WHAT'S IN YOUR TOP TEN? ETHNIC IDENTITY AND SIGNIFICANCE IN CANADIAN HISTORY[1]

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ABSTRACT

Out of everything that has happened in Canada's history, how do you decide which people, events, or developments are the most significant? This is the task I put before an ethnically diverse group of grade twelve students living in British Columbia in an effort to understand what they would denote as significant in Canadian history and the criteria they would use to make their decisions. In this article, I explore the concept of historical significance and investigate how students' ethnic identities influenced their ascriptions of significance and their subsequent narrations of Canadian history.

RÉSUMÉ

Parmi tout ce qui s'est passé historiquement au Canada, comment choisir quels personnages, événements ou évolutions sont les plus importants ? C'est la tâche que j'assigne à un groupe ethniquement divers composé d'élèves de Colombie-Britannique de 12e année , afin de comprendre ce qu'ils considèrent important dans l'histoire canadienne et les critères qu'ils utilisent pour prendre ces décisions. Dans ce texte, j'explore le concept de l'importance historique et cherche à comprendre comment les identités ethniques des élèves influencent l'octroi de l'importance historique et la narration subséquente de l'histoire canadienne

If you were asked to create a timeline of the ten most significant events in Canadian history, what events would you include? Confederation? The creation of Residential Schools? The Japanese Internment? Pearson's Nobel Peace Prize? One or both of the World Wars? Out of everything that has happened in Canada's history, how would you narrow down your choices? This is the task I put before an ethnically diverse group of grade twelve students living in British Columbia in an effort to understand what events they would denote as significant in Canadian history and, more importantly, the criteria they used to select the events that they did. In this article, I explore the concept of historical significance and investigate how students' ethnic identities influenced their ascriptions of significance and their subsequent narrations of Canadian history.

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES AND SIGNIFICANCE

The construction of historical narratives involves, among other things, the purposeful selection of historical people, places, and events and the explanation of the relationships between them. At a very basic level, historical narratives answer the questions: who, what, when, where, why, and how? In consideration of these questions, historians mobilize evidence, establish causation, and make decisions about significance. "What is the narrative about?" is the essential starting point. Establish this, and historians can more easily answer questions about timeframe (beginnings and endings), actors and their actions, and context.

Another approach to constructing historical narratives is to focus on a particular event and then build a narrative around it. Instead of starting with the question, "What is this narrative about?" some may begin by asking, "What matters in history?", "What am I interested in?" or "Why is it important to know about this?" An example of this in Canadian history is the World War I battle at Vimy Ridge. For decades, historians and Canadian history textbook authors have pointed to this battle as the precise moment that a modern Canadian identity was formed; an

identity based on collaborative achievement and sacrifice. Vimy became the anchor to which historians and textbook authors hung narratives of the forging of Canada's national identity.

In either approach, the historian's central concern is historical significance. According to Peter Seixas (1997), decisions about historical significance involve understanding the connections people in the present establish with people, places, and events of the past. Questions about historical significance are not asked and answered in a vacuum, devoid of context. They are answered by every generation in response to the question, "How is this moment in history relevant (or not) to me/us/our time?"

The significance of any particular event is derived from how it fits into a larger narrative, and, ultimately, how the historian (or student, or member of the public) relates to that narrative. Although many factors shape how an individual ascribes significance to historical events, including knowledge of the subject matter, interest, past experiences, familial influences, and type of narrative in which the person situates the event, recent work has demonstrated that an important and thus far under-researched influence on students' historical understandings is identity.

IDENTITY AND HISTORICAL UNDERSTANDING

Several scholars have begun to recognize the impact of socioeconomic, cultural, political, and gendered factors on students' understanding of various aspects of history, and have incorporated these elements into their research design and data analysis procedures (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Epstein, 2009). This research tells us that students from ethnically diverse backgrounds may find it difficult to make connections between their family and/or ethnic histories and those which are taught in school. This is particularly true when neither the school nor the teacher make explicit attempts to establish such links. This is problematic for both majority and minority students; the potential to significantly enrich both groups' understandings of history is lessened when these connections are neither sought nor explored.

To date, little attention has been paid to how Canadian students from diverse ethnic backgrounds understand and negotiate the histories they encounter both in and out of school. With multiple histories to contend with, students are faced with the task of deciding which events and people from the past can and should be included in the narrative(s) of Canadian history they construct. Implicit in this process of separating the significant from the inconsequential are frameworks and values that shape a student's historical understanding (Seixas, 1997).

INVESTIGATING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN STUDENTS' ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND THEIR CONSTRUCTIONS OF CANADIAN HISTORY

In the larger study that provides the backdrop for the work reported here, I investigated the influence students' ethnic identities may have on their understandings of Canadian history generally and historical significance in particular (Peck, 2009a). Twenty-six grade twelve students (16–18 year olds) from an urban centre in British Columbia participated in the study. Most (n=17) of the participants were born in Canada. Seven of the participants were immigrants to Canada, and two were Aboriginal. A range of ethnic identities was reflected in each of these sub-groups. Due to space constraints, in this article I report on only one aspect of this study and include data from two Canadian-born students who worked together during the research task. I am profiling these students because, although they worked on the research task together, each student offered a different interpretation of Canadian history and thus their data provide a rich portrayal of how ethnic identity can influence a person's historical thinking. I have reported on other aspects of this research elsewhere (Peck, 2009b, in press).

CONSTRUCTING NARRATIVES OF CANADIAN HISTORY

Before beginning the central research task (described below), students were asked to complete a questionnaire on their demographic information and they wrote a paragraph describing their ethnic identity. Next, heterogeneous groups of two to four students completed a "picture-selection" task, modelled on well-established American and European research (Barton, 2004; Lee & Ashby, 2000). In the first part of the picture-selection task, students were asked to create a timeline of the ten most significant events in Canadian history. Students were given thirty event cards that provided brief descriptions of events in Canadian history and were instructed to create a timeline by selecting ten events from the thirty provided. Each event card included the name and date of the event, a brief caption, and between one and three images. Events were selected from Canadian history and social studies secondary school curricula. In the second part of the picture-selection task, I conducted follow-up group interviews with each of the groups of students to further probe their understandings of historical significance. Finally, I interviewed students individually in order to probe their understanding of how their ethnic identity may have influenced the decisions they made during the timeline task.

TABLE 1: Narrative Templates and Historical Significance Criteria

NARRATIVE TEMPLATE[2]	KEY CHARACTERISTICS	HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA EMPLOYED IN NARRATIVE TEMPLATE
Founding of the Nation	• Recounts the history of the first inhabitants of Canada and the events that "built" the country. • Stories of Aboriginal peoples seem to disappear after Confederation.	• *Pattern Significance:* Ascribed to events that were "firsts," groundbreaking or turning points.
Diverse and Harmonious Canada	• Recounts the history of Canadians overcoming prejudice and discrimination to establish a unified, multicultural country. • Conflicts, if included, are seen as aberrations in an otherwise positive and progress-oriented history of Canada.	• *Symbolic Significance:* Ascribed to events that were symbolic of the development and growth of the nation, unity, Canadian identity, iconic individuals, or offered a lesson. • *Significance for the Present-future:* Ascribed to events that students see as relevant in the present-day; students may establish connections between historical and current events
Diverse but Conflicted Canada	• Recounts the history of multiculturalism in Canada with an explicit focus on conflicts and tensions that have arisen as a result of Canada's changing demography. • Provides a template for critiques of racism and discrimination.	• *Symbolic Significance* • *Significance for the Present-future* (as described above)

Although the central research activity in this study was presented to students in terms of "creating a timeline," in essence, what I asked students to do was construct narratives of Canadian history. In this study, three narrative templates (Wertsch, 1998) course through the data (Table 1).

Will and Ethan, two Canadian-born students, completed the picture-selection task together. Will was third generation Canadian and described himself as follows: "Most of my ancestors are Canadian, including my great grandparents. However, I consider myself a Canadian with British heritage." He reported that his great-grandfather was one of the first people to ride the railway in Canada from coast to coast, and reflected that he (Will) was "so Canadian" because of this.

When asked to reflect on if and how his ethnic identity may have influenced the kind of timeline he and his partner constructed, Will drew on the "Founding of the Nation" narrative:

> So I found a lot of the original establishing things important but – I mean, I can look back and see maybe, maybe some of the stuff in the 20th century is just as important or more important – But for me, cause this [referring to the first five events on their timeline] is sort of when my ancestry came and started to do things, it's important.

Will's identity as "so Canadian," and the fact that he could trace his roots back to early Canadian history, meant that he selected events related to the development of the nation during the timeline activity. His reference to when his "ancestry came and started to do things" is an example of pattern significance. That is, he denotes the arrival of his ancestors as a starting point for his own family's history and involvement in the development of the nation, and a reason for ascribing pattern historical significance and constructing the narrative he did.

Will's partner, Ethan, described his ethnic identity as follows:

> I would describe myself as Canadian. For reasons or because of my personality *[sic]* qualities I've inherited from living here. I, myself, as being a person with many different racial origins feel as if I am the epitome of Canadian culture. I feel as [if] I am a mosaic, which is what Canada is on a national level.

TABLE 2: Timeline Created by Will and Ethan

1670	Granting of Royal Charter for Fur Trade
1759	The Siege of Québec
1778	Europeans Arrive on the West Coast of Canada
1881-1885	Building of the Canadian Pacific Railway
1867	Confederation
1916-1918	The Women's Suffrage Movement
1939-1945	Canada Enters World War II
1957	Pearson Wins Nobel Peace Prize
1971, 1988	Canada Enacts Multiculturalism Policy and Act
1982	Canada Act Passed

When I asked Ethan to reflect on the role, if any, his ethnic identity may have had on the decisions he made during the picture-selection task, he argued that, "I wasn't really thinking about myself, I was thinking more on how people were perceiving Canada; I was thinking of Canada more on a general level." However, when asked if he could explain his thinking further, Ethan referred explicitly to his own identity as a visible minority:

> When I was going through [the picture cards]… I took out all the racial things right – because it didn't bother me, right, and hopefully it doesn't bother people now because Canada was in a different place 100 years ago… Canada now is a multicultural place… and that is the most important thing.

This statement reflects Ethan's earlier comment on his identity ("a person with many different racial origins") being the "epitome of Canadian culture" and is an example of symbolic historical significance in that his explanation is tied to a mythic Canadian identity. For Ethan, what was paramount in his decision-making process was that the timeline reflect a multicultural Canadian society, and therefore he constructed Canadian history using the "Diverse and Harmonious" narrative. This, in turn, reflects both his perception of his ethnic identity and his understanding of Canadian history.

IDENTITY KITS AND CULTURAL TOOLS

James Gee (2006) posits that individuals use "identity kits" with which they "live out [their] social lives as different and multiple kinds of people" (p. 33). According to Gee, students use identity kits to interpret texts. Identity kits involve socio-culturally situated identities, the performance of identities, the use of cultural tools, and particular ways of acting and interacting with others. Will and Ethan's ethnic identities (or "identity kits") influenced their selection of significant events for their timeline. The most striking example of this is Will's comment that he selected events related to when his ancestors "came here and started to do things."

However, Will and Ethan also employed particular narratives as "identity resources" in order to better locate themselves in particular narratives of Canadian history. James Wertsch (1998) argues that historical narratives are "cultural tools" (p. 24) that people use to understand the past, and notes that "texts [such as narrative texts] serve as 'identity resources' to be mastered and to be employed in particular contexts in a variety of flexible ways" (p. 45). For Ethan, this meant constructing a narrative about Canada's multicultural identity, which he employed to locate himself in the narrative that he wove during the research exercise.

Ethan and Will's ethnic identities influenced their ascriptions of historical significance, as well as the different narratives they employed to explain their timeline. As mentioned earlier, Will's identity as "so Canadian," and the fact that he could trace his roots back to early Canadian history meant that he used pattern historical significance to select events related to the beginning of the nation. And while Ethan argued that he "tried to step out of my own sort of bias… to make it [the timeline] represent everyone," he also remarked that Canada's passing of the Multiculturalism Act was the most important event for him because of his ethnic identity: "Where would Canada be if it wasn't multicultural, right? Like I might not be able to live here if it didn't accept multiculturalism." Throughout the interviews Ethan was quite adamant that his ethnic identity did not really have any influence on his selection of events. Nevertheless, when asked to explain which one was most important to him, he expressed quite a different viewpoint. Ethan was not fully aware of the disjuncture between his earlier statements about setting aside his "bias" (as he put it) and the significance he placed on multiculturalism in Canada. Will and Ethan's sense of their ethnic identities helped shape the different narratives they ultimately selected to interpret the timeline they had created together.[3]

CONCLUSION

Studying the relationship between ethnic identity and the construction of historical narratives can help students, teachers, and researchers understand some of the reasons why people have different interpretations of the past. A focus on developing students' capacity to think historically can provide students with a means to not only construct historical narratives, but also to sift through the layers of identity that influence their own understandings and interpretations of history. For example, a key concept in historical thinking is the evaluation of evidence. One question historians (and students being taught how to think historically) ask about a piece of evidence is how an author's perspective may be reflected in that evidence. If students can begin to understand how an historical actor's perspective, including his/her identity, could have shaped the production of a newspaper article or journal entry, for example, they might be more likely to consider how their own identity influences their own interpretations of the past, including their constructions of historical narratives. Doing so may help students understand that narratives taught in school and/or espoused in society represent only possible interpretations of the past and lead students to more sophisticated historical understandings.

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NOTES

[1] This is a revised and abbreviated version of "Peering through a kaleidoscope" published in the journal, *Citizenship, Teaching and Learning*, 2009.

[2] An important limitation needs to be acknowledged at this point. There is no question that, because students were provided with thirty events from which they were to chose ten for their timeline, certain narrative explanations were possible while others were not. To address this, I asked students questions during the follow-up group interviews and the individual interviews, in order to provide them with opportunities to challenge the narratives embedded in the task. For example, I asked students if they thought the timeline "told the story of Canada as they would tell it?" and offered them opportunities to add, change, or otherwise modify the timeline they had created with their group.

[3] Other students employed the "Diverse but Conflicted Canada" narrative, and some relied on more than one narrative as they drew relationships between their ethnic identities and their understandings of Canadian history (See Peck, in press).