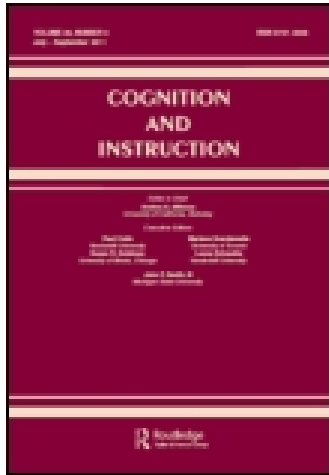


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### Do Master Narratives Change Among High School Students? A Characterization of How National History Is Represented

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# Do Master Narratives Change Among High School Students? A Characterization of How National History Is Represented

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Master narratives frame students' historical knowledge, possibly hindering access to more historical representations. A detailed analysis of students' historical narratives about the origins of their own nation is presented in terms of four master narrative characteristics related to the historical subject, national identification, the main theme and the nation concept. The narratives of Argentine 8th and 11th graders were analyzed to establish whether a change toward a more complex historical account occurred. The results show that the past is mostly understood in master narrative terms but in the 11th grade narratives demonstrate a more historical understanding. Only identification appears to be fairly constant across years of history learning. The results suggest that in history education first aiming at a constructivist concept of nation and then using the concept to reflect on the national historical subject and events in the narrative might help produce historical understanding of a national past.

Historical knowledge and the elaboration of narrative are intimately related. It has been suggested that narrative constitutes a particularly human way of organizing thought (Bruner, 1990). Narrative thought, which structures experience with plot, is a way of constructing reality. This can, in turn, frame the consumption or learning of history (Carretero & Kriger, 2011; Rüsen, 2004; Straub, 2005; Wertsch, 1998). History is also produced or taught as narrative. Both in philosophy of history (e.g., Ricoeur, 1990; Topolsky, 2000; White, 1987) and in history education (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004), narratives have been recognized as powerful cultural tools for historical understanding. The analysis of narrative as a cultural tool, encompassing their production and consumption, allows for a broad scope on historical understanding. However, history and narrative are not the same: narratives can be more and less historical. Indeed, narration can be considered a part of the craft of the historian, establishing a complex relationship between the past and the present. Therefore, narrative competence is considered necessary for developing historical

consciousness (Rüsen, 2004). Yet, narrative can also simplify or obliterate what historical research reveals and thus limit historical understanding. A plot is selective and implies that some events are told, some characters are mentioned, whereas others are not. A proper use of historical sources often conflicts with creating a lively narrative, as Marguerite Yourcenar also emphasizes. Reflecting on writing the *Memoirs of Hadrian*, she says, “Whatever one does, one always rebuilds the monument in his own way. But it is already something gained to have used only the original stones” (Yourcenar, 2000, p. 248).

In education history typically acquires a narrative format (Barton, 2008), which on the one hand might facilitate learning as it engages with prior narrative thought, but on the other hand, narrative as a frame might limit understanding. The matter of what history is taught becomes most important, as it is not only the student’s narrative thought but also the selection of narratives propagated through education that frames which monuments, or accounts of the past, are (re)constructed. It is not surprising that the establishment of a history curriculum or canon drags educators and policymakers into heated debate (Grever & Stuurman, 2007; Symcox & Wilschut, 2009), because by framing the past, the future is also framed (Carretero & Solcoff, 2012).

#### NATIONAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AS A CULTURAL TOOL IN EDUCATION

One kind of narrative is encountered in most countries when history is taught: the narrative about the country’s own history (Barton & McCully, 2005; Carretero, 2011). These national historical narratives are *master narratives* that underlie superficial changes of historical contents and the variety of stories we encounter and manifest over and over in revisions of the curriculum (Alridge, 2006). The master narrative has been developed as a unit of analysis in current social scientific and historical thought. For example, Heller (2006) describes master narratives as general interpretation patterns which have the function of making sense of the past, present, and future of a cultural community. She analyzes the biblical narrative of the Jewish people looking for freedom through the exodus from Egypt as a general model of liberation from oppression. This model is supposed to act as a narrative underlying many representations of the past, particularly those related to national revolutions. Analyses of school history contents, either from a disciplinary historical perspective (Berger, 2012) or from the history education point of view (Foster, 2012), reveal their close resemblance to “official narratives” aiming at historically legitimizing the present and future political agenda. How students understand and analyze the past is greatly influenced by these kinds of pervading narratives (VanSledright, 2008). As Alridge (2006) indicated:

American history textbooks present discrete, heroic, one dimensional, and neatly packaged master narratives that deny students a complex, realistic, and rich understanding of people and events in American history. . . . Such master narratives, I contend, permeate most history textbooks and deny students critical lenses through which to examine, analyze, and interpret social issues today. (p. 663)

As a consequence of the emphasis on national master narratives, students have limited access to what’s controversial about the history of their country, thus complicating the development of a critical perspective (Grever & Stuurman, 2007; Penuel & Wertsch, 2000). According to Wertsch

(1998, 2002; Wertsch & Rozin, 2000), national historical narratives are cultural tools configuring how the past is represented and understood.

The notion of cultural tool indicates that certain objectives underlie the selection and content of narratives. Seixas (2004, p. 5) states synthetically that “a common past [is] perhaps the crucial instrument—in the construction of collective identities in the present” (see also Seixas, 2012). Many scholars agree that through history education values are transmitted and identities are constructed (Barton & Levstik, 2008; Hobsbawm, 1992). Particularly national identity construction has been aimed at for many years (Carretero, 2011). History education emerged at the end of the nineteenth century with the specific purpose of consolidating national identity and constructing nation-states (Berger, 2012). National historical narratives have been criticized in historiography, and this criticism found its way to educational practice, which, for example, then began emphasizing the learning of critical historical skills (Symcox & Wilschut, 2009). Yet, studies reveal that current curricula and textbooks have a nationalist foundation (Foster & Crawford, 2006; Leeuw-Roord, 2004). Carretero (2011) suggests that two different objectives of history education have been handed down, aiming at identity construction on the one hand and critical historical thinking on the other. Barton (2008) and Gottlieb and Wineburg (2012) also implicitly and explicitly consider the existence of different objectives of history education. The continuous tension between the identity-formation function and the critical function of history education is elaborated and discussed by Carretero, Asensio, and Rodríguez-Moneo (2012) as well. In the construction of the national historical narrative by students, deep contradictions appear between identification on the one hand and critical reflection on the other (Carretero & Kriger, 2011). This invites further study on whether the two objectives of history education are complementary, as will be discussed later on.

### NATIONAL HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AS A CULTURAL TOOL IN LEARNING HISTORY

National master narratives have been primarily studied in the context of their production, that is, in history textbooks and in other cultural devices related to the public uses of history (Alridge, 2006; Foster & Crawford, 2006; VanSledright, 2008). Much less work has been done on how exactly students “consume” master narratives (Wertsch & Rozin, 2000). Yet it is important to consider that learning or consumption is more than a passive reproduction of the produced educational content. Processes of resistance, expressed by counternarratives, have also been found to occur (Wertsch, 1998). Both production and consumption of master narratives and their interaction need to be well understood. Are the produced master narratives also consumed and how? Research has affirmed that overall the historical narratives that students construct about their own nation closely resemble historical master narratives (Barton, 2008; López, Carretero & Rodríguez-Moneo, in press-a; Wertsch, 2002). To study this in more detail, a model of production and consumption of national historical narratives has been proposed (see for more details Carretero, 2011, Chapter 4; Carretero & Bermúdez, 2012). Four characteristics of historical master narratives distinguished in that model will be under consideration in this article:

1. The historical subject is established in terms of inclusion and exclusion, radically opposing it to others as a coherent and homogeneous group. This determines the “voice” of the

narrative and the exclusion of others, as well as the logical course of action for the subject often confronting the historical other. The national group is internally unified, and at the same time, it is set apart as absolutely different from another, often simplified, historical group.

2. Identification processes are at work in the narrative, attaching personal affect and value judgments to the unification and opposition mentioned above. The historical subject is referred to in the first person plural “us,” often logically opposed to “them,” and valued more positively. A shared identity—a timeless national identity—between the present storyteller and the past historical subject is established.
3. The historical events are simplified around one common narrative theme, such as the search for freedom or territory. As indicated by previous studies (e.g., Wertsch, 1998), this search only considers the freedom of a specific group: the freedom of the historical subject. The narrative tends to minimize, and avoids mentioning, the right to freedom of additional subjects, such as natives, slaves, or women. Also, this particular freedom is considered in a teleological way, as the preestablished outcome of the historical processes.
4. The narrative demonstrates a romantic and essentialist concept of both the nation and its nationals. The national identity is perceived as a natural property and a condition preexisting the nation. This narrative characteristic is based on our recent theoretical (Carretero, Castorina, & Levinas, 2013) and empirical (López et al., in press-a) contributions, developing the idea that concepts and narratives interact in the students’ historical representations. Concepts are supposed to be embedded in the narrative, and it is important to pay attention to their analysis, because different ways of using concepts could affect how the students construct their representations of the past.

From the perspective of contemporary historiography, the kind of historical narrative characterized here is inadequate. It provides a presentist or anachronist view on national history. It projects present categories on the past and confounds historical cause and effect. National identity is taken as a precondition of the historical events instead of taking it as a result that is historically constructed. As Hobsbawm observes, “Defining a nation by its members’ consciousness of belonging to it is tautological and only provides an a posteriori guide to what a nation is” (1992, pp. 7–8). National identities are not real or natural conditions, but constructions of political interest (Gellner, 1978). The nation is an imagined community (Anderson, 1983), or at least it is a modern social construct (Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 2002). The narrative driven by an essentialist or naturalized concept of nation and national identity, with its univocal and transcendent historical subject taking a logical and just course of action, is a particularly mythical approach to the past. It is also a biased approach, as the narrative aims at legitimizing national identity historically and thus attributes interests to the past instead of trying to understand the past in its own terms.

This is of great importance for learning history, suggesting that critical historical understanding means overcoming a biased conceptualization and simplified narrative of nation (Carretero et al., 2013). Research about history learning indicates that students only modestly progress in historical understanding. For example, learning to think historically has been found to be difficult for students because presentism limits them in developing a more disciplinary historical approach toward the past (Wineburg, 2001). Also, tensions occur between identification with and taking a distance from the national past as sources of historical reflection (Carretero & Kriger, 2011; Goldberg, 2013). When it comes to historical concepts, students do progress from a more concrete

understanding to a more abstract understanding (Berti & Andriolo, 2001; Carretero & Lee, 2014). Nevertheless, students master the second-order concepts that are necessary for dealing with historical source material and interpretations contradicting each other relatively late (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Young students tend to use concrete, anecdotal and personalist causal explanations rather than abstract and structural causal explanations (Carretero, López-Manjon, & Jacott, 1997). Understanding the complexity of historical events varies throughout adolescence and adulthood, yet historical representation remains static and simple rather than becoming dynamic and complex (Voss & Carretero, 2000). When it comes to historical narratives, students' metaunderstanding develops from taking the historical account as a given (the past is the story), through taking them as copies of the past with accidental errors or deliberate distortion, to interpretations of historians with particular questions (Lee & Ashby, 2000). Yet, when looking at the narrative accounts produced by adult students, even they lacked in historical understanding while reproducing national historical narratives (Carretero, López, González & Rodríguez-Moneo, 2012; López et al., in press-a).

Elaborating on this research tradition and applying the model of four master narrative characteristics, this article will consider how students represent their national historical narrative and whether they progress from a master narrative to a more historical account of the national past. As it has been introduced, our approach considers the importance of two possible influences on the student's representation. On the one hand, we suppose there is an influence of the master narrative. On the other hand, we assume there is a progression from simple to complex representation of history. We suppose this expected progression could be due to the combined impact of cognitive development, enriched history learning, and an increasing exposure to cultural accounts through media and socialization devices.

Before presenting our study on students' reconstructions of the national past, the particular master narrative under consideration will be introduced. Even though national historical narratives are common worldwide and share characteristics, cultural tools are known to be context-specific. In order to properly contextualize the study carried out in Argentina, and to understand the qualitative results presented later on, the relevant Argentine history will be briefly reviewed. As will be seen, the four master narrative characteristics are contested by historical research.

## A MYTH OF ORIGIN UNDER HISTORICAL SCRUTINY

Classical studies of nationalism (Smith, 1991) have stated that every nation has a myth of origin. That is, an event presented as the starting point of the nation. A myth of origin is a classical example of a national historical master narrative. In the case of Argentina, this is May 25, 1810, representing the revolution leading to independence from Spain (Romero, 2004; Shumway, 1991). The event can be compared to the Boston Tea Party in the United States and other histories of independence on the American continent, whose narrative structures are strikingly similar.

In Argentina, May 25 is celebrated every year as a day of independence. Children are exposed early on. Witnessing and performing patriotic acts is mandatory both in private and public primary schools. The official date of independence is July 9, 1816, six years after the events in 1810. July 9 is also a national holiday and celebrated in schools. As studied by Bertoni (2001), these celebrations were invented about 40 years after the first constitution and approximately 80 years

after independence. This was primarily motivated by the growing number of immigrants importing different celebrations from their countries of origin and the perceived need to bring all different groups and customs together. In other words, the main objective of implementing the patriotic school acts was to foster social cohesion and national identity. Additionally, the celebration of the 200-year anniversary of the nation in 2010 indicates that May 25 collectively represents the origin of the nation.

Apart from the informal teaching through rituals, celebrations, and other means of collective memory, national history is taught formally in school. The curriculum contents are basic and simple in primary school, becoming more complex in high school. Officially May 25 is on the high school curriculum at the end of the second year (ninth grade). Practically, at the school where this research was carried out, May 25 is taught at the beginning of the third year (10th grade) as a part of the history of the processes of independence. The events are presented in the wider context of the French Revolution, the processes of independence in Northern America, and in the narrower context of the English invasions in Buenos Aires just prior to 1810.

Historical investigation reveals that neither Argentina nor the Argentines existed yet in 1810. In the Viceroyalty of River Plate, indirectly ruled by the Spanish monarch Ferdinand VII, different political identities existed (Chiaromonte, 1989). To suppose that Argentine nationalism led to independence is an anachronism, misreading the *criollo* sentiments some might have had at the time (Chiaromonte, 1991). *Criollo* refers to the Spanish colonists and their descendants but also to local cultural identities different from Spain as a consequence of mixing with Native Americans (Shumway, 1991). They did not form a homogeneous or unanimous group. What happened in 1810 involved a quarreling political elite and cannot be indisputably categorized as a political action toward independence. This would be a teleological interpretation of what at the time were tensions between colony and metropolis. Also, very diverse political projects, from a new monarchy to a radical Jacobin republic, existed among the May 25 political leaders (Lynch, 2009). What actually happened was a *Cabildo Abierto*, an expanded town council meeting in the city of Buenos Aires. The *cabildos* were political institutions of the colonial period with a council consisting of elects from the local elite under jurisdiction of the viceroy (Shumway, 1991). Out of the meeting on May 25, 1810 came the *Primera Junta*. This was the first governing body not to represent Spain, which nevertheless swore allegiance to Ferdinand VII. Independence was formally declared in 1816, and the first constitution was established in 1853, but even then, Argentina as a nation, territory, and identity was not consolidated. Therefore, in response to the four master narrative characteristics listed above, by 1810:

1. There was no homogeneous national historical subject.
2. National identification was formed by the social and political changes over several decades.
3. There was no one common objective of independence.
4. There was no Argentina nor were there Argentines.

In short, the Argentine national historical narrative is a cultural tool with certain characteristics that are contested by historical research, just like other national historical narratives are. Whether the aforementioned master narrative characteristics appear in the national historical narrative told by students and whether a more disciplinary historical account of the past is approached will now be further explored.

## OBJECTIVES

The objective of this study was to analyze the narrative that Argentine high school students construct about May 25, 1810, in terms of the four characteristics establishing the historical subject, identification, the main historical events, and the conceptualization of nation. This study also analyzes whether there are differences in these narratives between two groups: 8th and 11th graders. It aims at exploring whether the students' narratives reflect the master narrative characteristics and whether these change towards more historically sophisticated representations. Additionally, if this change occurs, this study seeks to establish which specific narrative features this change is affecting. Even though this article deals with the master narrative of a specific nation, it also aims at providing a scheme of analysis based on the four mentioned characteristics that could be applied to master narratives in other countries, for example, on the American continent. This is clarified by Table 1, which illustrates the analytic strategy.

## METHOD

### Participants

In this study, 38 Argentinean students participated, 18 male and 20 female, from an urban, middle class, public high school in Buenos Aires. Among them were 18 8th graders (age:  $M = 13.3$ ;  $SD = 0.77$ ) and 20 11th graders (age:  $M = 16.2$ ;  $SD = 0.52$ ). The researchers approached the school as it reflects the middle socioeconomic segment of the population. Considering the school's reputation, its situation in the city, and the professional profile of the students' parents, the students have above average access to cultural resources. The students were selected at random after parent consent forms, which informed about the aims of the research in very broad terms, had been handed back. The sample is best defined in terms of the students' Argentine nationality; the sample represents the wider population in which there is a mix of ethnic backgrounds both due to the colonial period and to the early twentieth century immigration from Europe. The narratives of two students, who identified themselves as Bolivian and part Brazilian respectively, were taken out of the analysis.

As has been indicated in the introduction, the 8th graders are familiar with May 25 through collective memory, the patriotic celebration carried out in primary school every year, and the basic Argentine national history on the primary school curriculum. The 11th graders had been exposed to the events in more historical detail at the beginning of their third year (10th grade) in high school. That is to say, May 25 was taught about a year before the students were interviewed. The history textbooks that are used present historically rich material, as historians were involved in their production (Cristofori, 2010; Giordano, 2012). The high school curriculum prescribes two obligatory history classes per week, a total of 2 hours and 40 minutes, from the 8th to the 12th grade. The social and cultural prestige that history enjoys in Argentina is reflected in this emphasis on history throughout high school. No particular history teaching intervention program was being implemented at this school at the time of the study.



## Procedure

Semistructured individual interviews were conducted to obtain the students' narratives. School personnel called the students during regular classes to the empty classroom where the interviews took place. The interviewer would introduce herself as an investigator interested in what students thought about certain historical events, assuring that their identities were confidential and that the interview did not have an evaluative purpose. After the subjects had given their consent, the interview was recorded. A picture, often encountered in Argentine history textbooks, was used to trigger the narrative. It is a picture of a crowd in front of the emblematic *Cabildo*, representing the May 25 events. The subjects were first asked to elaborate on what was happening in the picture. The first part of the interview aimed at their spontaneous production of a narrative about May 25. The interviewer did not mention historical terms, like *cabildo*, *revolution*, or *independence*, if the subject had not mentioned them first. If necessary, in order to invite the students to further elaborate their representation, they were asked

- What had happened;
- How it had happened;
- Why it had happened;
- For what reasons it had happened;
- Who had participated in these events;
- Why they had participated in the events; and
- To what purpose they had participated in the events.

In the second part of the interview, specific questions were asked to have the students reflect on the historical subject and events they had described. Thus, the interviewer aimed at the participants' further elaboration of their explanations and concepts. A series of questions about the historical subject and context, starting with "Were they Argentines?," was employed. In order to verify whether the subject would insist in representing the past in master narrative terms, some questions were posed offering the subject a more historical alternative ("Some people say they were Spanish colonists or criollos, what do you think?"). This clinical-critical interview strategy aimed at establishing the subject's nation concept and had been successfully used in earlier research (Carretero & Gonzalez, 2008; Gonzalez & Carretero, 2013). Corresponding to the clinical-critical interview method (Duveen & Gilligan, 2013), both the standard interview questions and what the student would spontaneously say guided the interviewer.

## Analytic Strategy

A comparative strategy was used to analyze the assembled narratives on four dimensions that would, on the one hand, reflect the national master narrative characteristics mentioned above and on the other, the more historical alternative. Identification as a characteristic was determined by the students' use of *us*, *we*, or *our* in the past tense, that is, when narrating about the May 25 historical subject. The alternative would be using *them*, *they*, or *their* in describing these protagonists. The use of these terms was counted in the first part of the interview, when the student would speak more spontaneously about the historical event. The coding depended on

whether in this initial phase the students mostly used the first person plural or the third person plural.

The other three characteristics and their historical alternatives are summarized in Table 1 in terms of criteria for analyzing the narrative. The first column indicates the more general criteria that can also be applied to narratives in other countries. The second column gives more specific criteria as they apply to the Argentine historical narrative. The analysis would thus indicate whether the subject of the historical narrative was homogeneous or heterogeneous. This is to say, the analysis would reveal whether the subject of the historical narrative was simplified and idealized as in the traditional master narrative or diversified and contextualized socially and politically according to contemporary historical accounts. Likewise, the narration of the historical event would be established as simple or complex. That is, it would be determined whether the historical event was explained as a monocausal ideological quest for freedom and independence or in terms of the complex and conflict-laden political and social circumstances of the time, as a multicausal account. The coding with respect to the historical subject and events was based

TABLE 1  
Criteria for Narrative Characterization

	<i>General Criteria</i>	<i>Specific Indication</i>
<i>Historical Subject</i>		
Homogeneous	Historical subject described as an unanimous group/internal identification and unification Rigorous separation of historical subject from historical other	The “(Argentinean) people” The Spaniards merely as “them”: opponents of the revolution
Heterogeneous	Presence of different or conflictive motives within group of historical subjects Historical subject and historical other not absolutely separated	Different ideologies among <i>criollos</i> Revolutionaries were Spanish colonists
<i>Historical Events</i>		
Simple	The event as a sudden and uniform change Search for freedom as basic theme or telos, not considering other (economic, social, political or international) factors	25th of May 1810 means Independence Liberation from the Spaniards
Complex	Acknowledgement of gradual change and conflictive process Taking diverse, social, political, economic and international factors into account	<i>Cabildo Abierto</i> part of long political process with internal power struggles Some wanting to get rid of the economic monopoly, some wanting political autonomy
<i>Nation Concept</i>		
Essentialist	Preexistence of the nation	Argentina before or at the time of May 25th 1810
	Preexistence of the nationals	Argentines before or at the time of May 25th 1810
Constructivist	The nation is the result of a historical process	Argentina gradually constructed / in 1853 the first constitution
	Change in names for the territory	Viceroyalty of River Plate at the moment of the <i>Cabildo Abierto</i>
	Nationals as a constructed group	No Argentines until much later

on the first part of the interview, in which students elaborated or were asked to elaborate on what happened. If they demonstrated different ideas later in the interview, it was established whether this was due to a real complex understanding of the past, or merely to doubt induced by the interviewer's suggestions, and weighed with the first part of the interview. Finally, the understanding of the nation concept demonstrated in the narrative was analyzed to be essential and everlasting or historically constructed. Did the events happen in Argentina, and were the protagonists Argentines, or was it in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate involving colonists with political privileges? This decision was based on weighing the first part with the second part of the interview, depending on how the students reacted to the interviewer's suggestions.

In order to validate the analysis, two independent judges analyzed the narratives from a random 30% of the total sample. The agreement index surpassed 94.5% in all cases. The discrepancies found were used to reflect on and further elaborate the narrative characteristics. We were interested in analyzing the differences between 8th graders and 11th graders in detail per narrative element. The appropriate nonparametric statistics were used to compare them: a  $\chi^2$  test when the cross tabulation cell values counted more than 5, Fischer's Exact Test if values were lower than 5 (Siegel & Castellan, 1988).

## RESULTS

The length of the interviews averaged 26 minutes ( $SD = 7.5$ ) for the 8th graders and 27 minutes for the 11th graders ( $SD = 6.1$ ). There is, however, a significant difference in the amount of words uttered in the entire interview between the 8th graders ( $M = 1312$ ;  $SD = 978$ ) and the 11th graders ( $M = 2151$ ;  $SD = 810$ );  $t(36) = -2.89$ ,  $p < .01$ . Indeed, the 8th graders needed to be questioned more for the interviewer to have a proper idea about their narrative representation. They often knew more than they spontaneously stated. These first statements could be as concise as "It was when we liberated ourselves from the Spaniards, very important, with the 200-year anniversary and all." Through the interviewer's questions, these initial mininarratives could be elaborated. All the students recognized the picture and knew what it collectively represented, in terms of revolution or independence.

Below the results per narrative element will be presented first, illustrated with interview excerpts from both groups. All names reported in the interview fragments are pseudonyms. Second, the narrative patterns and the relation between narrative elements found will be presented.

### The Historical Subject: Homogeneous or Heterogeneous?

As Table 2 indicates, 89% of the 8th graders represent the historical subject as homogeneous, and there's a decrease in the 11th grade (50%). The following fragments illustrate a homogeneous historical subject:

Interviewer: What can you tell me about this Revolution?

Mario (13 years old): The Argentine people were tired of being governed by Spain. At that time there was a Viceroy and the people went to overthrow him, to tell him that we were free people.

TABLE 2  
Historical Subject of the Narrative per Grade Level

	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>11th Grade</i>	<i>Total</i>
Historical subject			
Homogeneous	89%	50%	26
Heterogeneous	11%	50%	12
<i>n</i>	18	20	38

Interviewer: Are you saying that there were also Argentines that did not want to become independent?

Violeta (16 years old): [ . . . ] There was a group that maybe did not want to, that wanted to maintain the same ideology. And then, almost the big majority . . . the people let's say, wanted independence.

[ . . . ]

Interviewer: There are people who think that they were Spanish colonists or *criollos*. What do you think?

Violeta: I think it's the same [ . . . ]. It was mostly the purpose of what they were doing, [ . . . ] they were striving all together for the same purpose.

In the fragment of the interview with Mario, "the people" and "we," presented in opposition to Spain, indicated a homogeneous historical subject. Violeta considers the possibility of opposite groups within the territory but rejects it, unifying the historical subject as "the people" with a common interest.

A heterogeneous historical subject was encountered in 50% of the accounts of 11th graders, compared to 11% in the 8th grade. For example:

Interviewer: Who were the people that participated on the 25th of May?

Alex (13 years old): The majority were [ . . . ] what is called peninsular *criollos* [ . . . ]. Because the majority was of Spanish origin. Some were born here and others were not, like Matheu who was a Spanish merchant that came here, and Saavedra, who today would be Bolivian as he was born in what was Upper Peru. We can't say they were all Argentines; there were Spaniards, peninsular *criollos*. [ . . . ] The [other] *criollos* and lower [classes] were not admitted, because they were not considered citizens in deciding on different matters.

Interviewer: Why, what happened?

Soledad (16 years old): We ceased to belong to Spain. I don't know to what degree it was democratic, because not everyone voted in the Primera Junta . . . the people were not well represented. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: Who participated?

Soledad: The elite in my opinion. They controlled everything and were the first to propose the matter of the revolution, freeing us from Spain.

Alex and Soledad distinguish between different sociopolitical groups present at the time of the historical event. There were *criollos* with and without privileges, and not all people were allowed to participate. Alex also indicates the Spanish origin of the majority of the revolutionaries. In her account, Soledad describes the historical subject in terms of oppositions or conflicts, even though she uses "us" in her description of the past.

To sum up, the majority of narratives was characterized by a homogeneous historical subject, as a sort of idealized (pre)national community. This occurred significantly more in the accounts constructed by 8th graders (Fisher's  $p < .05$ ), indicating that in the 11th grade, students have a more contextualized understanding of those participating on May 25, 1810.

## Identification

The first person plural was used in the past tense in 61% of the narratives, with no significant difference between 8th graders and 11th graders,  $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = 0.354, p = .55$ . Consider, for instance, the next two examples of an 11th grader using *we* and an 8th grader using *they* in their description of the May 25 historical subject.

Interviewer: What happened at the Cabildo?

Cristina (16 years old): In the Revolution? [ . . . ] a revolution arose because, as we were dominated by Spain and they had a crisis or something, we felt more . . . like we wanted to be independent [ . . . ] our first patriot government arises through this idea, we believed that we should not be governed by Spain [ . . . ] They controlled us in everything, we were a colony and worked for them.

Interviewer: What was the May Revolution?

Lucía (13 years old): When they wanted to become independent from Spain.

Interviewer: Why? They weren't independent before?

Lucía: No, Spain was . . . a representative of the king was here and so they wanted to be just Argentina, and that there'd be no people from other places and so they wanted them, like, to go.

Interviewer: And that's why they revolted . . .

Lucía: Of course, to tell the king that he should go, that they did not want him here.

Interviewer: And how did they do that?

Lucía: They went to protest at the Cabildo so that they'd listen and make the revolution happen, so that the representative of the king would go.

Cristina tells a story of repression and domination in terms of *us* and *them*. Her historical subject is timeless, uniting those in the past with herself and probably others in the present. This collective voice emphasizing colonization seems to position her as a Latin American in opposition to Spain. Lucía, on the other hand, tells a story about *them*, keeping the past and the present apart.

The percentages in Table 3 suggest that the majority of the students interviewed somehow confused past and present collective agency. The past and present are united under one national

TABLE 3  
Identification in the Narrative per Grade Level

	8th Grade	11th Grade	Total
Identification			
“Us”	56%	65%	23
“Them”	44%	35%	15
<i>n</i>	18	20	38

TABLE 4  
Historical Events of the Narrative per Grade Level

	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>11th Grade</i>	<i>Total</i>
Historical events			
Simple	89%	40%	24
Complex	11%	60%	14
<i>n</i>	18	20	38

identity, whereas historically the relationship between past and present is infinitely more dynamic and complex than this national historical sameness supposes. The persistence of this characteristic throughout adolescence could indicate the pervasiveness of the master narrative cultural tool beyond formal education, in relation to its function of generating national identity.

### The Historical Events: Simple or Complex?

As Table 4 indicates, 89% of the narratives in the 8th grade are characterized by a simplification of the historical events, compared to 40% in the 11th grade. The following fragments illustrate this characteristic:

Interviewer: You were saying something about freedom. What does that have to do with the May Revolution?

Laura (13 years old): That the people were seeking to be free, so it's like, how to put it . . . they gave themselves the freedom to start to express what was bothering them.

Interviewer: What was bothering them?

Laura: Not being free. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: Free from whom, from what?

Laura: From the government. They wanted to have their own patriotic government. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: Why? What do you mean by patriotic government?

Laura: Something to do with the cockade [*escarapela*, a symbol of the Argentine nation] . . . that they wanted to be . . . they wanted to depend on themselves, on their own people and not on other countries. [ . . . ] they wanted to be Argentines because of this whole matter of . . . they didn't have the freedom to be able to be who they were.

Diego (16 years old): The people organized themselves and decided to be independent from the ruling Viceroyalty.

Interviewer: Why?

Diego: Because they felt that they were already able to be independent, they did not want to be dominated by anyone, that's probably why. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: There were benefits in becoming independent, is that what you're saying?

Diego: The benefit is to be able to do what they wanted. [ . . . ] if I think about it from an economic perspective maybe it wasn't that good, [ . . . ] but freedom is freedom all the same.

Laura explains the events in terms of liberation: they became independent because they wanted to be free. This circular argumentation is found in many accounts indicating mono causality. Diego,

for a moment, considers economic motives for becoming independent but then discards them. He reasons that becoming independent would not have been economically beneficial and finally boils it all down to a need to be free.

In 11% of the 8th graders and 60% of the 11th graders, the narrative is characterized by more complexity, as illustrated below:

Interviewer: What were they looking for on the 25th of May? What were they doing it for?

Alex (13 years old): [ . . . ] They needed to have economic independence from the monopoly, as it was for the upper class. That's why many of them supported [the revolutionaries], because it benefited them economically. It is told that the upper class families said 'Yes to the Primera Junta, no to independence' because they wanted the Primera Junta, because it was a more indirect government and they could have a more fluent economy. But independence did not benefit them, as they would have to take care of things on their own.

Interviewer: Why a revolution?

Lucas (16 years old): [ . . . ] They also became independent for free trade, because everything that Argentina made had to be given to them. I believe one could say that in social terms they were seeking freedom. Even though it was not exactly like that, because until for example the obligatory vote arrived a lot of time had to pass, until women voted a lot of time passed. Even for there to be no more slavery a lot of time passed. [ . . . ] For the political part it was to start having their own policies and not depend on . . . let's say to have a democracy, and not depend on the crown. [ . . . ] Still, until they accomplished what they had proposed time went by. It's not like on the 25th of May a new system was installed and people voted for the first time, no. There was a long period of time until everything would be set up, like it is today.

Alex mentions the economic interests of the upper class, for whom independence was not that high on the agenda. Thus, he clarifies that the ideology of liberation was not shared by all and indicates the conflictive political processes at work. Lucas mentions commercial and political interests, complicates the notions of freedom and independence, and describes a long historical process. Both demonstrate a use of abstract historical concepts and a multicausal representation of past events.

In summary, a high percentage of the narratives were characterized by simplification in both age groups. However, the percentage is significantly higher in 8th graders (Fisher's  $p < .01$ ). Among 11th graders, a higher percentage of narratives were characterized by a complexity of the events.

### The Nation: Essential or Constructed?

Another difference is found with respect to the nation concept, as can be seen in Table 5. Of the narratives by 8th graders, 67% demonstrated an essentialist nation concept, as opposed to 25% in the 11th grade. The following fragments illustrate this concept:

Interviewer: Were they Argentines or Spanish colonists or *criollos*, or is it all the same, what would you say?

TABLE 5  
Nation Concept in the Narrative per Grade Level

	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>11th Grade</i>	<i>Total</i>
Nation concept			
Essentialist	67%	25%	17
Constructivist	33%	75%	21
<i>n</i>	18	20	38

Maria (13 years old): People are all equal but those who are Argentines are from here and the Spaniards are from over there. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: What became independent?

Maria: The whole of Argentina became independent. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: Because some people say that the United Provinces of the South became independent, what do you think [ . . . ] would you rather say that Argentina became independent?

Maria: Not only the United Provinces of the South but all the provinces became independent.

Interviewer: Some people think that they were Spanish colonists or *criollos*, what do you think?

Clara (16 years old): Let's see . . . the fact that they were born in Argentina, there they grabbed on to the homeland and said 'this is my homeland.' But it's also kind of a double nationality. They were born there but their parents were from Spain, they were educated there, they weren't from here [ . . . ] After their formation they came here to Argentina and then they realized that they were following the orders of the Spaniards and decided to end this. [ . . . ] They fought with their rights, saying that we didn't need a government telling us what to do, if we want to be independent, we want to govern, we the Argentines. [ . . . ]

Interviewer: Was it Argentina that became independent?

Clara: Yes, because of San Martín [national hero of the independence].

Maria applies the terms Argentines and Argentina indiscriminately on the pre-Argentine historical context of the May 25 events. Even back then, if they were from "here," they were Argentines. The interviewer's mention of the colonists does not make her reconsider. Maria confuses the United Provinces of the South, as the independent territory was called, with the provinces of Argentina. She reaffirms that it was the whole of Argentina that became independent. Clara also presupposes Argentina: Spanish colonists would come to Argentina and adopt some kind of double nationality, as if the Argentine nationality already existed. She also presupposes a national identity: the (self-declared) Argentines fought for their (adopted) fatherland. So did San Martín, who at the time collaborated in the independence of Latin America, but according to Clara was a national hero responsible for Argentine independence.

Nevertheless, the misconception seems to diminish over the three high school years. Whereas 33% of 8th graders demonstrate a notion of the nation as constructed, 75% of 11th graders do. Take, for example, Juan and Amalia:

Interviewer: Did they feel Argentine?

Juan (13 years old): No, because they had the Spaniards over here. Maybe they were born in the Argentine territory, what now is Argentina, but at that time it was a part of America that was



conquered by the Spaniards. They wanted to be free, not Argentines, free. Later it was called Argentina.

Interviewer: Were they Argentines like Argentines today?

Amalia (16 years old): No, I don't think so . . . today we have a constitution [. . . ] It wasn't possible to talk about Argentina at that time, we weren't even a confederation, we were a vicerealty formed by various countries.

Both students know that Argentina became established later, and therefore, the participants in the May 25 events could not have been Argentine. According to Juan, it was the quest for liberty instead of nationality that united the protagonists. Amalia uses *us* in past tense, but she demonstrates a nonessentialist take on nation.

With respect to the nation concept, the 11th graders' narratives are much less essentialist than those of 8th graders, even significantly so:  $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = 6.653, p < .05$ . As will be further discussed below, there seems to be little resistance to accepting a constructed nation concept. Compared to the historical subject and events, the percentages indicating a master narrative characteristic are lower for the nation concept.

### Narrative Patterns

The interview fragments considered above already give an idea of the variety and richness of the narratives and of their change through adolescence. There are a variety of narrative configurations that go beyond dichotomizing the adolescent account as either a national historical master narrative or as its more historically sophisticated counterpart. A look at the narrative patterns might clarify how master narrative reproduction changes to historical reflection or how they occur together.

As Table 6 illustrates, the more historical accounts are almost exclusively encountered among 11th graders. Only 6% of the 8th graders, that is, one student, demonstrated a predominantly historical understanding, whereas 40% of the 11th graders did. The narratives wherein national historical master narrative characteristics predominate are found among 83% of the 8th graders and 25% of the 11th graders. An equal amount of historical account and master narrative characteristics occurs in the interviews with 8th graders (11%) as well as 11th graders (35%). The table suggests that in these cases, the constructivist nation concept is the historical content most often and perhaps most easily appropriated. The narrative by Germán (13) provides an illustration of what might be going on. It presents a homogeneous historical subject, identification through *us*, simplified historical events, but a nation concept that is not entirely essentialist. In the following fragment we see a tension between the nation concept and the homogeneous historical subject in simplified historical action:

Interviewer: Did they feel Argentine at that time?

Germán (13 years old): Of course, although . . . no! If Argentina did not exist at the time, or did it?

Interviewer: What do you say?

Germán: It didn't exist as Argentina. It wasn't "Argentina" Argentina.

Interviewer: What was it?

TABLE 6  
Narrative Patterns

<i>Historical Subject</i>	<i>Pattern of Narrative Characteristics</i>			<i>Amount of Narratives With Particular Pattern</i>		
	<i>Identification</i>	<i>Historical Events</i>	<i>Nation concept</i>	<i>8th Grade</i>	<i>11th Grade</i>	<i>Total</i>
1	1	1	1	4	3	7
1	0	1	1	8	1	9
1	1	1	0	3	0	3
1	1	0	1	0	1	1
Narratives with mostly master narrative characteristics				83%	25%	53%
1	0	1	0	0	2	2
0	1	1	0	1	2	3
1	1	0	0	1	3	4
Half master narrative half historical elements				11%	35%	24%
0	1	0	0	1	4	5
0	0	0	0	0	4	4
Narratives with mostly historical elements				6%	40%	24%
<i>n</i>				18	20	38
				100%	100%	100%

*Note.* 1 = Master Narrative Characteristic. 0 = Element of Historical Account.

Germán: I don't know, it was "something united" of the River Plate, something like that.

Interviewer: Is that why they felt like Argentines different from how they feel nowadays? Or did they feel Argentine the same way as nowadays?

Germán: Yes definitely, they felt the same. Before being Argentina they felt like their own people, they fought exactly for that reason, so that it could be their own and not the Spaniards'.

Interviewer: Was that feeling necessary for wanting a revolution?

Germán: Yes, otherwise the Spaniards would have stayed ruling everything and that would be that.

Interviewer: Did they feel Argentines or another kind of people?

Germán: Argentines.

Germán knows that Argentina did not yet exist and that therefore the historical subject could not have been Argentine. He is not entirely sure, however, and he sustains the unanimity of the protagonists and the singular motive for the historical events. Germán seems to think that if all the people wanted to be free from the Spaniards, they needed to have something in common. The nation did not exist yet, but something un-Spanish, like an Argentine national identity, must have existed. How else could they have organized to fight off Spanish domination? For Germán, there seems to be no problem in sustaining the existence of a national identity before there was a nation. His teleological explanation reflects that of the national historical master narrative. In this fragment, we also see how Germán's nation concept is ambiguous: He accepts that the label *Argentina* did not exist but maintains some sort of national predetermination. It seems that historicizing the national identity is more difficult than historicizing the nation. This might be an indication of a learning process that is going on.

Taking another look at Table 6, we find that much of the diversity of narrative patterns is related to the identification narrative characteristic. The 1011 and 0100 narrative patterns indicate that

some students with an overall historical account would use *us*, whereas others basically telling the national master narrative would not use it at all. As also can be seen in the table, this happened in 14 of the 38 narratives, or 37%, regardless of the students' grade,  $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = 2.545$ ,  $p = .11$ , and in over half of the narratives that were not entirely coherent. Further statistical analysis demonstrates that identification is unrelated to the other three characteristics. The homogeneous historical subject, the simple account of the events, and the essentialist nation concept are all significantly related among each other: Fisher's  $p < .01$  for each of the three relations between these characteristics, as can be expected in a coherent narrative. However, the use of *us* and the homogeneous historical subject are not significantly related (Fisher's  $p = .73$ ), nor is referring to *us* related to a simplified account of the historical events (Fisher's  $p = .33$ ) or to an essentialist nation concept,  $\chi^2(1, N = 38) = 2.335$ ,  $p = .13$ . This dissociation found between identification and the other three narrative characteristics is reflected in the narrative patterns: the coexistence of more historical information and the use of *us* in the past tense on the one hand, and the coexistence of a master narrative and a lack of the identification narrative characteristic on the other. This coexistence could be an effect of the different goals of history education, identity construction and disciplinary historical thinking, which were mentioned in the introduction. However, whether identification enters in tension with the development of historical understanding is a question that carries beyond these results. The results do seem to suggest that aiming at identity construction could be compatible with aiming at critical historical understanding. This is a matter in need of further research.

## DISCUSSION

Analyzing the narratives of 8th and 11th graders in detail, we found both a strong presence of master narrative characteristics as well as a significant change toward more historically sophisticated accounts. This agrees with research indicating the power of the national historical narrative as a cultural tool (Wertsch, 1998, 2002) and with research about the slight increase in the sophistication of the students' historical narratives and concepts as a consequence of history learning (Berti & Andriolo, 2001; Carretero & Lee, 2014; Lee, 2005), as will be considered here in more detail.

Taking all narrative characteristics together and looking at the narrative patterns, the majority of 8th graders manifest a predominantly master narrative representation about the historical process of the emergence of their own nation, as 83% of their narratives demonstrated at least three of the four characteristics. Eleventh graders clearly differ, as 25% demonstrated at least three of the four characteristics, suggesting that a change has occurred. In parallel, the school history contents offered to the 11th graders are usually more complex than those that have been presented to 8th graders. Yet, a considerable amount of master narrative representations still exist in the 11th grade. The national master narrative continues to be reproduced wholly or in part by students that have been taught more detailed historical contents, indicating its perseverance. Even though there is a change towards more sophisticated historical accounts from 6% in the 8th grade to 40% in the 11th grade, the latter percentage is still less than half of the narratives told by the older students. This is a lot, considering that the students are in the educational phase in which they are exposed to the most complex historical material on the national past that most of them will be ever confronted with at all. Not much more formal history learning will happen in most of their lives. It is therefore plausible to expect that adults do not develop much

more sophisticated representations. This is confirmed in studies indicating that adults reproduce more of a master narrative about their own nation (Carretero, López, et al., 2012; Wertsch, 2002).

Now, master narratives in general have been considered in earlier research, but this research offers a more detailed look at four different dimensions of the narrative. Distinguishing these four, the change can be looked at per narrative characteristic and in comparison to each other. In the case of the historical subject and the historical events, results are similar, with the great majority of 8th graders (89% on both characteristics) and approximately half of the 11th graders (50% and 40%, respectively) demonstrating the master narrative characteristic. A similar significant difference is found between 8th and 11th graders with respect to the nation concept. However, this characteristic is encountered less frequently than the other two characteristics. The lower percentage of 8th graders (67%) and 11th graders (25%) demonstrating an essentialist nation concept indicates a generally more developed historical understanding of the nation than that of the historical subject and events. As has been mentioned earlier, history learning with respect to the nation concept seems somewhat easier than with respect to these other two narrative characteristics. Indeed, Germán (age 13) showed how a constructed nation is easier to accept than a constructed national identity. The national identity is safeguarded in the narrative of a homogeneous historical subject with one logical course of action. The Argentine nation might not have been there since always, but it was nevertheless the predestined and anticipated objective of the historical subject and the historical events. Many 11th graders demonstrate an understanding of the 25th of May similar to that of Germán. Of the 8th graders, 33% already have a more constructivist view of the nation, as compared to 75% in 11th grade. The latter is the highest percentage of a more disciplinary representation on the four dimensions studied. Most of the students by the 11th grade know that there was no such a thing as an Argentine nation 200 years ago. History education, combined with cognitive development and an increasing exposure to cultural devices, has probably been effective in producing a conceptual change. However, many misunderstandings remain with respect to the historical subject and the historical events.

With respect to the identification narrative characteristic, rather different results have been obtained in comparison to the other three characteristics. No difference was found between 8th and 11th graders; therefore, talking about *us* in the past tense does not seem to disappear with the combined effect of history education, cognitive development, and other cultural influences. This pervading collective voice, transcending historical processes, has been found by other researchers in the field (Barton, 2008; Wertsch, 2002). The nation has become so real and ingrained into present daily practices and discourse that *we* is applied indiscriminately. Billig (1995) already suggested this in introducing his idea of *banal nationalism*. Yet it should be taken into account that nationalism in a formerly colonized part of the world is very different from the colonizers' nationalism. Postcolonial theory (Young, 2001) elucidates the differences in historical contexts for these nationalisms. This might also explain why the nation concept is not that essentialist, but that the narrative theme is mostly simplified around the quest for freedom: The Argentine nation did not exist but it was aimed at by the revolutionaries. The results nevertheless indicate a pervasiveness of the master narrative cultural tool in terms of identification. By using *us* while describing the protagonists of historical events over 200 years ago, past and present are confounded. History education is supposed to generate an understanding of the relation between past and present. If students do not understand that past and present are very different epistemological worlds (Carretero & Solcoff, 2012; Lowenthal, 1985), this is not

only confusion but also a misconception in opposition to the development of historical thinking (Levesque, 2008; Seixas, 2004; Wineburg, 2001) and ultimately a limited understanding of the complex and dynamic present. In this sense, identification is conceived to be a possible inhibitor to historical understanding. However, identification is likely to also play a positive role in history learning, in terms of approaching the past or otherness. Social identities have been found as possible facilitators and inhibitors of a complex history learning (Bellino & Selman, 2012; Epstein & Schiller, 2005; Goldberg, 2013; Goldberg, Baruch, & Porat, 2011; Hammack, 2010). Another empirical study in our line of research (López, Carretero, & Rodríguez-Moneo, in press-b) indicates that when telling the narrative of a nation that is not their own, students present a more elaborated historical narrative. This might be because this narrative is not committed to supporting their national identity. These findings do not necessarily imply that teaching should no longer aim at identity construction. Rather, from an instructional point of view, it seems that it would be useful to present master narratives in a comparative context, where students can analyze master narratives of different nations.

Developing implications for both history education and learning, it should be taken into account that misconceptions or simplified national historical narratives are persisting. This is probably due to many informal sources of historical information such as the media and traditions full of historical stereotypes. At the same time, significant change in the narratives has been found, as can be observed when comparing Argentine 8th graders to 11th graders. Particularly with respect to the concept of nation, a better disciplinary historical understanding is found. This suggests a first step towards improving the whole narrative representation. Elsewhere (López et al., in press-a) the idea that the process of change of historical concepts could be better understood if embedded in historical narratives has been developed and empirically supported. Thus, improving students' representations starts with helping them develop a more constructive notion of nation and proceeds to reflect on the homogenous historical subject and unidirectional events. If students and citizens in general are able to distinguish the different dimensions of a master narrative, they might approach a disciplinary view of the nation more successfully. Thus, they might be able to understand that the nation is the result of a historical, political, and social process instead of a preexisting entity with a teleological destiny. Also, they might learn with more ease that both national narratives and nations are representational tools that can be reflected on with historical consciousness and thinking abilities, such as comparing sources and contextualizing (Seixas, 2004; Wineburg, 2001).

The students' more disciplinary historical narratives indicate that history learning is possible, but at the same time the results support the idea of the national historical narrative as a powerful cultural tool. The narratives of the students that were interviewed to a great extent coincide with a master narrative, in agreement with the comparison between produced and consumed national historical narratives (Carretero & Bermúdez, 2012). Also, these results support previous empirical and theoretical analyses (Wertsch, 1998, 2002). However, as Wertsch already indicated, master narratives can be contested, and therefore educational emphasis on a more disciplinary historical approach might gradually change national historical representations. To be able to better understand the process behind the change or perseverance of the national historical narrative during adolescence and into adulthood, additional cross-sectional and longitudinal studies will need to be carried out.

This study has contributed by looking at the narratives in more detail. It suggests that narratives can be evaluated in terms of the historical information they provide and that information acquired

by historical research can be introduced. History does a particularly good job at investigating change. History even reflects on itself, and on the concepts and narratives it produces, as changing (Koselleck, 1975/2004). Historical investigation can thus introduce change into collective representation. Recognizing that even the national narrative and its subject can change, we are one step closer to understanding the dynamic world we live in. More generally, we can accept that historical information is given a narrative format, as long as the narrative is reflected on with the proper critical historical attitude. This is something that Marguerite Yourcenar already said much more elegantly.

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