provide strong evidence that people who share the self-serving instrumental lay theory are not really interested in the history of their national group or of their locality and if they use references to history, they do it entirely instrumentally. This was particularly visible in the consistent positive correlations between instrumental lay theory and the explicit denial of the value of the city's historical heritage, accompanied by an open focus on the city's present. There was an opposite pattern for the realistic lay theory. This is not a trivial effect, as references to history are frequent among those sharing the instrumental LTH. In fact, nationalism seems to be obsessed with history, while the historical visions it brings often distort reality and are not based on novel historical findings (Jaskulowski and Majewski, 2022). The historical policy of nationalists is similar to that of Orwell's (1949) Big Brother: history can be attended to only if it can be officially controlled. Our analyses also suggest that the current historical disputes in Poland and elsewhere cannot be resolved simply by reference to objective historical facts, as they seem to be grounded in much deeper general approaches towards history's aims.

The results also add to our understanding of the processes that underlie the distinction between patriotism and nationalism, here called in-group attachment and in-group glorification. As numerous studies show (Cichocka, 2016), nationalism (under different names) is a defensive form of national identification. A defensive identity is typical of people with an uncertain self-concept, compensated for by a grandiose overestimation of one's assets and dependence on external feedback for self-evaluation. Historical search carries the risk of discovering an unpleasant truth about the in-group's past, which may easily shatter the fragile national self-concept. To be prepared for such a discovery, one needs a healthy distance from an in-group, something that is offered by in-group attachment but not by nationalistic glorification (Roccas et al., 2006; Sekerdej and Roccas, 2016). This reluctance of people who score high on glorification against engaging in historical investigations was also documented by a consistent set of positive correlations between glorification and focus on the present, a subscale of the Interest in (local) History Scale (Lewicka, 2016). Nationalists, even if they address history (and they do fairly often), treat history not as a source of knowledge but as a convenient tool that can be used when needed. Otherwise, it is the present that ultimately attracts their interest.

The distinction drawn in this article between the realistic search for historical truth and the instrumental treatment of history is another way of saying that people differ in whether they believe that the ends justify the means – the 'ends' here being the group interests, the 'means' the historical truth. This is a crucial distinction considered by some (Lefebvre, 1982) to underlie two qualitatively different systems of moral reasoning: System I (evil is always evil; hence, the good end does not justify the evil means) and System II (good ends may justify evil means). Interestingly enough, Lefebvre, a Soviet mathematician and psychologist who emigrated to the United States in the early

1980s, claimed that adherence to one or the other system of moral reasoning differentiates countries and political systems: System II being more popular in the East, and System I in the West. The use Putin and his followers make of history to instigate and justify the ongoing war in Ukraine (Hill and Stent, 2022) seems a good example for a clash between the different LTHs. It also demonstrates very clearly how these different concepts of history translate into real life.

The findings presented in this article are correlational. We learn that certain people's characteristics, attitudes and beliefs go together; however, we do not know if any of these is a cause of another, or perhaps if there is any other variable that may be responsible for their co-occurrence. There is probably a large array of psychological constructs that could explain these differences and correlation patterns: sense of personal control, stability of self-esteem, openness to experience and need for cognition, among others. 'Lay historicism' as an individual variable is another one. Nevertheless, as we conclude this article, we would like to return to one of our opening quotes: 'what distorts memory is not some inherent defect in the process of mental recall, but rather a series of external constraints, usually imposed by society – the constraints are the issue here, not the accuracy' (Fentress and Wickham, 1992: xi–xii). It is these external social and political constraints that should become the focus of future psychological studies, along with customary individual variables.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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