CANADIANS CONFRONT THE HISTORY WARS

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ABSTRACT

How do ordinary Canadians deal with the presence of public historical disputes, often called "history wars"? This paper analyzes the responses of a telephone survey sample of 389 Canadians to the question, "When people disagree about the past how do you think they can find out what is most likely to have really happened?" Responses fell into three different levels of sophistication, with the most sophisticated expressing the necessity to interrogate all sources actively.

I. INTRODUCTION

Historiography is fueled by debate over the questions of what happened, what should we focus on as significant, and what does it all mean. Critique and revision are the lifeblood of academic history.

When we talk about the "history wars," we are talking about something else: the interpretive debates that take place not in the academy, but on the public stage. (See Linenthal & Englehardt, 1996.) These may occur around monuments and memorials that pay homage to heroes of a bygone age, and whose messages run counter to the values of a rights-conscious, post-colonial culture. Penney Clark and Peter Seixas have written about this in relation to the murals in the British Columbia Legislature (whose depiction of First Nations people was dreamed up in the 1930s) remained on display until native protest and public reaction gathered enough support to have them removed in 2008. Controversies like those over the murals arise when groups in civil society demand the revision of an *outdated* historical representation. A second kind of stimulus for history wars is *new* historical interpretation presented in museums and on film and television. Pitched battles in Canada have been fought over the Canadian War Museum's panels on the bomber command, and McKenna brothers' television productions about World War II. (For both of these, see http://www.cha-shc.ca/public_history/papers.html) In these controversies, public groups—and veterans have been preeminent here—become vocal in rejecting a new interpretation. A third stimulus for history wars takes place around schools. School curricula and the textbooks written to meet their stipulations undergo a slow, apparently inexorable, process of revision. But from time to time they become lightening rods for public dispute. Such storms were the topic of a session at the 2006 Association of Canadian Studies conference in Vancouver, with presentations by Gary Nash from the United States and Stuart Macintyre from Australia. The following year, the Quebec history curriculum was in the eye of a similar hurricane.

While much has been written about these phenomena, we know little about how well prepared the public is to handle them. What do ordinary Canadians—not the activists who precipitate them, nor the historians who are called to weigh in—what do ordinary Canadians do with the ubiquitous presence of historical disputes—history wars? How sophisticated are they in their approaches to the discrepancies among historical accounts? This was one of the questions that interested the research team that came together in the *Canadians and Their Pasts* project.

II. THE TELEPHONE SURVEY AND ANALYSIS

Canadians and Their Pasts worked in partnership with the Institute for Social Research at York University (http://www.yorku.ca/isr/) to conduct telephone interviews of a national sample of Canadian adults, stratified by five

regions. We developed and then refined a survey using pre-tests from September 2006 to March 2007 and cognitive testing with a series of "think-aloud" groups with selected respondents. We completed a Canada-wide representative sample of 3,119 interviews, with a response rate of approximately 50%.[1] Some of the questions in the survey involved open-ended responses to questions by the respondents. A sub-sample of 389 of the respondents' open-ended responses were transcribed at the time of the writing of this paper. In most ways, the subsample is demographically similar to the national sample. It does differ, however, in that these transcriptions are all of Anglophone respondents, and so francophone Quebec is not represented. One of the open-ended questions was: "When people disagree… how do you think they can find out what is most likely to have really happened?" (Survey question D8) We knew we had a good question when we saw how many people responded initially with comments such as "that's an interesting question," or "that's a good one." Respondent 8655 was candid: "That's a toughie!"

We analyzed the open-ended responses to that question. Though the particular types of response (i.e., codes) emerged from the data themselves, a theoretical framework, drawn from research on history education, helped to shape our views of the data. "Progression" in historical thinking, clearly defined by Lee and Ashby (2000), underlies the corpus of that literature. Certain understandings about historical epistemology give people a capacity to move more easily through problems like the one that we posed for them: how does one deal with conflicting historical accounts. A range of Canadians' capacities emerged from the survey responses.

"We might judge some of these to be more sophisticated than others, though it is frequently a difficult call. Respondents also mentioned encyclopedias, photographs, elders, and experts as places to go to resolve the dispute."

III. "HOW DO YOU THINK THEY CAN FIND OUT…?"

The categories, (or codes) that emerged from the data could be ranked in a hierarchy of three levels.

At the most basic level, some people were simply stumped by the question, and could suggest no way to move forward. Others at this level suggested that the correct answer could be found by "common sense" or dismissed the question by saying, "research it," without being able to elaborate. A second level could be distinguished where people gave some elaboration as to what kind of research or investigation would help to determine the truth. The most powerful level differed from the second level in that the answers gave some indication that the investigator might have to take an active role in the investigation: that answering difficult historical questions was less a matter of *looking up an answer* than one of *piecing together a puzzle* or *making an interpretation based on evidence*.

Something more about the nature of these levels should be said at this point. The hierarchy has to do with the *epistemological power of the ideas*. At all levels, people gave responses that were fascinating, sweet, beautiful and generous. But the ideas expressed at the highest level (Level III) had more potential to deal well with the problem we had posed for them.

LEVEL I: DEAD-ENDS AND DISMISSALS

The responses at Level I included the codes "I don't know," "there's no way", "common sense," and "research it." What they have in common, *prima facie*, is a kind of full stop, end-of-story. With a response of "I don't know," some respondents seem simply to throw up their hands, with no way to move forward. These are clearly at the most basic level.

We have also included at this level, those who assert positively that there is simply no way to do so, somewhat different from "I don't know." One expression of this is that a witness would have to have been there in order to know what happened, again, in most cases, a powerless strategy.

Some respondents failed to express the curiosity suggested by "that's a toughie!" and moved quickly to take care of the question in a somewhat perfunctory manner, saying "use common sense," or "research it" without giving more idea of what that meant. These may all, in fact, be fairly close to "I don't know," in terms of indicating a strategy to adjudicate conflicting historical accounts.

LEVEL II: BEGINNINGS OF AN EPISTEMOLOGY

An intermediate group of responses provided a variety of ways to adjudicate conflicting accounts of the past, but each bumped up against limitations.

Many people responded to the question of disagreement about the past by referring to other questions they

had just discussed (what source is most trustworthy, and why do you think so), possibly an instance of what survey researchers call "context effect." Thus, "I would say go to the museum…Because all the stuff's there" (4504); "check a book" (6513); or "nowadays, it's the internet: you can find out a lot of information there" (7243) or the internet because "it's the handiest" (7292). We might judge some of these to be more sophisticated than others, though it is frequently a difficult call. Respondents also mentioned encyclopedias, photographs, elders, and experts as places to go to resolve the dispute.

Another response that sets off in the right direction to know the past in the midst of controversy included simply "get the facts" (4565). This assumes, of course, that there is some authoritative spot to look up "the facts," circumventing the very dispute that we were asking them about.

Others said that they would consult books *and* museums, or said, in so many words, that they would look at "multiple sources." But they had difficulty saying what they would *do* with the assembled sources in the end: 3304, for example, proposed to "compile, compare and contrast and then come to a consensus."

Clearly missing from any of these responses, and present in Level III was an idea that the sources had to be interrogated.

LEVEL III: ACTIVELY INTERROGATING SOURCES

The codes at this level are closely related in that they all focus on obtaining sources of evidence for analysis, and not merely searching for a true account. In "multiple sources plus" (MS+) type responses, the respondent suggests using multiple sources but also gives some sense of *what to do* with the sources, more sophisticated than "reaching consensus."

> I think it's more complex than that. I don't think it's what really happened or didn't happen. I think it's how we interpret what happened in the context of our own perspective on it so two people can watch the exact same events and facts and walk away with a different conclusion and that's legitimate. If I went to your questionnaire and absolute basic, the nuts and bolts, who hit who first or something like that, then clearly one of the things that is helping nowadays in the very recent past is them changing how people look at things, videos, cell phone cameras and all those things that are actually capturing things on tape and causing people to interpret, you know, um, that is not really what we read in the paper. In terms of going further back, I guess multiple sources, first person account, people who are actually in the room though I'm reading books, historical books, you know you consider the sources and how close they were to the source but even then, people who were directly involved are coming in from a perspective and motivation. (4059)

Some focused more on the quality of the sources than on the number of sources.

> Go to original sources, only through research. It's not so much that people agree or disagree about what happened in the past, it's that sometimes it's hard to figure out what really happened in the

Figure 1: Frequency Distribution of Levels by Coders

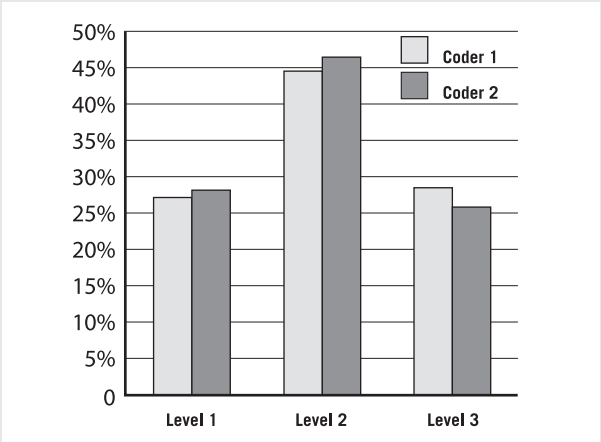
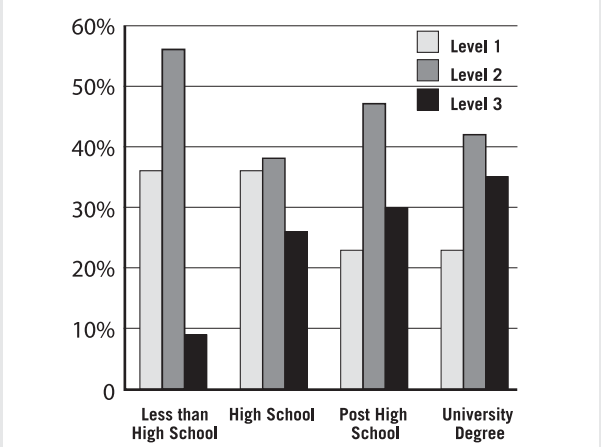


Figure 2: Level by Education (Rater 2)



past and how things are reported in history are skewed by all kinds of factors, and sometimes it's hard to get at the truth. The way history is presented in official history is not necessarily the truth and the truth is not always guaranteed that you are going to find the truth [sic]. (3313)

IV. WHAT CAN CANADIANS HANDLE?

The two raters independently assigned codes to each of the cases. We made room for up to three codes for each case. The next step was to assign a level to each case (i.e., each person), indicating their sophistication in historical epistemology. For this, we used the *highest* level code of the up-to-three codes assigned to their response. This provided a picture of percentages of people working at each of the three levels:

This puts a quantitative value on the responses of the sample, with a bit less than one half at level two, and the rest split roughly evenly between levels one and three.

What accounts for the differences in the power of people's historical epistemologies? We found no significant differences by age, income level or immigration status. As can be seen in Figure 2, however, level of education does make a difference. Here there is a statistically significant pattern of difference (Pearson chi square .015). Those with less education are over represented in Level I and under represented at the highest Level III; those with more education, vice versa. Of course, we have no evidence of which aspects of their education might have contributed to this competency: was it history classes, literature classes, or a culture of inquiry more generally that led to the kinds of responses that those with more education tended, disproportionately, to make?

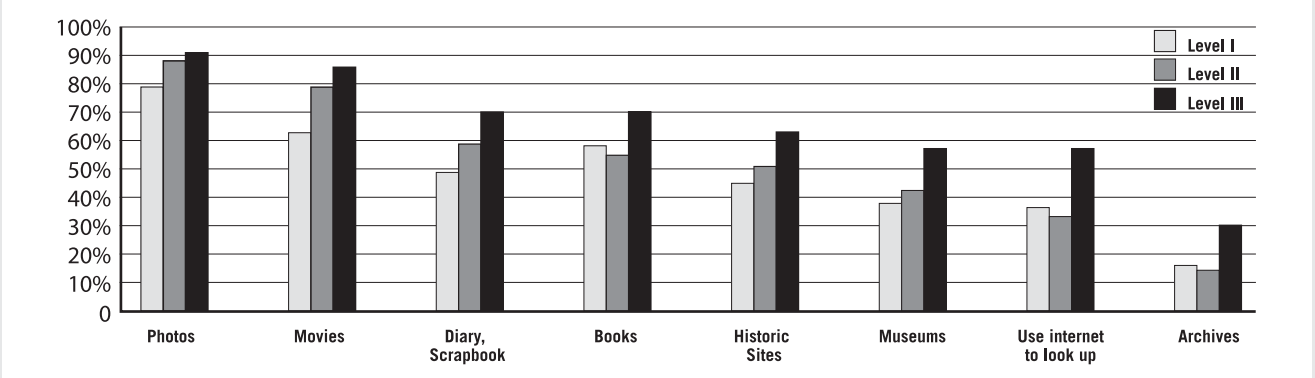
Finally, we examined the correlation of various historical activities with the levels of sophistication. Figure 3 shows that for *every historical activity* that we asked about, those at Level III (the green bars) had higher rates of participation than those at the Levels I and II. This was true whether the activities were widely engaged in (photos of the past) or much more rarely so (visiting archives, either on-line or in person).

CONCLUSION

North American media have devoted considerable attention to the public's knowledge (and lack thereof) of discrete historical facts (see Wineburg 2001, pp. vii-viii). Over the past decade, Canada's Dominion Institute has brought this attention north of the border. Poor scores or good scores, the exercises miss a good deal of what is important in public knowledge of history. As respondent 7292 told us, while you might have had to pore through an encyclopedia to find a fact "in days gone by," now a quick Google is "the handiest." The more significant measure of public historical literacy is one that captures not the number of facts they remember but rather the sophistication and power of their strategies for coming to know the past, generally, and dealing with historical controversy, specifically.

People in contemporary culture are frequently confronted by conflicting histories. How does the average person assess claims that there was no Holocaust, that slavery was not so bad for African-Americans, or that the 20th century was one of uncertainty and disaster? Does he or she have ways to face these arguments? From these early findings, admittedly a rough cut, it looks as though about a quarter of the adult population of Canada can do pretty well. Moreover, those with more education and those who engage in more history-oriented activities are more likely to be able to handle conflicting histories more competently.

Figure 3: Participation in Historical Activities by Levels



As people embrace the disciplinary qualities of history more systematically and whole-heartedly—an understanding of evidence, context and interpretation—they are better equipped to cope with the very real challenges posed by knowing and using the past in the contemporary world. This paper contributes to our understanding of how people actually do think about history. As we go further with the analysis, there will be significant implications, for schools as well as other institutions of public history.

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NOTE

[1] Additional samples of residents of large cities (1000), Aboriginal people (100), new immigrants (100), and Acadians (100) supplemented the national samples.