# QUÉBEC STUDENTS' HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE NATION

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores some French Canadian (Québec) students' historical consciousness of the nation through the lens of Social Identity Theory (SIT). Informed by SIT principles, our narrative analysis shows how most Franco-Québécois categorize the past in homogenous categories (e.g., the imperialist Anglophone; the surviving Francophone) and frame their stories into particular modes of present-day orientations. Implications of this study for history education are also discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The understanding and uses of history in Canada are very disputed due to the bilingual nature of the country and the coexistence of so-called 'nations within.' As philosopher Charles Taylor once observed 'In Canada even history divides.'[1] Interpretations of the past are not only contested but used publicly to justify partisan decisions about the future of the Canadian nation. The concept of nation means broadly 'a historical community, more or less institutionally complete, occupying a given territory or homeland, sharing a distinct language and culture.'[2] Debates around national history are particularly salient in the case of Québec because this nation within was incorporated into the Canadian federation while maintaining historical reference to a distinct 'homeland.'

Communities such as the Québec one typically transmit their history through what James Wertsch calls 'cultural tools,' which include such societal things as official texts, oral stories, cinematographic representations, and school programs and textbooks.[3] These tools are rarely interpreted in the same way by members of a nation. Such divergences are not unique to Québec.[4] Yet few studies have been conducted with young citizens to understand how they acquire, internalize, and make use of the history of their nation, in other words, how do youngsters develop their historical consciousness of the nation.

The aim of this article is to address this question: In what terms do young Québécois, being part of a nation within a nation, make sense of Québec's past? This question makes it possible to investigate the process of appropriating Québec's national history. It also explores how young Québécois, to borrow Sam Wineburg's words, 'navigate the shoals of the competing narratives that vie for [their] allegiance.'[5]

Studies have documented young Québécois' historical consciousness but one bears particular significance.

Over the last ten years, historian Jocelyn Létourneau has collected over 4,000 narratives of Québec history written by students using the following invitation: 'Please present or account for the history of Québec since the beginning, the way you see it, remember it, or understand it.'[6]

Preliminary results revealed a striking pattern: Québécois students of French Canadian background share a relatively linear and unhappy representation of Québec's national place in history rippled with ideas of nostalgia and historical melancholy.[7] The narrative template, called 'la survivance,' has variations but the plot remains relatively stable and contains the following chapters:

- An 'initial situation' in which European explorers discover North America and subsequently settle and live a modest life in New France.
- A 'time of crisis' with the Conquest of 1759, which marks the end of New France and the start of a long and painful period of English domination and fight for cultural and linguistic survival (*la survivance*).
- The 'awakening' with the return of French power in Québec during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. A time of political, economic, and cultural awakening for Québécois who have become 'masters in their own house' (*maîtres chez-nous*).
- The 'uncertainty' of a fragmented and hesitant future. The momentum of the Quiet Revolution seems to have been lost with new constitutional changes and political defeats from the Referendums on sovereignty of 1980 and 1995.

The study of Létourneau identified an unresolved, puzzling situation. His findings suggest that young French Québécois still hold a traditional narrative of the Québec nation, that of *la survivance*. This is puzzling because in the current history programs, Québec students are no longer expected to acquire a master-narrative of French Canada but to engage in a critical study of the collective past based upon evidence.[8] Following the task force on history education in 1996, all school programs have been rewritten to put greater emphasis on historical thinking, citizenship education, and cultural diversity. So why do these students tell this particular story of Québec history education programs and modern historiography no longer sanction?[10] Largely unexplored in studies of historical consciousness, Social Identity Theory (SIT) can be of great service to answer this question.[9]

A classic theory in social psychology, SIT suggests that states people identify themselves in a comparative process between an 'us' and 'them', otherwise called ingroup and outgroup.[10] The ingroup is seen as sharing common attributes, such as norms, values, language and history. For SIT theorists, categorization is the intellectual process by which people identify common attributes to an ingroup.[11] For instance, categorizing historical events allows us to organize the messiness of the past into coherent groupings. SIT provides a critical lens to look into the categorization process taking place when we narrate the history of our nation. Since history is a vital part of one's ingroup, the way one's categorize the past can tell us about how he or she establishes a foundation for defining their personal and collective identity. With insight from SIT and empirical data from students, we looked at how young Québécois categorize actors and events into dichotomous or harmonious groupings and therefore structure their narration of Québec' history.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results for this paper are based on a stratified sample of 142 stories from the broader corpus of data collected by Létourneau between 2003-2004 and 2010-2011. We revisited the stories of students who (1) were in grade 11, their last year of high school,[12] (2) came from 11 schools located in various region of Québec, and (3) were French Canadian by origin.[13] Students completed their stories during class time for research purpose. Students were given 45 minutes to complete the activity and did not have the opportunity to use personal notes, textbooks, or computers. We believe that the use of storytelling to capture how students think the nation is a formidable instrument because narrative is an affordable tool used extensively by students to orient their life and talk about the practical past.[14]

Much of current research in history didactics, including our own, is grounded in the belief that formal school history is supposed to replace intuitive ideas about the past, that people gradually acquire through life experiences, with more evidence-based ones. School evaluations, which are supposed to measure what students have acquired in their courses, also rely on the same scholastic assumption. Yet this is clearly not the way participants from our study envision *their* history. Our results suggest that young Québécois do not bother making sharp distinction between 'history' as a form of critical inquiry and 'historical memory' - the usable past shaped by emotional and contemporary social processes. This poses a considerable challenge to history educators in Québec.

Focussing on what young Québécois see as historically significant and how they categorize events and people (ingroup, outgroup) reveals an interesting pattern of meaning-making. Indeed, when looking at which events student chose to narrate the history of Québec, we see the salience of conflict (see Table 1). The top five categories of significant events all deal with the period corresponding to the first and last chronological chapter of the narrative template. Although students

could have selected a multiplicity of events in Québec history, they deliberately selected only those that highlight confrontations between groups (e.g., contacts and fights with aboriginals, Conquest of 1759, debates over sovereignty), typically in terms of a dichotomous ingroup (French) and outgroup (aboriginal peoples and *les Anglais*). Students wrote statements such as:

**Table 1: Categorization of actors and events in Québec history by students**

| EVENTS/PERIODS | OCCURRENCES IN TEXT |
|---|---|
| Age of Discovery/Explorers | 132 |
| Conquest of New France/Treaty of Paris (1763) | 128 |
| Colonization of New France | 126 |
| Québec referendums/Patriation of Constitution/ Provincial-Federal accords (Meech Lake, Charlottetown) | 93 |
| British North America/Québec Act (1774)/ Constitutional Act (1791) | 80 |
| Rebellions of Patriots/Union Act (1840) | 68 |
| World War II | 48 |
| American Revolution/War of Independence | 48 |
| Confederation (1867) | 42 |
| Loyalists arrival to Canada | 40 |
| World War I | 38 |
| Quiet Revolution/October Crisis (1970) | 35 |
| Great Depression | 34 |
| Aboriginal peoples/Pre-contact with Europeans | 32 |
| Cold War/Duplessis era in Québec | 32 |
| Industrial Revolution | 31 |
| Women's rights | 30 |
| Westward expansion/Riel Métis Rebellion (1885) | 17 |
| Bill 101/Charter of French language | 8 |
| Deportation of Acadians (1755) | 5 |

'The French arrived in North America in 1535. Indian tribes were stripped of their land and resources, exploited and massacred.' (CND5S14)

'England colonized America in the south (US today). It is when the English came to New France that conflicts really started.' (PER5S2)

'Since Confederation Québec has tried on several occasions to secede from Canada but it does not work, unfortunately.' (ECEP5S10)

To understand more precisely how students categorize Québec history serve identity functions, we look at the dynamic orientation of their narratives.[15] Four different narrative orientations were delineated from the stories: descriptive, adversity, just cause, and victimhood (see Table 2).

Overall, 60 students offered narrative accounts that do not provide a clear historical orientation. These accounts presented historical events in a descriptive manner (e.g., timeline) or connected together without personal statement on their significance in explaining the past to the present.[16]

**Table 2: Orientations of students' stories**

| ORIENTATIONS OF THE STORY | NUMBERS OF STORY |
|---|---|
| Descriptive story | 60 |
| Adversity story | 48 |
| Just cause story | 21 |
| Victimhood story | 13 |
| **Total** | **142** |

That being said, 82 students developed stories that do present a clear narrative orientation. The dominant vision (48 stories) is that of 'adversity'. As Létourneau's findings suggest, the concept of adversity is characteristic of French Canadian culture (but most likely found in other minority cultures). Stories of adversity are not exclusively about a negative vision of the past (stories of decline). Instead they bridge time differences with a conception of human experiences characterized by a condition of serious and continuous difficulties. Past challenges (e.g., struggle over inclement Nordic climate, fight for French cultural survival, resistance against Anglophone assimilation) are mobilized to form a meaningful story of Québec experiences for identity orientation. The following excerpts provide examples of narratives structured around the adversity template:

'The English win the war [of the Conquest] but the French language remains despite the contempt of the British; the French people hold their ground and fight for their rights.' (CND5S17)

'The Brits led an assault on French land. Then they tried to assimilate the French but they failed because we were too many and making too many French babies…' (ELE5S60)

'When the war in Europe was won by the British, the territory of New France was ceased to England with the Treaty of Versailles [sic]…. The mission of English was now to assimilate the French people. The first two governors, Murray and Carleton, were conciliatory with the French. They understood that they were too numerous to be assimilated. Later, in 1774, the Québec Act re-established the Seigneurial system and French civil laws.' (PCAR5S18)

'The Patriots [of 1837] attacked the English but they are beaten. French Canadians continued to make requests to protect their culture while the English attempted to assimilate them.' (SOU5S3)

If the previous students recognize that Québec history is made up of adversity, a quarter of participants, however, have exposed more decisive narrative orientations. A total of 21 stories present a vision of what might be called the 'just cause.' We refer to the concept of 'just cause' as stories that highlight the long and progressive struggle of the Québec people to achieve its full collective recognition and national self-determination. Students who fit this orientation have a positive view of Québec nationalism and feel confident about its future. They believe that they are right in their collective quest for sovereignty and will ultimately triumph. Feeling right about a cause is an extremely powerful motivator to continue the struggle. From an identity point of view, supporting a just cause make individuals 'feel justified and worthwhile' because in modern world affairs nationalism can provide people with an opportunity to be right, moral, and just.[17] Indeed, perceptions of persistent Anglo-domination and growing immigration pressure make Québec nationalists typically resort to the 'just cause' for justifying another referendum on sovereignty. Consider the following statements from students:

'Québec is now a province where the majority of people speak French (unfortunately not perfect) but with immigration the language is slowly dying. So we have to separate from Canada to keep our language and our European traditions. In 1980, a leader thinks right for the Francophone and holds a referendum to secede from English Canada, but people are afraid and vote NO. In 1995, a new attempt, No! (Yes 49.4 and No 50.6). In 2006 a new attempt… YES (60.1) and No (39.9).' (CND5S6)

'For a long time, Québec has tried to achieve its independence. The more we progress in history the more we are getting closer to sovereignty.' (GRIV5S27)

If feeling right about a cause makes people envision the future in positive and certain terms, feeling of victimhood can be a powerful emotion to comprehend the present in reference to past actualities. Thirteen students have presented a vision of Québec history wrapped in historical tragedies and collective hardships. Their stories are filled with references to struggles that remind Québécois of their miserable condition as victims of past political decisions and military defeats. These include the Conquest of 1759, the failed Rebellion of Patriots and the domination of Anglo-American economy.

'England wins the war… they tried to acculturate French Canadians but failed. They oppressed us politically and limited our rights to choose and manage our budget…. A few years later there was a rebellion that some called the rebellion of Patriots 1837-1838. The majority got executed at the end of the rebellion. This event discouraged the nationalist movement.' (CND5S3)

'We were and are still under the influence of Americans, and gradually becoming passive wards of the government and victims of the media which alienate us with lies and messages of consumption.' (PER5S5)

Such historical memories serve an important function for the orientation of these students as they help situate their own personal stories within the course of time. As Jorn Rüsen observes, history becomes 'the mirror of past actuality into which the present peers in order to learn something about its future.'[18] Those students who see past realities in terms of oppression and tragedy tend to develop a rather negative vision of both history and their own historical identity. Stories of victimhood repetitively stress the danger of assimilation and external threat for their cultural and linguistic identity.

'Although I am proud to be Québécois of old stock, there is a limit to pride. This province was conquered and this leaves no room for pride.' (CND5S20)

'The history of Québec is a series of trickeries by the English.' (CND5S34)

From a didactical point of view, the majority of narratives we analyzed offered simplified and naïve historical accounts in light of the current state of history education programs which put great emphasis on the development of student's competencies toward situating events in the larger international and present-day context and considering "multiperspectivity." Our analysis shows that those competencies are underdeveloped.

From a SIT point of view, though, the way young French Québécois frame their stories serve an extremely useful purpose for them; they help position their ingroup (French Canadians) in opposition to a dominant, imperialist outgroup, *les Anglais*. By doing so, students develop a predictable pattern of meaning-making which simplifies past realities into a dichotomous story of 'us versus them'. It also creates what social psychologists call an 'outgroup homogeneity effect.' Once we categorize people into (dichotomous) groups we tend to see the outgroup not only as more different than ours but with common and stable traits and attitudes among all their members. In the case of most these students, 'les Anglais' become all alike, regardless of whether they are British or not, whether they were Americans or English Canadians. No reference is made to individuals or subcategories within the outgroup.

Students seem to make use of those narrative templates because it provides them with an affordable tool to comprehend past complexities. These narrative simplifications serve also another practical function: it sets forth a temporal direction for situating oneself within the 'course of the nation'. It strengthens young French Québécois' identification with a referential community whose temporal continuity exceeds their own personal life.

## IMPLICATIONS

As our and others studies show, most French Québécois students do not naturally adopt a scholastic approach to the past, at least not in the way they narrate the nation. Our contribution serves to explore how student's collective identity and group identification seriously affect their categorization of historical references and how they interpret and use Québec's national history.

What students learn in school does not necessarily get reinforced by public culture. Students' usable past is very much shaped by forces outside the realm of formal education. In the case of Québec, this practical past is in sync with public culture; a culture where the 'survivance' template is still being referenced by Québec leaders and popular figures (e.g., pop artists).[19] This is an important lesson for history educators, particularly in minority context. The process of learning a usable history for practical life orientation involves a different sort of relationship between learners and cultural tools than does formal learning in history classes. Studies suggest that simply presenting students more historical evidence and conflicting stories seem to do little to change entrenched attitudes and personal modes of orientation toward the past.

In these circumstances, how should we design more effective educational programs in history? What can be done in the context of minority education in which issues of collective identity, cultural threat and national survival often take precedence over scholastic thinking? Identifying what changes need to be made in Québec history teaching and learning is beyond the scope of this article. But presenting and analyzing the particular narratives that students appropriate from their culture to make sense of the past highlight the areas where more research should be directed in the future.

### REFERENCES

[1] Charles Taylor, *Reconciling the solitudes: Essays on Canadian federalism and nationalism* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's, 1993): 25.

[2] Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural citizenship: A liberal theory of minority rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995): 11.

[3] James Wertsch, 'Is it possible to teach beliefs, as well as knowledge about history?' In P. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. Wineburg, ed. *Knowing, teaching and learning history: National and international perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 38-50.

[4] Jacky Reilly & Alan McCully, 'Critical thinking and history teaching in a contested society: the potential influence of social cognitions,' Paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, 8-12 April 2011, New Orleans, LA. Available from http://www.aera.net/tabid/10250/Default.aspx; Tony Taylor & Robert Guyver, *History Wars and the Classroom – Global Perspectives* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2011); and Michalinos Zembylas & Froso Kambani, 'The Teaching of controversial issues during elementary-level history instruction: Greek-Cypriot teachers' perceptions and emotions, '*Theory and Research in Social Education*, 40(2) (2012): 107-133.

[5] Sam Wineburg, 'Making historical sense,' In P. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. Wineburg, ed. *Knowing, teaching and learning history: National and international perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 311.

[6] See Jocelyn Létourneau & Christopher Caritey, 'L'histoire du Québec racontée par les élèves de 4e et 5e secondaire : l'impact apparent du cours d'histoire nationale dans la structuration d'une mémoire historique collective chez les jeunes Québécois', *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 62(1) (2008): 69-93.

[7] The potential role and impact of school history and teachers on the development of Québec students' stories has been discussed extensively in Jocelyn Létourneau & Sabrina Moisan, 'Young People's Assimilation of a Collective Historical Memory: A Case Study of Quebeckers of French-Canadian Heritage,' In P. Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004): 109-128.

[8] Christian Laville, 'History taught in Quebec is not really that different from the history taught elsewhere in Canada, '*Canadian Social Studies*, 31(1) (1996): 22-24, 42; Desmond Morton, 'Teaching and Learning History in Canada,' In P. Stearns, P. Seixas, & S. Wineburg, ed. *Knowing, teaching and learning history: National and international perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 51-62; and Jean-Francois Cardin, 'Pour un enseignement intellectuellement riche de l'histoire : un discours de longue date, '*Canadian Diversity*, 7(1) (2009): 31-36.

[9] A recent study has demonstrated the usefulness of combining SIT premises with narrative analysis to scrutinize young Quebecers historical consciousness. See Evelyne Bougie *et al.*, "The cultural narratives of Francophone and Anglophone Quebecers: Using a historical perspective to explore the relationships among collective relative deprivation, in-group entitativity, and collective esteem", *British Journal of Social Psychology*. 50(4) (2011): 726-746.

[10] See Henri Tajfel, ed. *Social identity and intergroup relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); and Joshua Searle-White, *The psychology of nationalism* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

[11] See Ulrich Wagner, Ludger Lampen & Jorn Syllwasschy, 'In-group inferiority, social identity and out-group devaluation in a modified minimal group study, '*British Journal of Social Psychology*: 25(1) (1986): 15-23; Amélie Mummendey, Andreas Klink & Rupert Brown, 'Nationalism and patriotism: National identification and out-group rejection' *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(2) (2001): 159-172; and Michael Wohl, Nyla Branscombe & Stephen Reysen, 'Perceiving Your Group's Future to Be in Jeopardy: Extinction Threat Induces Collective Angst and the Desire to Strengthen the Ingroup, '*Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 20(1) (2010): 1-13. Létourneau and Caritey propose to deepen their analysis by looking at the structure of student's narrative: "only a thorough analysis of the structural dynamic of student's narrative would confirm our [interpretations]". Jocelyn Létourneau & Christopher Caritey, 'L'histoire du Québec racontée par les élèves de 4e et 5e secondaire, '*Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française*, 62(1) (2008): 93.

[12] In the Québec school system, students graduate from high school in grade 11 (secondary V). In order for them to enter university, they have to complete a college degree. The total number of 990 students from grade 11 included all French Québec students regardless of their country of birth and cultural heritage. Of this total, 651 students are identified as Québécois of French Canadian background. Our sample of 142 participants thus represents about 22 percent of all Québec students of French Canadian heritage who provided accounts supportive of the conclusions of Létourneau (2006). More specifically, the breakdown of participants by school is as follow: CND5S : MTL 7, PER5S : QUE 2, ECEP5S : GASP, ELE5S : MTL 9, PCAR5S : MGIE, SOU5S : MTL 10, DEC5S : CTRQ, DRAC5S : SGLSJ, IESI5S : CTNO 2, SMB5s : CHAP and GRIV5S : OUT. The different number of participants by school is in statistical proportion to the number of accounts collected by each given participating school in the project. The geographic location of those school varies, from Montréal, Hull, Québec city, Gaspé, Chicoutimi, Saint-George de Beauce and Sept-Îles Student are on average 16 years ($M$=16.14, $SD$=46, min. 15, max 18) and more often boys (n=78, 54.9%) than girls (n=60, 42.3%). They were born in various location in the province of Québec, particularly Montréal (n=31), Chicoutimi (n=25) and Québec city (n=17), but also Gaspé (n=6), Hull (n=6) and several other cities. It should be noted that the study was approved by University review board and all participants had completed ethical form prior to the activity. For the purpose of this study, we included participants who had completed their personal story before and after the implementation of the new Québec curriculum. No significant difference was found between the two groups.

[13] By doing so, we were able to focus our analysis exclusively on accounts from students who do form the ideological "core" of French Canada. We understand that this delineation is rather conceptual as other students outside this definition could be considered Québécois of French Canadian background. But doing so made it possible to identify and select participants who corresponded more closely to the earlier definition and findings of Létourneau, 'Remembering our past: An examination of the historical memory of young Québécois, 'In R. Sandwell, ed. *To the Past: History education, public memory and citizenship in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006): 70-87.

[14] Keith Barton, 'Narrative simplifications in elementary children's historical understanding,' Jerry Brophy, ed. *Advances in research on teaching: vol. 6 teaching and learning history* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1996): 51-83; and Kieran Egan, 'Layers of historical understanding,' *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 17 (1989): 280-294.

[15] In this study, we refer to 'narrative orientation' as the particular way of mobilizing past experiences to understand present circumstances and envision the future. The narrative orientation has various practical functions for people but essentially serves to establish the identity of its author. See Jörn Rüsen, *History: narrative, interpretation, and orientation* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), chap. 1.

[16] The narratives of these students do not show clear emotional or political orientation with regard to the history of the nation and reference to the template of 'la survivance.' Saying this is not to affirm, however, that the students have a disinterest approach to the past. In several ways, their lack of psychological engagement could be interpreted as a sign of 'historical detachment, 'what Carl Becker defines as the historians''mental reservations referring to human affairs' (p. 527). See Carl Becker, 'Detachment and the writing of history,' *Atlantic Monthly*, 106 (1910): 527-537.

[17] Joshua Searle-White, The psychology of nationalism (New York: Palgrave, 2001): 87.

[18] Jorn Rüsen, History: narrative, interpretation, and orientation (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005): 24.

[19] See for instance Entretien avec Alain Dubuc, propos recueillis par Sabine Choquet, 'Sortir de nos mythistoires,' Cités, 23 (2005): 197-208.