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'You don't go in their place': historical empathy in education

'Tú no vas en su lugar': empatía histórica en la educación

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ABSTRACT

Writing about historical empathy and its place in education in the 1980s, Denis Shemilt pointed out that 'the theory of "empathetic reconstruction" excites the devotion of some and the censure of others.[1] This article discusses the debates that the concept's introduction in the English educational system caused and the key objections against its implementation in history teaching. These objections, which in some cases are voiced even today, have to do with the concept's complex meaning, the idea that understanding people in the past is impossible, and pessimistic views about students' ability to make sense of past behaviour. In order to counter these objections this article discusses the idea of empathy in the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of history and suggests a definition of the concept in ways that distinguish between problematic and helpful notions related to the concept. It also discusses available research findings about students' ideas of the concept.

Keywords: Historical empathy, criticism of historical empathy in education, philosophy of mind, philosophy of history, students' ideas.

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[1] Denis Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», in *Learning History,* ed. For Alaric Dickinson, Peter Lee and Peter Rogers (London: Heinman Educational Books, 1984), 39.

RESUMEN

Al escribir sobre la empatía histórica y su lugar en la educación en la década de 1980, Denis Shemilt señaló que "la teoría de la "reconstrucción empática" suscita la devoción de algunos y la censura de otros. Este artículo analiza los debates que generó la introducción del concepto en el sistema educativo inglés y las principales objeciones en contra de su implementación en la enseñanza de la historia. Estas objeciones, que en algunos casos se expresan incluso hoy, tienen que ver con el significado complejo del concepto, la idea de que es imposible comprender a las personas en el pasado y las opiniones pesimistas sobre la capacidad de los estudiantes para dar sentido a comportamientos pasados. Para contrarrestar estas objeciones, este artículo analiza la idea de empatía en la filosofía de la mente y la filosofía de la historia y sugiere una definición del concepto que distingue entre nociones problemáticas y útiles relacionadas con el concepto. También analiza los hallazgos de investigación disponibles sobre las ideas de los estudiantes sobre el concepto.

Palabras clave: Empatía histórica, Crítica de la empatía histórica en educación, Filosofía de la mente, Filosofía de la historia, Ideas de los estudiantes.

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Historical empathy: a highly contested concept in history education

'A word I brought into history teaching which caused me a lot of trouble, but nevertheless. It came into the words and it's been around in history teaching for a while'.[2] This is how David Sylvester, the first director of the Schools Council History 13-16 Project in England, refers to historical empathy. As it will be demonstrated in this section, this is a very accurate description of historical empathy's journey in the field of history education. A concept that, as I argued elsewhere, 'instigated much controversy, and still does, but also a concept important enough to remain central in history education until today'.[3] The controversy around historical empathy is best described in Denis Shemilt's words:

> Many teachers see in 'empathy' the essence of the historian's craft, the divine wind that the breathes life into the dry bones of the past, turns dust to flesh, and inspires pupils to commune with their predecessors. More sceptical teachers scorn the currently fashionable projective approaches to empathy as unhistorical at best and fraudulent at worst.[4]

[2] David Sylvester and Nichola Sheldon, «Interview with David Sylvester», in *History in Education Project* (2009), accessed 22 February 2022, https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews/interview-david-sylvester-7-july-2009.html.

[3] Lukas Perikleous, «'Because they believed': Students' ideas of historical empathy in Greek Cypriot primary education», *History Education Research Journal* 16, Nº 4 (2019): 195–208.

[4] Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 39.

Historical empathy was the term introduced in history education, originally in England in the early 1970s, by the Schools Council History 13- 16 Project (later Schools History Project- SHP) to describe historians' attempt to understand past behaviour, practices and institutions.[5] It was chosen by Sylvester in his effort to use a term that captures Robin George Collingwood's idea of re-thinking past thoughts.[6] Since its popularization by the SHP, the concept became a highly contested one.[7] The discussion of the case of England is useful because it is an educational context in which teaching historical empathy has been the issue of an intensive and public debate which illuminates the controversial nature of the concept's place in history education.

Certain aspects of the debate over historical empathy were part of the wider collision between the Great Tradition and the New History in history education, in the late 1980's, during the discussions over the first National Curriculum in England and Wales.[8] The term New History in history education, which is not identical to the New History approach in academic history, was used at the time to describe the disciplinary approaches in the teaching of the subject. In contrast with the focus of the Great Tradition on transmitting a single definite narrative of 'our' past which promoted national identity and loyalty to the nation, New History, without denying the importance of developing substantive knowledge, aimed to develop students' understanding of the discipline of history in terms of its logic and methods.[9]

As Lee and Shemilt note, at that time, 'historical empathy became a focus for opposition to radical developments in history education'.[10] During that period, historical empathy was accused of promoting leftist ideology.[11] Also, along with the rest of the new concepts and methodologies

[5] Peter Lee and Denis Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», *Teaching History*, Nº 143 (2011): 39-48; Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», in *Historical empathy and perspective taking in social studies,* ed. for Ozro Davis, Elizabeth Yeager and Stuart Foster (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 21-50.

[6] Sylvester and Sheldon, «Interview with David Sylvester»; Denis Shemilt and Nichola Sheldon, «Interview with Denis Shemilt», in *History in Education Project* (2009), accessed 22 February 2022, https://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3175/.

[7] Lee and Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», 39-48; Sylvester and Sheldon, «Interview with David Sylvester»; Shemilt and Sheldon, «Interview with Denis Shemilt».

[8] Stuart Foster and Elizabeth Anne Yeager, «The role of empathy in the development of historical understanding», *International Journal of Social Education* 13, Nº 11 (1998): 1-7; Lee and Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», 39-48.

[9] Alaric Dickinson, «What should history be?», in *School subject teaching: the history and future of the curriculum,* ed. for Ashley Kent (London and New York: Kogan Page, 2000), 1-25.

[10] Lee and Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», 39.

[11] Deborah Cunningham, *Professional Practice and Perspectives In The Teaching Of Historical Empathy*, unpublished PhD thesis (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2003); Stuart Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts», in *Historical empathy and perspective taking in social studies,* ed. for Ozro Davis, Elizabeth Yeager and Stuart Foster (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 167-179.

introduced by New History, it was regarded as unable to help students to learn history in the way that the teaching of an uncontroversial account of the past does.[12]

In her memoir, Margaret Thatcher, the Conservative UK prime minister at the time, explicitly refers to historical empathy. She claims that the emphasis of New History on 'concepts rather than chronology and empathy rather than facts was at the root of much that was going wrong'.[13] Thatcher also admits that she personally intervened in the curriculum design process by asking 'for major, not just minor changes' to the interim report of the History Working Group in 1989, in order for British history to be reinforced.[14] This shows that the collision between the Great Tradition and New History also existed beyond educational circles. Politicians also took part in that debate. More recently, Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education at the UK for the Conservative/ Liberal Democrat coalition government between 2010-2014, argued for the need to return to the 'proper' teaching of history, which will promote Britishness and national pride through the learning of the 'right' facts.[15] This bears a striking resemblance to the conservatives' rhetoric in the late 1980s. This is not a phenomenon located only in England. The involvement of external forces that seek to use history education as a means to social engineering is common around the world and, as Foster points out, 'the most unfortunate and chilling curriculum lesson to be learned' from debates over history education.[16]

Historical empathy was particularly attacked as being a complex and vague concept which promoted 'generalised sentimentality'.[17] Similarly, teaching methods related to historical empathy (such as role play and simulation) were accused of being of low quality and promoting an unhistorical approach by letting students imagine themselves in the past.[18]

In this climate, historical empathy did not make it into the first National Curriculum which was essentially a compromise between the Great Tradition and New History. Its central ideas, though, were smuggled into schools through the *Knowledge and Understanding* attainment target.[19]

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[12] Margaret Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts», 167-179.

[13] Thatcher, *The Downing Street Years*…, 596.

[14] Idem.

[15] Rosalyn Ashby and Chris Edwards, «Challenges facing the disciplinary tradition», in *Contemporary Public Debates Over History Education,* ed. for Irene Nakou and Isabel Barca (Charlotte, NC: The Information Age Publishing, Inc., 2010), 28.

[16] Stuart Foster, «Politics, parallels and perennial curriculum questions: The battle over school history in England and the United States», *Curriculum Journal* 9, Nº 2 (1998): 162.

[17] Richard Harris and Lorraine Foreman-Peck, «Stepping into other peoples' shoes: teaching and assessing empathy in the secondary history curriculum», *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research* 4, Nº 2 (2004): 1-14.

[18] Harris and Foreman-Peck, «Stepping into other peoples' shoes: teaching and assessing empathy in the secondary history curriculum», 1-14; Peter Lee, «History Teaching and Philosophy of History», *History and Theory* 22, Nº 4 (1983): 19-49.

[19] Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50; Cunningham, *Professional Practice and Perspectives In The Teaching Of Historical Empathy*….

Also, ideas related to empathy are to be found in GCSE exams specifications, in the updated National Curriculum 2000, the 1999 National Curriculum Programme of Study for Citizenship and the National Curriculum 2007 both for primary and secondary history education.[20] Despite the fact that ideas related to historical empathy exist in these, and other, documents, and despite the fact that it attracts interest from researchers, historical empathy, unlike other second-order concepts in history education, remained, in some ways, 'hidden' in the English educational context. In a recent Ofsted review, historical empathy is not included among the second-order concepts commonly used by English teachers, while claims for the introduction of 'historical perspective' (which is connected to historical empathy) is presented as a recent development.[21] These indicate that the objections against historical empathy go beyond the general criticism of 'New History' by the advocates of traditional approaches.

As Lee and Shemilt suggest, '[i]n many ways empathy was a soft target and therefore, for polemical purposes, a well-chosen target'.[22] By this, Lee and Shemilt refer to issues related to the concept's treatment by many teachers and more specifically to the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s the concept was often wrongly associated with imagination, sympathy, and identification. As a result,

> much [of the teaching of empathy] ranged from the weak to the execrable... [T]he line separating *historical imagination* from *literary invention* was all too easily eroded in the classroom, in coursework and in public examinations. Once this occurred, *empathy* lost all conceptual substance and, indeed, was often regarded as a skill which students could develop through practice and teachers coach by sparking excitement and fanning the embers of youthful creativity... [Also] *empathetic* imaginings tended to be seen as a warm and affective counterbalance to more cerebral, and hence less accessible, exercises dealing with sources of evidence, change and development, cause and consequence. One symptom of the affective view of *empathy* was an inevitable partiality in the sort of people with whom students could be permitted to empathise, and hence sympathise and identify...Denied opportunities to explore the reasons and perspectives of unsympathetic predecessors, less worldly wise students tended to slide into 'us and them' conceptions of the past.[23]

In the light of these observations, Lee and Shemilt argue that it is imperative to clarify the term in order to avoid confusion and misuse in classrooms.[24] A similar claim is also voiced by a

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[20] Cunningham, *Professional Practice and Perspectives In The Teaching Of Historical Empathy…*; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, *History Programme of study for key stage 3 and attainment target* (London: QCA, 2007).
[21] Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), *Research review series: history* (2021), accessed 22 February 2022, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history/research-review-series-history.
[22] Lee and Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», 39.
[23] Ibídem, 39-40.
[24] Ibídem, 39-48,

number of other authors.[25] These concerns are related, in many cases, with terminological issues that are the source of serious problems in the teaching of historical empathy. The great variety of meanings given to the term empathy has caused (and still does) a great amount of confusion among educators which leads to problematic teaching approaches.

The lack of consensus regarding the meaning of the term and its association with notions of sympathy and sharing feelings leads other authors to question the place of historical empathy in education.[26] Knight for example, warn us about the danger of associating empathy with affect and emotions leading to approaches which encourage students to sympathise rather than to understand people in the past.[27] He also argues that empathy can be misunderstood as a means to provide descriptions instead of explanations. Low-Beer also questions the place of historical empathy in education claiming that the concept 'belongs within the affective rather than the cognitive domain of knowledge' and is therefore problematic in terms of teaching and assessment.[28] Furthermore, Knight argues that a unitary view of empathy is problematic since it overshadows the different components involved in making sense of people in the past and also because of the lack of sufficient research evidence regarding students ideas of the concept.[29] Both Knight and Low-Beer acknowledge the importance of understanding past behaviour in history education. What they object to is the use of the specific term and more specifically the way that the term was approached in history education in the 1970s and 1980s. In this aspect, many of their concerns are similar to the ones voiced by Lee and Shemilt.[30] Furthermore, Knight's suggestion, for replacing the unitary concept of empathy (both in terms of teaching and research) with its components, is based on the assumption that a) teaching practices were based on a simplistic approach of empathy as a vague concept to be developed in terms of a skill and b) little research evidence about children's ideas of empathy in different ages were available at the time. However, today this is not the case. As it will be demonstrated in the next sections of this article, today there is a significant amount of literature which has contributed to the development of a better understanding of historical empathy in education in terms of both teaching and research.

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[25] Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts», 167-179; Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50; Lukas Perikleous, «Why did They Treat Their Children Like This? A Case Study of 9-12 year-old Greek Cypriot Students' Ideas of Historical Empathy», in *The Future of the Past: Why history education matters,* ed. for Lukas Perikleous and Denis Shemilt (Nicosia: Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, 2011), 217-252.

[26] Peter Knight, «Empathy: concept, confusion and consequence in a national curriculum», *Oxford Review of Education*, Nº 15 (1989): 41-53; Ann Low-Beer, «Empathy and history», *Teaching History*, Nº 55 (1989): 8- 12.

[27] Knight, «Empathy: concept, confusion and consequence in a national curriculum», 41-53.

[28] Low-Beer, «Empathy and history», 8.

[29] Knight, «Empathy: concept, confusion and consequence in a national curriculum», 41-53.

[30] Lee and Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», 39-48.

The problem of terminology has also led to the suggestion of other terms to describe the idea of making sense of people in the past in history education. *Perspective taking* and *rational understanding*, for example, are suggested by some authors as a way to avoid the misuses and misunderstandings which *empathy* carries and to stress the concept's rational and intellectual nature as opposed to the affective one. Downey justifies the selection of *perspective taking* instead of *empathy* by the *Writing to Learn History Project* as an effort to define the notion 'in its most limited, non-affective sense' and to emphasise the idea of understanding 'a historical character's frame of reference, without assuming that one can or need identify with his or her feelings'.[31] According to Downey this is very close to what Boddington describes as a 'weak sense of empathy', which 'enables us to devise a discrete use for empathy which is distinguishable from contiguous meanings such as identification, involvement, sympathy and portrayal'.[32] In a similar vein, Seixas, Gibson and Ercikan argue that *perspective taking* should be used in order to avoid *empathy's* 'connotations to emotional involvement'.[33] Davis claims that *perspective taking* can be a 'fruitful assist' in order to avoid the misunderstandings of *empathy.*[34] However, he points out that *empathy* cannot be abandoned since 'it is too valuable'.[35]

Suggestions for the replacement of *empathy* with *perspective taking* are based on the idea that the latter is a term for which there is a consensus about its meaning and especially its cognitive nature. This assumption however is not accurate. For example, in the field of psychology, *perspective taking* is considered to be a multidimensional notion with *cognitive* and *affective perspective taking* being the most commonly recognised of its dimensions.[36] Some authors describe *affective perspective taking* as the notion of identifying and understanding the feeling of others without sharing them.[37] However, others explicitly refer to *affective perspective taking* as sharing feelings or consider *affective perspective taking* as such at least in some

[31] Matthew Downey, «Perspective taking and historical thinking: Doing history in a fifth-grade classroom», paper presented at the *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association* (San Francisco, CA, 1995): 5-9.
[32] Idem; Tony Boddington, «Empathy and the teaching of history», *British Journal of Educational Studies* 28, Nº 1 (1980): 13-19.
[33] Peter Seixas, Lindsay Gibson and Kadriye Ercikan, «A Design Process for Assessing Historical Thinking: The Case of a One-Hour Test», in *New Directions in Assessing Historical Thinking,* ed. for Kadriye Ercikan and Peter Seixas (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 206-20.
[34] Ozro Davis, «In pursuit of historical empathy» in *Historical empathy and perspective taking in social studies,* ed. for Ozro Davis, Elizabeth Yeager and Stuart Foster (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 1-12.
[35] Idem.
[36] See for example Hans-Werner Bierhoff, *Prosocial Behaviour* (London: Psychology Press, 2022); Christi Crosby Bergin and David Allen Bergin, *Child and Adolescent Development in Your Classroom* (Independence, KY: Cengage Learning, 2015).
[37] Patricia Oswald, «The effects of cognitive and affective perspective taking on empathic concern and altruistic helping», *The Journal of Social Psychology* 136, Nº 5 (1996): 613-623; Michelle Harwood and Jeffrey Farrar, «Conflicting emotions: The connection between affective perspective taking and theory of mind», *British Journal of Developmental Psychology* 24, Nº 2 (2006): 401–418.

occasions.[38] Even in the case of history education, *perspective taking* is not a commonly understood term. For example, while Seixas et al. and Downey consider *perspective taking* as a version of *empathy* in which affective engagement is excluded, others refer to historical empathy as a cognitive act which is a component of perspective taking or use the two terms interchangeably.[39] Finally, another kind of confusion that can arise from the use of *perspective taking* is the one related to the meaning of 'taking'. Downey points out that this the term is not immune to confusion either, since

> '[h]istorical perspectives are not "taken," in the sense that photographic images are taken. That is, they are not out there waiting to be discovered and recorded. Rather, the perspectives of people who lived in the past must be constructed on the basis of historical information and evidence.[40]

Barton and Levstik also warn us for the danger of misunderstanding *perspective taking* as implying that 'we can "take on" the perspective of others'.[41]

Rational understanding is the term used by Peter Lee and Alaric Dickinson in their early work in the 1970s and it was also used in CHATA project to describe albeit, in a narrower way, what was called *historical empathy* by the SHP at the time.[42] According to Lee, he and Dickinson avoided the use of *empathy* exactly because of the misconceptions that its use could create and instead used *rational understanding* as a term that was often employed by philosophy at the time. However, he also acknowledges that *rational understanding* can create misconceptions since it 'employs much too desiccated a notion of rationality for most people'.[43]

Despite the choice of term, it can be claimed that most of the authors mentioned above share a similar understanding of what is involved in understanding people in the past. *Historical empathy, rational understanding and perspective taking* are used in history education to describe

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[38] Bierhoff, *Prosocial Behaviour…;* Bergin and Bergin, *Child and Adolescent Development….*

[39] Downey, «Perspective taking and historical thinking: Doing history in a fifth-grade classroom», 5-9; Seixas, Gibson and Ercikan, «A Design Process for Assessing Historical Thinking: The Case of a One-Hour Test», 206-220; Tim Huijgen, Carla van Boxtel, Wim van de Grift and Paul Holthuis, «Testing elementary and secondary school students' ability to perform historical perspective taking: The constructing of valid and reliable measure instruments», *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 29, Nº 4 (2014): 653–672; Ulrike Hartmann and Marcus Hasselhorn, «Historical perspective taking. A standardized measure for an aspect of students' historical thinking», *Learning and individual differences* 18, Nº 2 (2008): 264-270.

[40] Downey, «Perspective taking and historical thinking: Doing history in a fifth-grade classroom», 6.

[41] Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (New York: Routledge, 2004): 207.

[42] Peter Lee, Rosalyn Ashby and Nicola Sheldon, «Interview with Peter Lee and Ros Ashby», in *History in Education Project* (2009), accessed 22 February 2022, https://archives.history.ac.uk/history-in-education/browse/interviews/interview-peter-lee-and-ros-ashby-3-september-2009.html; Peter Lee, Alaric Dickinson and Rosalyn Ashby, «Project Chata: Concepts of History and Teaching Approaches at Key Stages 2 and 3 Children's Understanding of 'Because' and the Status of Explanation in History», *Teaching History*, Nº 2 (1996): 6-11.

[43] Lee, Ashby and Sheldon, «Interview with Peter Lee and Ros Ashby».

essentially the same notion of a cognitive act of understanding past behaviour which must be distinguished from sympathy, sharing feelings and affective involvement. In some occasions, this is explicitly stated. For example, Seixas et. al. acknowledge that 'the concept of perspective taking evolved from the term that was at one point ubiquitous in British history education: historical empathy', while Lee describes his early work with Dickinson, saying 'everything we did implied empathy in their [SHP] sense, but we never called it empathy'. This is also evident by the fact that both Seixas and Lee seem to have changed their term of choice through time.[44] Originally, Seixas, influenced by the work of Peter Lee, used *empathy* to move later to *perspective taking*.[45] Following an opposite route, although they never renounced *rational understanding* completely, in recent years Lee and Ashby prefer to use *empathy*.[46]

As demonstrated in the above paragraphs, the suggested alternatives to empathy are also susceptible to confusion and therefore misuse. In the mid- 1970s, Sylvester himself, acknowledging that the use of empathy could be problematic, was seriously considering a change in terminology. However, he could not come up with an alternative that would be immune to misconceptions.[47] Lee, who at some point wrote to Shemilt saying 'for God's sake, don't use that word [empathy]', also admits that 'any word we could have used would have brought misunderstandings, so in the end I'm not too worried about the fact that it was empathy that got used because anything else would almost certainly have been equally bad'.[48] An advantage of *historical empathy* over the rest of the suggested terms is that today is the most commonly used one in history education.[49] Even when authors prefer other terms, they still refer to historical empathy. This is mainly due to the prominent place of the work of Denis Shemilt, Peter Lee, Alarick Dickinson and Rosallyn Ashby in history education literature. In the light of the above discussion, it can be claimed that an undisputed term cannot exist or at least is not available at the moment. What is important however is to clarify what understanding people in the past entails.

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[44] Seixas, Gibson and Ercikan, «A Design Process for Assessing Historical Thinking: The Case of a One-Hour Test», 206-20; Lee, Ashby and Sheldon, «Interview with Peter Lee and Ros Ashby».

[45] Peter Seixas, «Conceptualizing the Growth of Historical Understanding», in *The Handbook of Education and Human Development: New Models of Learning, Teaching and Schooling*, ed. for David Olson and Nancy Torrance (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 765-783.

[46] Lee and Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», 39-48; Lee and Ashby, Empathy, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50.

[47] Denis Shemilt, personal communication, April 13, 2016.

[48] Lee, Ashby and Sheldon, «Interview with Peter Lee and Ros Ashby».

[49] A Google Scholar search for titles that include "*historical empathy*" (exact phrase) on the 30th of December 2021 would return 235 results, while a search for "*historical perspective taking*" (the other popular term used for the concept) would return 35 results. Also, a title search for *historical empathy* (in this case the search looks for the words in any place in the title) would return 310 results, while in the case of *historical perspective taking* would return 102 results.

Beyond issues of terminology, there are criticisms of historical empathy which have to do with the concept of understanding people in the past being epistemologically impossible. This is based on the idea that it is impossible to access other minds since these are private and different from our own.[50] It is also expressed in the postmodern criticism according to which there is no way to empathetically understand the people in past since we cannot have valid interpretations of our sources. The latter is, according to Jenkins and Brickley, the effect of the everlasting process of linguistic change, not just in terms of vocabulary and syntax but also in terms of meaning.[51] Furthermore, according to this point of view, since the past is essentially the construct of historians, historical empathy is an effort to understand the historians rather than the people in the past.[52] In other words, the past, according to this critique, is not empathetically retrievable. VanSledright emphasises the historians' (and in the case of education students') contextuality and claims that since it is impossible to escape from 'the standpoint and department of where we are now.. [the] historicized positions we presently hold', historical empathy might not be possible to achieve.[53] Based on this assumption, he suggests that a more worthwhile aim for history education should be the development of ideas related to the construction of historical context (*historical contextualisation).* He admits that as in the case of historical empathy, historical contextualisation might not be possible to be fully achieved, he claims however that through this process we become aware of our own contextuality and therefore increase self-understanding.

A third category of objections against the teaching of historical empathy has to do with students' ability to empathize with people in the past and, at a more general level, the effectiveness of approaches aiming to develop this kind of understanding. Harris and Foreman-Peck claim that empathy was removed from the GCSE History syllabuses partly because of a belief that students lacked the contextual knowledge, historical evidence and life experience needed to make sense of people in the past. It also had to do with an associated belief that empathy was too difficult to teach.[54] A similar argument is voiced in the case of the critique against constructivist approaches that seek to develop disciplinary understanding in general. According to this critique constructivist approaches' emphasis on developing disciplinary understanding in

[50] Cunningham, *Professional Practice and Perspectives In The Teaching Of Historical Empathy…*; Chris Husbands, *What Is History Teaching?: Language, Ideas and Meaning in Learning about the Past* (Philadelphia, Pa: Open University Press, 1996).

[51] Keith Jenkins and Peter Brickley, «Reflections on the empathy debate», *Teaching History*, Nº 55 (1989): 18- 23.

[52] Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking history* (London: Routledge, 1991); Jenkins and Brickley, «Reflections on the empathy debate»*,* 18-23.

[53] Bruce VanSledright, «From empathic regard to self-understanding: Im/positionality, empathy, and historical contextualization», in *Historical empathy and perspective taking in social studies,* ed. for Ozro Davis, Elizabeth Yeager and Stuart Foster (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 63.

[54] Harris and Foreman-Peck, «Stepping into other peoples' shoes: teaching and assessing empathy in the secondary history curriculum», 1-14.

different school subjects is problematic, since a) students do not possess the factual knowledge and expertise of professionals within disciplines, and b) the process of constructing knowledge within a discipline is different from learning about a discipline.[55] In fact, even the advocates of historical empathy in history education stress that the concept is a difficult one to be taught and developed, and that students' empathetic explanations will always be restricted by the limitations mentioned above.[56]

The issues of a) theoretical objections to the possibility of understanding people in the past, b) meaning confusion, and c) students' capacity to empathise with people in the past pose some serious questions in relation to historical empathy's place in education. The following sections discuss these issues and attempt to counter objections against the place of historical empathy in education.

Empathy as a topic of philosophical discussion

Empathy in the philosophy of mind: understanding other minds

The problem of how we perceive and understand other minds became a major issue in western philosophy during the 19th century.[57] John Stuart Mill provided what is regarded as a classic version of inference from analogy, suggesting that we perceive other minds by making inferences about the mental states of the Other. According to Mill, we do this based on their bodily expression, using analogies from our own experience of how our mental states are expressed by our body. A central assumption in this argument is the notion of different minds being psychologically similar.[58]

Theodore Lipps' critique of inference from analogy, advanced at the beginning of the 20th century, is focused on the above assumption. Lipps argues that inference from analogy is a contradictory act because it entails that we make sense of the Other's mental states based on the experience of our own, while at the same time accepts that the mental states of the Other are completely different.[59] For Lipps 'our knowledge of others is a modality of knowledge *sui generis*, something as irreducible and original as our perceptual experience of objects or our

[55] Daniel T. Willingham, *Why don't students like school? A cognitive scientist answers questions about how the mind works and what it means for the classroom* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2009).
[56] Harris and Foreman-Peck, «Stepping into other peoples' shoes: teaching and assessing empathy in the secondary history curriculum», 1-14.
[57] Karsten Stueber, «Empathy», in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. for Edward Zalta (San Francisco, CA: Stanford: 2008), 1-2
[58] John S. Mill, *An examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy and of the principal philosophical questions discussed in his writings, 3rd edition* (Buffalo: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1867).
[59] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2.

memory of our past experiences. It is a novum that in no way can be explained by or reduced to some kind of analogical inference'.[60]

Lipps introduced a new notion using the German word *einfühlung* 'to denote the relationship between an artwork and the observer, who imaginatively projects himself/herself into the contemplated object'.[61] In contrast to the 19th century's dominant positivistic and empiricist ideas of aesthetic appreciation being based only on external sensory data and as direct as the perception of the physical characteristics of objects (e.g. an object is red), Lipps' notion of *einfühlung* is a psychological phenomenon during which the person who encounters a physical object 'relives' experiences related to movements of the body.[62] In other words, while engaged perceptually with a physical object, the observer's experience is one of being in the object. Depending on how 'life-affirming' and positive these experiences are we perceive an object as beautiful or not.[63] For Lipps our experience of beauty is an 'objectified self-enjoyment' since what impresses us is the 'vitality' and 'life potentiality' of a perceived object.[64]

The first person who used term was Robert Visher in his *On the Optical Sense of Form: A contribution to Aesthetics* in 1873 to 'account for our capacity to symbolize the inanimate objects of nature and art'.[65] Vischer was influenced by Lotze who in 1858 suggested a mechanism by which people are able to make sense of inanimate objects and animals by 'placing ourselves into them'.[66] Lipps was the one, though, who discussed the term thoroughly and, more importantly, extended the idea of *einfühlung* from a concept about aesthetic experience to the primary way in which we perceive other minds.[67] In this case, he suggests a notion of 'inner imitation' where our mind mirrors the mental activities of others based on their facial expressions and bodily movement. For Lipps, since we only experience our own mental states, and this is the only way to know of mental states, we perceive the mental states of others by projecting our own onto them.[68] Even though Lipps uses primarily examples related to the recognition of emotions, he explicitly refers to empathy's cognitive aspects which he describes as intellectual empathy.[69]

This original notion of *einfühlung* is what was translated as empathy by Edward Titchener. Although he uses the term for the first time in 1909, in *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology*

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[60] Dan Zahavi, «Empathy, Embodiment and Interpersonal Understanding: From Lipps to Schutz», *Inquiry* 53, Nº 3 (2010): 288.
[61] Vittorio Gallese, «The roots of empathy: the shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity», *Psychopathology* 36, Nº 4 (2003): 175.
[62] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2.
[63] Idem.
[64] Idem.
[65] Gallese, «The roots of empathy: the shared manifold hypothesis and the neural basis of intersubjectivity», 175.
[66] Idem.
[67] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2.
[68] Idem; Zahavi, «Empathy, Embodiment and Interpersonal Understanding: From Lipps to Schutz», 288.
[69] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2.

of Thought-Processes, Titchener does not provide any explanation about his creation of this new term. According to Wispé, Titchener was highly competent in modern languages and also Ancient Greek and Latin.[70] In addition, he was interested in etymology and this led him to coin the term empathy using the Ancient Greek word εμπάθεια [empathia] which, according to Wispé, means literally 'in' (en) 'suffering or passion' (pathos).[71] Although the etymology provided by Wispé is correct, the word has a very different meaning in Modern Greek which denotes a disposition of hostility and prejudice towards someone.[72]

One can rightly argue that this original idea of empathy is problematic especially in the case of history since it cannot provide us with a viable answer to the question of how we can access the mind of people in the past. Even if we accept Lipps' idea of empathy, this cannot be applied in the case of people in the past, since we cannot directly experience them in order for his 'imitation' mechanism to operate. However, as discussed in the following paragraphs, criticism of Lipps' idea of empathy offers a possible solution to the problem of accessing other minds.

While Lipps' arguments against inference from analogy and his notion of an irreducible and distinct experiential act of understanding other minds have been widely accepted, his account of empathy had also been criticized.[73] A key criticism of Lipps' account of empathy is that it fails to explain how understanding of the Other occurs.[74] This criticism focus on Lipps' idea of imitation as being the basis of empathy. However, as Max Scheler points out, we do not have to be in pain to understand that someone else is in pain. Also, in many cases we can understand expressions that we are not able to imitate (i.e., we understand that a dog is happy by observing it wagging its tail even though we are unable to imitate this expression ourselves).[75]

For Scheler, inference from analogy and Lipps' theory of empathy have a common two-fold starting point according to which, a) 'it is always our own self, merely, that is primarily given to us', and b) 'what is primarily given in the case of the Other is merely the appearance of the body, its changes, movements etc.'.[76] He rejects this and claims that when we perceive other minds there is not a clear distinction between our own and their experience, but a 'flow of experiences', a 'realm of minds', which contain both our own experiences and theirs. Since the mental life of

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[70] Lauren Wispé, «History of the concept of empathy», in *Empathy and its development*, ed. Nancy Eisenberg and Janet Strayer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 17-37.
[71] Idem.
[72] In Modern Greek *empathy* translates to *ενσυναίσθηση [ensinesthisi]* which is usually used with a completely opposite meaning to *εμπάθεια [empathia].*
[73] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2; Zahavi, «Empathy, Embodiment and Interpersonal Understanding: From Lipps to Schutz», 288; Dan Zahavi, «Beyond empathy: Phenomenological approaches to intersubjectivity», *Journal of consciousness studies* 8, Nº 5 (2001): 151-167.
[74] Idem.
[75] Idem.
[76] Max Scheler, *The nature of sympathy* (London: *Routledge and Kegan Paul*, 1954), 244.

the Other is also part of this 'universal consciousness' (thoughts and ideas which can be ours or collective ones), observing it becomes possible.

The idea of the possibility of observing not only our own mental life but also that of others, based on the notion of a common world of shared experiences, is not only to be found in Scheler but also in other thinkers in philosophy. For instance, Martin Heidegger claims that the problem of bridging the gap between me (one isolated subject) and the Other (another isolated subject) does not exist. This is because *Dasein* (the human being) exists in a world shared with Others. Even in their absence *Dasein* constantly encounters objects (artefacts and equipment) which contain references to them (since they were created by others or are used for work by others).[77] In this sense, we do not exist isolated from others in this shared world. Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty voice similar arguments since they both 'fully recognize that we [human beings] are embedded in a living tradition'.[78] Husserl, for example, claims that 'one has been together with Others for as long as one can remember, and one's understanding and interpretation are therefore structured in accordance with the inter-subjectively handed-down forms of apperception.[79]

Max Weber also rejected Lipps' account of empathy by arguing that in this account what we experience is essentially ourselves and not the experience of the Other. According to Weber, when we observe a behaviour what we experience, is not the experience of the agent and not even the experience that we would have if we were at their place.[80] For Weber, such an understanding 'fails to qualify as knowledge in any sense of the word'.[81] He uses the concept of *verstehen* to describe an understanding of why people do what they do that is different from Lipps' empathy in the sense that is cognitive and rational.[82] In his interpretative sociology, Weber argues that the sociologist must go beyond people's observed behaviour and 'share in their world of meaning and come to appreciate why they act as they do'.[83] This argument also demonstrates a different interest regarding understanding other people. Unlike the ideas discussed in the previous paragraphs, which attempt to explain how we make sense of people in our everyday life, Weber's argument essentially refers to what a sociologist should do in order to have a better understanding of the people they study. This is in fact a key difference between discussions about folk psychology in the philosophy of mind and discussions about empathy in the social sciences.

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[77] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008).
[78] Zahavi, «Beyond empathy: Phenomenological approaches to intersubjectivity», 155.
[79] Ibídem, 151-167.
[80] Austin Harrington, «Dilthey, Empathy and Verstehen A Contemporary Reappraisal», *European Journal of Social Theory* 4, Nº 3 (2001): 311-329.
[81] Ibídem, 315.
[82] Sung Ho Kim, «Max Weber», in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. for Edward Zalta (San Francisco, CA: Stanford: 2008), 1-5.
[83] John Macionis and Linda Linda, *Sociology* (Toronto: Pearson Canada Inc., 2011), 33.

The philosophy of social sciences is primarily concerned with how interpretations and explanations of human behaviour are justified, rather than the mechanisms involved in understanding other people.[84]

The discussion so far provides a brief description of the origins of empathy and of the way its initial inception (i.e., Lipps' idea of empathy) allows for arguments against the possibility of understanding other people and especially people in the past who are not directly observable. Lipps, as previously Mill did, failed to explain how we can meet other minds which are foreign to our own. Their failure is mainly due to the fact that there is, actually, no way to do so. There is no way, at least no one epistemologically sanctioned, to transfer our mind into another. The criticism of Lipps' idea of empathy provides us with alternatives. These are the idea of understanding taking place in a common world of shared experiences and the idea of a conscious effort to relate with people from their own point of view rather than observing them from our own one.

However, understanding people in the present who live in our present world and with whom we can have a reciprocal relationship is different from understanding people in the past who lived in a world that is no more and with whom we cannot have a reciprocal relationship. As Leslie Poles Hartley tells us in the opening phrase of his novel *The Go-Between*, 'THE PAST is a foreign country: they do things differently there'.[85] David Lowenthal who used this phrase as the title for his seminal book, reminds us that '[t]he past was not only weirder than we realize; it was weirder than we can imagine'.[86] The following section focuses on historical empathy and discusses the question of understanding people in the past.

Empathy in the philosophy of history: understanding minds in the past

Friedrich Schleiermacher who is regarded as the father of modern hermeneutics claims that 'the success of the art of interpretation depends on one's linguistic competence and one's ability of knowing people'.[87] Schleiermacher refers here to the knowledge of the language that the author uses but also to the knowledge of their intentions, beliefs, ideas and context.[88] This

[84] Karsten Stueber, «Empathy», in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. for Edward Zalta (San Francisco, CA: Stanford: 2019), 1-2

[85] Leslie Poles Hartley, *The Go- Between* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1953).

[86] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); David Lowenthal, «Dilemmas and delights of learning history», in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History: National and International Perspectives*, ed. for Peter N. Stearns and Peter Seixas and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 74.

[87] Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, «Iintroduction: Language, Mind, and Artifact: An Outline of Hermeneutic Theory Since the Enlightenment», in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German traditions from the Enlightenment to Present,* ed. for Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 2006), 35; Friedrich Schleiermacher, «General hermeneutics», in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German traditions from the Enlightenment to Present,* ed. for Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 2006), 76.

[88] Ibídem, 76.

knowledge allows the interpreter to 'put himself both objectively and subjectively in the position of the author'.[89]

These ideas can also be found in the work of German historians such as Wilhelm von Humboldt who, as Schleiermacher does, argues that understanding is based on a common understanding of language between the speaker and the listener. Humboldt extends this idea in the case of history and claims that the historian can understand history because they are part of the social world in which historical process takes place; 'for everything which is effective in world history is also active within man himself' this is the 'preliminary basis of comprehension', the bond between the historian and the object of their historical investigation.[90]

The fact that this kind of understanding is a particular way of investigation, which is to be found in social sciences, is expressed in Johan Gustav Droysen's famous distinction between the social and the positive sciences. Referring specifically to history, he argues that 'historical research does not want to explain; that is, derive in a form of an inferential argument, rather it wants to understand'.[91] This is because, according to Droysen,

> historians study the intentionality of actions and… such intentions cannot be depicted from causal analysis in the manner of the natural sciences. The intention of an action can be grasped only through an understanding of the concrete situation (or context) in which the action takes place.[92]

As Schleiemarcher and Humboldt do, Droysen argues that historical understanding is based on a notion of familiarity between the historian and the object of their investigation. He argues that '[t]he method of historical investigation is determined by the morphological character of its material. The essence of historical method is understanding by means of investigation. The possibility of this understanding arises from the kinship of our nature with that of the utterances lying before us as historical material.'.[93] For Droysen, this is also a major difference between the social and the positive sciences. In the case of the latter, one's understanding is limited because of their essential differences with the objects of their observations (i.e., animals, plants and the inorganic world).[94]

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[89] Ibídem, 83.

[90] Wilhelm von Humboldt, «On the task of the historian», in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German traditions from the Enlightenment to Present,* ed. for Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 2006), 112.

[91] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2

[92] Harald Johnsen and Bjornar Olsen, «Hermeneutics and Archaeology: On the Philosophy of Contextual Archaeology», *American Antiquity* 57, Nª 3 (1992): 421.

[93] Johann Gustav Droysen, «History and the Historical Method», in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German traditions from the Enlightenment to Present,* ed. for Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 2006), 121.

[94] Ibídem, 121.

Droysen refers to this kind of understanding as *verstehen* and he describes it in ways that are arguably close to Lipps' conception of *empathy*.

> A further condition of this possibility [of historical understanding] is the fact that man's nature, at once sensuous and spiritual, speaks forth every one of its inner processes in some form apprehensible by the senses, mirrors these inner processes, indeed, in every utterance. On being perceived the utterance, by projecting itself into the inner experience of the percipient, calls forth the same inner process. Thus, on hearing the cry of anguish we have a sense of the anguish felt by him who cries.[95]

In fact, for some time, *verstehen* was closely associated to *empathy* and in many cases the two concepts were used interchangeably to denote a methodological difference between the social and the positive sciences.[96] Droysen however does not consider *verstehen* to be only a matter of identification through projection. As he points out,

> [t]he human being is, in essential nature, a totality in himself, but realizes this character only in understanding others and being understood by them, in the moral partnerships of family, people, state, religion, etc. The individual is only relatively a totality. He understands and is understood only as a specimen and expression of the partnerships whose member he is and in whose essence and development he has part, himself being but an expression of this essence and development.[97]

As Humboldt did before him and as the phenomenologists did a few decades later, Droysen describes the understanding of others as the participation in a shared social world. Furthermore, both Humboldt and Droysen emphasise that this kind of understanding is only part of the process of historical research. Humboldt believes that historical understanding is not sufficient in the absence of historical investigation. These are '[t]wo paths… [that] must… be followed simultaneously in order to approach the historical truth: the exact, impartial, critical determination of what has taken place and the connection of the results of [the historian's] investigation, the intuitive conjecture of that which is not attainable by the former means'.[98] In a similar vein, Droysen stresses that historical understanding must be combined with the craft of the historian. This craft has to do with a) securing the authenticity of the sources and alleged

[95] Idem.
[96] Karsten Stueber, *Rediscovering Empathy: Agency, Folk Psychology, and the Human Sciences* (Toronto: Bradford Book, 2010).
[97] Droysen, «History and the Historical Method», 122
[98] Humboldt, «On the task of the historian», 107.

facts (criticism) and b) the evaluation and explication of what is portrayed as historical facts by the sources (interpretation).[99]

Wilhelm Dilthey also used the term *verstehen* to describe an understanding of the people in the past, based on the experience of human life itself.[100] For Dilthey, our understanding of people in other times is to be found in our life experience of our own world, which allows us to re-experience past life.[101] As he claims, '[r]e-experiencing follows the line of events. We progress with the history of a period, with an event abroad or with the mental processes of a person close to us'.[102] Dilthey's answer to the question of bridging the gap between our self-understanding and historical understanding of people in the past was the adoption of Hegel's idea of the 'objective mind'.[103] He argues that '[i]n this objective mind the past is a permanently enduring present for us. Its realm extends from the style of life and the forms of social intercourse to the system of purposes which society has created for itself and to custom, law, state, religion, art, science and philosophy'.[104]

Dilthey acknowledges that *re-experiencing* does not happen without knowledge of the context in which past experience takes place. He explicitly refers to the importance of historical context, when he admits that in his effort to write Schleiermacher' biography, it would not be possible to understand his life 'without comprehending the history of the period in which he so actively participated'.[105] Furthermore, his idea of *verstehen* is not one of projecting one's self into another person in the past but a 'a deliberate process that finds the proper context to relate others and their objectifications to what is already familiar to us. It is a reflective mode of inquiry that provides the framework for more specific explanations, whether causal or rational'.[106]

Alfred Schütz, in a similar vein with Dilthey, claims that our knowledge of both our world and the world of our predecessors allows understanding of people in the past.[107] As he points out, the world of our predecessors 'contains within itself many levels of social experience of varying degrees of concreteness, and in this respect, it is like [our] world of contemporaries. It also resembles [our] world of contemporaries in the sense that the people in it are known to [us]

[99] Mueller-Vollmer, «Iintroduction: Language, Mind, and Artifact: An Outline of Hermeneutic Theory Since the Enlightenment», 35.
[100] Johnsen and Olsen, «Hermeneutics and Archaeology: On the Philosophy of Contextual Archaeology», 421.
[101] Idem; Rudolf Makkreel, «Wilhelm Dilthey», in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* ed. for Edward Zalta (San Francisco, CA: Stanford: 2011), 1-6.
[102] Wilhelm Dilthey, «The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life-Expressions», in *The Hermeneutics Reader: Texts of the German traditions from the Enlightenment to Present,* ed. for Kurt Mueller-Vollmer (New York: Continuum, 2006), 159.
[103] Johnsen and Olsen, «Hermeneutics and Archaeology: On the Philosophy of Contextual Archaeology», 421.
[104] Dilthey, «The Understanding of Other Persons and Their Life-Expressions», 155.
[105] Makkreel, «Wilhelm Dilthey», 1-6.
[106] Idem.
[107] Alfred Schütz, *The phenomenology of the social world* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967).

through ideal types'.[108] He also acknowledges that the distance between our experience and the experience of our predecessors is a major reason for understanding people in the past being different to understanding our contemporaries. He argues that '[m]y predecessor lived in an environment radically different not only from my own but from the environment which I ascribe to my contemporaries…The same experience would seem to him [the predecessor] quite different in the context of the culture of his time. Strictly speaking, it is meaningless even to speak of it as "the same" experience'.[109] Far from ruling out any possibility of understanding the people in the past, though, Schütz, as Dilthey did, claims that although the two worlds are different ones, they are bound together by the fact that they are both experienced by the human mind. In this way, we can understand people in the past by relying on our knowledge of human experience in general. For Schütz, the latter transcends worlds, making understanding people in the past possible.

> any experience of my predecessor is open to my interpretation in terms of the characteristics of human experience in *general.* In the words of Schiller, the uniformity and unchangeable unity of the laws of nature and of the human mind . . . constitute the reason why events of long ago happen again today, although in different circumstances, and the reason why from the most recent events light can be shed upon pre-historic times.[110]

As mentioned earlier, the idea of historical empathy introduced by Sylvester was based on Robin George Collingwood's philosophy of history. For Collingwood, thought has a central place in history and it is a major distinction between natural sciences and history. He argues that unlike processes in nature, historical processes 'are not processes of mere events but processes of actions, which have an inner side, consisting of processes of thought; and what the historian is looking for is these processes of thought. All history is the history of thought'.[111] The idea of the human mind being the means to transcend time is also to be found in the work of Collingwood, who claims that the same act of thought can be re-enacted in different minds from different times. He argues that,

> [w]hen a man thinks historically, he has before him certain documents or relics of the past. His business is to discover what the past was which has left these relics behind it. For example, the relics are certain written words; and in that case he has to discover what the person who wrote those words meant by them. This means discovering the thought which he expressed by them… to discover what this thought was, the historian must think it again for himself.[112]

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[108] Ibídem, 210.
[109] Idem.
[110] Idem.
[111] Robin Collingwood, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215.
[112] Ibídem, 282-283.

For Collingwood, human thought has a universal character that allows for the understanding of people in the past without being affected by the present.[113] What makes past thought possible to be re-thought (re-enacted) by the historian, in a different context, is its rationality.[114] Furthermore, in Collingwood's work, re-enactment is not an immediate mystical grasp of people in the past, but 'always a critical examination of the presuppositions of others' thoughts and, thus, always involves a strong element of self-reflection upon one's own thinking about the agent being studied'.[115] As with Dilthey and the rest of the hermeneuticians discussed earlier in this section, Collingwood also acknowledges the importance of the knowledge of historical context. This is evident, when he claims that interpretations of historical agents' intentions can only make sense if they fit with the historian's reconstruction of past contexts.[116]

The discussion so far provides us with possible ways of understanding people in the past; namely, the common experience of the social world and the ability of human mind to transcend time. However, there is still a question that remains unanswered. A question that is also crucial for claims about the place of historical empathy in education to be sustained. This is the issue of 'what to do with our own ways of thinking when trying to think like people from the past'.[117] Claiming to be able to suspend our own thinking in order to understand the thinking of others is a rather naïve notion.[118] Furthermore, suspending our own thinking is also undesirable since this in fact the only way we have to think about the past anyway.[119] Authors in history, and social sciences in general, while acknowledging Collinwood's contribution, criticize the lack of an explanation of how the historian deals with their own contextuality and biases while attempting to re-enact past thoughts.[120]

A solution to this problem is proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer's moderate hermeneutics.[121] In this our own thinking, our historicity, is not viewed as a problem 'but as the very factor that enables us to understand the historical other'.[122] For Gadamer, understanding takes place in a 'fusion of horizons'. This happens not by concealing the tension between our own horizon and

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[113] Tyson Retz, «A moderate hermeneutical approach to empathy in history education», *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 47, Nº 3 (2015): 214–26.
[114] Idem.
[115] Ibídem, 217.
[116] Collingwood, *The idea of history…*, 282-283.
[117] Retz, «A moderate hermeneutical approach to empathy in history education», 216.
[118] Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, (California: Temple University Press, 2001).
[119] Idem; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method, 2nd edition* (New York: Continuum, 2004).
[120] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*; Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958).
[121] Retz, «A moderate hermeneutical approach to empathy in history education», 214-26.
[122] Ibídem, 224.

the horizon of the historical agent, but by consciously bringing it to light.[123] This process 'will make conscious the prejudices governing our own understanding, so that the text, as another's meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own'.[124] As he explains:

> Foregrounding (abheben) a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not consider it a judgment. How then can we foreground it? It is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked. The encounter with a traditionary text [a past behaviour] can provide this provocation. For what leads to understanding must be something that has already asserted itself in its own separate validity.[125]

Apropos the claim that the past is not empathetically retrievable because it is mediated to us by the historians, Lee and Ashby point out that this is an aphorism rather than an argument.[126] The same kind of indirect experience – transmitted to us through sources – is also what we rely on in the case of our knowledge of most of what we know (people and knowledge of the physical and the social world). Insisting on the problems caused by our indirect experience of people in the past not only rules out the possibility of understanding people in the past, but also eliminates the prospect of understanding most of the people in the present and the world itself.

Regarding the claim that we cannot have valid interpretation of our sources due to linguistic change, this is arguably an overestimation of the latter. As Quentin Skinner points out, explicitly agreeing with Ludwig Wittgenstein's criticism of the concept of private language, the language of written historical sources, as in the case of contemporary sources, is the way to understand them.[127] This is because 'the intentions with which anyone performs a successful act of communication must, *ex hypothesi*, be publicly legible'.[128] Also, as in the case of the mediation of the historians, discussed in the previous paragraph, we should also bear in mind that similar issues regarding the difference in our experiences and the use of language exist (albeit in different degrees) in the case of trying to make sense of people in the present. Even among the speakers of the same language, there is not always agreement about the meanings of the words they commonly use. Hence, to claim that the past is not empathetically retrievable on the basis of linguistic differences is essentially to claim that we cannot empathize even with people in our own time.

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[123] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*….
[124] Ibídem, 298.
[125] Idem.
[126] Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50.
[127] Skinner, *Visions of Politics, Volume 1: Regarding Method*….
[128] Ibídem, 120.

As it is evident from the discussion in this section, the common experience of the social world and human mind's ability to transcend time have the potential to allow us to understand people who lived in the past. To the question of how can one deal with their personal biases when re-enacting past thoughts, Hans-Georg Gadamer offers a solution through 'fusion of horizons,' where the tension between the present and the historical context illuminates biases, enabling understanding. Finally, as argued in this section, issues related with our indirect experience of the past and linguistic differences between the present and the past are also issues related to our understanding of the present. Hence to claim that it is impossible to understand people in the past based on these is essentially to claim that we cannot have any understanding of most of the people in the present too.

What is and is not historical empathy

Even though providing arguments for the possibility of historical empathy is crucial in order to argue in favour of its place in education, this is inadequate without a clarification of the meaning of the term. As mentioned earlier, the meaning of historical empathy and consequently its place in education are highly contested. This section discusses this issue and provides a description of the concept.

Much of the meaning confusion and objections related to historical empathy in education is arguably due the fact that public understanding of the term empathy is defined by a specific approach of the concept in the field of psychology. In this approach, empathy is considered to be an affective phenomenon which takes place when we encounter others.[129] Although today empathy as a cognitive phenomenon is also a research field in psychology, this aspect of the concept is usually not taken into consideration in the ways the term is publicly used.[130] According to Merriam- Webster dictionary, one of the most prominent dictionaries in the English language, empathy is

> the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner…the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions: the ability to share someone else's feelings.[131]

A similar definition can be found in *Psychology Today* one of the most popular magazines on issues related to psychology. According to PT, '[e]mpathy is the ability to recognize, understand,

[129] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2.

[130] Idem.

[131] Merriam Webster, *Empathy* (2022), accessed 21 February 2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/empathy.

and share the thoughts and feelings of another person, animal, or fictional character. Developing empathy is crucial for establishing relationships and behaving compassionately'.[132] The idea of empathy as identifying, sharing feelings, sympathising and with others is also prominent in the way the term is used by international organisations such as UNICEF, the Council of Europe, the European Union, and the United Nations.[133]

As discussed earlier, a number of criticisms against historical empathy in education are based on such views of the concepts that stem primarily from the field of psychology (i.e. an affective rather than a cognitive act of identifying with others and sharing their feelings). Although, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, this is not the case today in psychology, authors argue that the identification of empathy strictly with the affective was due to the fact that for many years, almost a century of literature in philosophy was usually neglected by psychology.[134] The discussion in the previous section demonstrates that the concept's cognitive nature was acknowledged in the field of the philosophy of history for over a century. Thus Low-Beer's claim that the concept 'belongs within the affective rather than the cognitive domain of knowledge', and therefore the teaching historical empathy is by definition problematic, becomes unconvincing.[135]

This problem of terminology is not confined to discussions about historical empathy but extends across time and disciplines. The problem of defining a specific meaning for the term *empathy* has existed since the beginning of its use. Lipps himself described *einfühlung* in different ways on different occasions and the phenomenologists' accounts of understanding other minds are not consistent in terms of using the term to support, extent or reject it.[136] For example, while Scheler rarely uses *einfühlung* (usually to criticize Lipps' idea of understanding other minds), his theory is described by other phenomenologists (i.e., Stein and Husserl) as a theory of *einfühlung*.[137] The problem is amplified by the use of the English translation of *einfühlung* to empathy; a non-English word which has undergone changes in its meaning even within the Greek

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[132] Psychology Today, *Empathy* (2022), accessed 22 February 2022, https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/basics/empathy.

[133] UNICEF, *Mission #3 – Empathy*, accessed 22 February 2022, https://www.unicef.org/lac/en/mission-3-empathy; Council of Europe, *Ethics and Empathy* (2021), accessed 22 February 2022, https://www.coe.int/en/web/digital-citizenship-education/ethics-and-empathy; Council of the European Union, «Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on key competences for lifelong learning», *Official Journal of the European Union* (2018), accessed 22 February 2022, https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?toc=OJ%3AC%3A2018%3A189%3ATOC&uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2018.189.01.0001.01.ENG; United Nations, *Is Kindness the Secret to Achieving the Sustainable Development Goals?* (2019), accessed 22 February 2022, https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/kindness-secret-achieving-sustainable-development-goals.

[134] Stueber, «Empathy», 1-2; Zahavi, «Empathy, Embodiment and Interpersonal Understanding: From Lipps to Schutz», 151-167.

[135] Low-Beer, «Empathy and history», 8.

[136] Zahavi, «Empathy, Embodiment and Interpersonal Understanding: From Lipps to Schutz», 151-167.

[137] Idem.

language from which it originates. For these reasons, it is necessary to offer a clear definition of the term historical empathy.

What historical empathy is not

In order to avoid many of the possible misuses of the term, Foster suggests that a better understanding of historical empathy 'may be derived from an appreciation of what is not'.[138] Foster's suggestion is quite helpful in terms of practice, since merely defining what a concept is does not necessarily inform us about all of its parameters. It may therefore be possible for people to assign to the concept characteristics which, although they may seem to fit its definition, are essentially inconsistent with it.

In this sense, we should make clear that first of all historical empathy is not in any way a metaphysical ability to transfer ourselves into the mind of people in the past and identify with them. Understanding other people is not identical with understanding ourselves. In fact, as Husserl and Levinas claim, the alterity of the Other is what makes understanding them possible, since in the absence of alterity the Other would simply cease to exist as such.[139] In this sense, to claim that the only way to understand other people is to identify with them is problematic as in this case we would not be able to tell the difference between them and us. The impossibility of such a task is demonstrated by Weber's critique to Lipps' theory of empathy through the discussion of the latter's example of an observer identifying with an acrobat. In this Weber argues that '[w]hoever "empathizes" with Lipps' acrobat "experience" neither what the acrobat "experiences" on the tightrope, not what he would "experience" if he were on the tightrope. What he "experiences" does not even have any unambiguous, imaginative relationship to the experience of the.[140] For Weber this does not constitute knowledge of the acrobat's experience, but merely knowledge of the observer's experience of observing the acrobat.[141] Since identifying with people whom we encounter in our everyday life is impossible, claims that such ability exists when we try to make sense of people in the past cannot be sustained.

In addition, the idea of identification is incompatible with the study of history since it ignores a) the principle that historians are interpreting the past from their contemporary point of view and b) the notion of hindsight.[142] Apropos the former, as Husserl claims, whenever we experience an object, the latter is also experienced by Others. If we do not acknowledge this, our experience of the object will never be objective and real.[143] To realize that our understanding of the world

[138] Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts», 169.
[139] Edmund Husserl, *Formal and transcendental logic* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969); Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1990).
[140] Harrington, «Dilthey, Empathy and Verstehen a Contemporary Reappraisal», 315.
[141] Ibídem, 311-329.
[142] Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts», 167-179.
[143] Husserl, *Formal and transcendental logic….*

is one among others also means to become aware of the fact that our own perspective is also contextualized. For Barton and Levstik, 'this is the recognition that our own perspectives depend on historical context: They are not necessarily the result of logical and dispassionate reason but reflect the beliefs we have been socialised into as members of cultural groups'.[144] As Shemilt reminds us, 'although the empathizing historian may be said to explain action "from the inside", as it were, he does so from the inside of our *known-in-common world* not from that of our predecessors'.[145] In other words, the historian is not standing on an Archimedean point, from which they then transfer into the historical agent's mind unaffected by their own contextuality. Besides this being an impossible feat outside the fantasy and science fiction genres, as discussed in the previous section, it is also undesirable since it strips us from the very tools we use to understand people in the past.[146]

Foster's claim about the notion of hindsight being important, when we try to make sense of people in the past is rejected by Cunningham who argues that 'empathy scholarship has typically emphasised that such understandings need to be somehow mentally quarantined to try to view happenings as actors did at the time'.[147] This idea, however, leads again to identification which as described above is both impossible and undesirable. Furthermore, in the case of understanding people in the past, as Schütz argues, hindsight is a major difference in the way we understand people in the present and people in the past.[148] This is because in the case of the past, '[t]he historian already knows perfectly well what the actor intended to do because he knows what he did in fact do. Furthermore, he knows the whole further course of historical events right down to the time he himself asked his question'.[149] Although we should refrain from claiming that knowing what the historical agent did can always inform us about their motives and intended outcomes, we can still argue that their intentions can be illuminated by their later actions and the general course of events that followed. For example, the most convincing argument that the airplane hijackers on the 11th of September 2001 took control of four airplanes and crashed them on buildings following orders to perform terrorist attacks, is the knowledge of what happened later (i.e., the official claim of responsibility by Al-Qaeda). In order to explain why they hijacked the planes we do not attempt to identify with them at the moment they took control of them. We explain this action's (hijacking) by reference to a later action (claim of responsibility by Al-Qaeda).

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144 Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good…*, 219.
145 Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 44-45.
146 Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts….*; Gadamer, *Truth and Method….*
147 Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts»,167-179; Cunningham, *Professional Practice and Perspectives in The Teaching of Historical Empathy…*, 19.
148 Schütz, *The phenomenology of the social world….*
149 Ibídem, 213.

Historical empathy is also not about sharing feelings or sympathising. As Scheler argues, sharing the feelings of the Other is not a necessary condition in order to understand them. When, for example, a third person observes the parents grieving for the loss of their child, this person does not have to feel their sorrow and despair in order to understand that they have these feelings. Although the observer does not feel their sorrow, this feeling is the object of their empathy.[150] This does not exclude the possibility of the observer also feeling sad, but this is not necessary in order to identify the presence of the feeling. This phenomenon of feeling what the Other feels is not empathy (in terms of understanding the Other), but, in the words of Scheler, 'emotional contagion' and it is not related to understanding.[151] Furthermore, we can also argue that we cannot even 're-feel' feelings that we ourselves previously experienced. The claim is quite valid if we think of the countless situations in our life where we cannot feel the way we ourselves previously felt, or completely understand why we felt in a certain way, a few years or even a few hours before. A similar idea is to be found in the work of Collingwood, who distinguishes between acts of thought and feelings and claims that while an act of thought can be re-enacted, the same does not apply in the case of a feeling.[152] The latter 'does not reappear, the stream of immediate experience has carried it away for ever; at most there reappears something like it'.[153] It would also be unreasonable to try to share the feelings of people in the past since we do not share their beliefs. We cannot also share their hopes or fears since we already know whether they came true or not.[154] Challenging the assumption that simulation exercises allow students to share the feelings of people in the past, Barton and Levstik point out that '[n]either they nor we can know what someone in a World War I trench felt like, because we know the simulation will be over in a few minutes, whereas a soldier at the time had no idea if he would live or die.[155]

A number of authors argue in favour of an affective aspect of empathy claiming that feeling something of what people in the past felt and caring about them enhances our empathetic understanding.[156] Despite the fact that authors who argue that historical empathy should include

[150] Scheler, *The nature of sympathy….*
[151] Idem.
[152] Collingwood, *The idea of history….*
[153] Ibídem, 293.
[154] Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50.
[155] Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good*, 236.
[156] Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good…*; Cunningham, *Professional Practice and Perspectives In The Teaching Of Historical Empathy…*; Terry Epstein, «The arts of history: An analysis of secondary school students' interpretations of the arts in historical contexts», *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision* 9, Nº 2 (1994): 174-194; Jason Endacott and Sarah Brooks, «Historical Empathy Perspectives and Responding to the Past», in *The Wiley International Handbook of History Teaching and Learning,* ed. for Scott Metzger and Lauren McArthur Harris (New Jersey: Willey Blackwell, 2013): 223-226; Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 2001); Peter Lee, «History Teaching and Philosophy of History», *History and Theory* 22, Nº 4 (1983): 19-49; Peter J. Lee, «Putting

an affective connection with people in the past, usually argue that this is different to sympathy or identification, they do not adequately explain this distinction.[157] As already discussed in previous paragraphs, feeling what people in the past felt is impossible. As I argue elsewhere, this 'does not exclude the possibility of feeling something. This feeling, though, could be an illusion (falsely believing that what we feel now is what the people in the past felt) or could be related to sympathy (emotional engagement with people in the past)'.[158] The coexistence of the two phenomena does not prove their contribution to understanding people in the past (or even in the present). Illusion does not enhance understanding and sympathising with someone does not necessarily mean that we understand them better. For instance, in educational systems in which history aims to develop feelings of respect and admiration for the students' ancestors and national pride, we cannot claim that what is developed is genuine understanding of the people in the past. At best, the students respect, admire and strive to follow the steps of their ancestors, but this does not mean that they understand them. Bearing these in mind we can only echo Foster's concern that sympathising can be problematic in the case of history since unexamined emotional engagement might hinder disciplined historical understanding.[159]

Of course, sympathising is likely to make us more receptive to different points of view and more willing to understand historical agents. In history, though, in many cases, we seek to understand the actions of people with whom sympathising is difficult and, for many people, even undesirable. For instance, as I argue elsewhere although many teachers would be happy to see their students sympathising with the Nazis' victims, they would rightly not wish them to do the same for the Nazis themselves. In history, however, we do not only seek to understand the 'victims', but the 'perpetrators' too.[160] In fact, in terms of understanding the Holocaust as a phenomenon, focusing on developing students' understanding of the victims' experience 'has little value if the reasons and motivations of the perpetrators are not addressed also'.[161] In a similar vein, the UCL Centre For Holocaust Education suggests that the understanding of how extremist views can grow in any society can benefit from an understanding of how the wider historical context contributed in order for the NSDAP to become popular among German people

principles into practice: understanding history», in *How Students Learn: history, mathematics and science in the classroom,* ed. for Suzanne Donovan and John Bransford (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 2005), 79-178.

[157] LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Samuel Moyn, «Empathy in History, Empathizing with Humanity», *History and Theory* 45, Nº 3 (2006): 397-415.

[158] Lukas Perikleous, «Deanna Troi and the TARDIS: Does Historical Empathy have a Place in Education?», *History Education Research Journal* 12, Nº 2 (2004): 24.

[159] Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts»,167-179.

[160] Perikleous, «Deanna Troi and the TARDIS: Does Historical Empathy have a Place in Education?», 22-30.

[161] Falk Pingel, «The Holocaust in textbooks: from a European to a global event», *Holocaust Education in a Global Context*, ed. for Karel Fracapane and Matthias Haß (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2014), 85.

at the time.[162] Sylvester refers to a similar example that he used during the days of the introduction of historical empathy in English history education in order to distinguish the concept from sympathy: 'We want to learn about Hitler. I don't want people to sympathise with Hitler, but youngsters ought to understand something of his background – why he was led to such views and in that sense, they can empathise with at least why he took the actions he did.[163]

The above do not mean that historical empathy is unrelated to the affective domain. This has to do with the acknowledgment that a) people in the past acted also because of the way they felt and b) caring to understand people in the past is an important part of historical empathy (discussed in the next section).

Collingwood stresses the importance of historical imagination by claiming that this is not a complimentary part of history but a structural one.[164] Lévesque also argues that '[t]he only possible way to understand more about past actors is to mentally recreate - to imagine - what it was like to be in their position, even if historians may (and often do) lack some of the keys to the past'.[165] However, imagination can also be a misleading notion when we think about historical empathy, and history in general, and its misuse often leads to unsophisticated approaches. As Lee points out, 'a good historian, it seems, must have imagination, and a mediocre one lacks it. Too much of it, however, and the result is not just a mediocre historian, but a downright bad one'.[166] Although Lee here is right to say that imagination can benefit or hinder historical thinking, we should not think of this issue as one of quantity. Collingwood makes a clearer distinction regarding the role of imagination in history when he claims that although the work of a novelist and a historian are both works of imagination, 'the historian's picture is meant to be true'.[167] Historical imagination is the historians' way of connecting the available evidence. In this process, 'the whole picture is constantly verified by appeal to these data, and runs little risk of losing touch with the reality which it represents'.[168] In this sense, as I argue elsewhere 'the historian is responsible both for the connections they make and the evidence they use… [and]… they are [also] aware of the fact that their picture can be challenged in terms of the validity of both of these elements. If these cautions and elements of historical investigation are not taken

[162] UCL Centre For Holocaust Education, *Agency and responsibility: Perpetrators and collaborators,* accessed 22 February 2022, https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Research-Briefing-1.pdf.
[163] Sylvester and Sheldon, «Interview with David Sylvester».
[164] Collingwood, *The idea of history….*
[165] Stéphane Lévesque, *Thinking historically: educating students for the twenty-first century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 147.
[166] Peter Lee, «Why learn history?», in *Learning History*, ed. for A. K. Dickinson, P. J. Lee and P. J. Rogers (London: Heinemann, 1984), 85.
[167] Collingwood, *The idea of history…,* 246.
[168] Ibídem, 242.

into consideration, 'our explanations will be closer to a work of fiction than a historical explanation of past behaviour'. [169]

Summarizing the above, in this section it is argued that we should avoid thinking of historical empathy as a) identification, b) sharing of feelings or sympathy, and c) sheer imagination since such notions can be problematic in the study of history. While on some of these issues an agreement seems to exist, at least among history educationalists (i.e., historical empathy not being about identification or sheer imagination), others are still a matter of debate (i.e., historical empathy's relation with sympathy and sharing of feelings). In this sense, I do not claim to have settled these issues. My aim, in this and the following section, is to present the key arguments on which my approach to the conception of historical empathy is based.

What historical empathy is

Lee and Ashby claim that historical empathy 'requires hard thinking on the basis of evidence, but it is not a special kind of mental process'.[170] In this sense, empathy is the result (an achievement) of the effort to 'know what past agents thought, what goals they may have been seeking, and how they saw their situation, and [and be able to] connect all this with what they did'.[171] Conversely, Yeager and Foster claim that historical empathy can be both a process and an outcome and quote Portal's claim that to exercise historical empathy 'it is necessary to establish what people thought was going on and how they saw their own range of options before any explanation of their motives has a chance of success'.[172] Although at a first glance these two descriptions seem to differ, they essentially describe the same two components involved in understanding people in the past. These are a) the knowledge of the historical agents' ideas and view of the situation and also of the historical context and b) the effective use of this knowledge to explain their actions.

Shemilt suggests that the exercise of historical empathy rests upon specific theoretical assumptions. The first one is that the perspectives of people in the past are likely to be different from our own ones.[173] In other words, we cannot expect people in the past to share the same ideas, beliefs and world views with people today. This is based on the assumption that the past and the present worlds are different. In the absence of this realization, the different world of the past is viewed as culturally homogenous with our present world. In this case, the only way to explain the 'strange' behaviour of its people is to think that they were usually inferior or

[169] Perikleous, «Deanna Troi and the TARDIS: Does Historical Empathy have a Place in Education?», 25.
[170] Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 24.
[171] Idem.
[172] Elizabeth Ann Yeager and Stuart Foster, «The role of empathy in the development of historical understanding», in *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies,* ed. for Ozro Luke Davis, Elizabeth Anne Yeager, Stuart J. Foster (Pennsylvania: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 15.
[173] Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 39-84.

irrational. On the other hand, acknowledging that the perspectives of people in the past were different, allows for the possibility of thinking that people in the past behaved rationally based on their beliefs and the way they perceived their world.

This leads to Shemilt's second assumption according to which, empathetic explanations should aim to identify rational and meaningful behaviours based on 'reasonably coherent and cohesive systems [of meaning]'.[174] Based on this second assumption, we can then proceed to try to connect the historical agent's ideas, aspirations and views of the situation to their action in question. As Lee and Shemilt point out, '[t]he aim is to understand how it could make sense: why what was done would have seemed to be the best thing to do in the circumstances'.[175] This assumption also stresses the importance of acknowledging the agency of people in the past. In this sense, empathetic understanding also has to do with the acknowledgment that people in the past made decisions and their behaviour was not simply imposed by their situation.

A third assumption, proposed by Shemilt, is the idea that '[w]e share a common humanity with people in the past.[176] As Lee and Ashby argue, in order to understand the past empathetically we need to 'entertain purposes and beliefs held by the people in the past without accepting them'.[177] In this way we will start thinking about what it would have been reasonable for these people to do, having these beliefs. This is possible exactly because people in the past are human beings as we are. Shemilt, here, as other authors, previously discussed in this article (i.e. Collingwood, Dilthey, Schütz), do, essentially argues that the human mind transcends time and allow us to think about the experience of our predecessors.

Finally, Shemilt argues that our way of life is genetically connected to the way of life of the people in the past.[178] This means that although we cannot experience this past way of life, our contemporary one is developmentally related to it. Here Shemilt, essentially repeats the argument, discussed earlier in this article (by Schleiermacher, Humboldt, Droysen, and Dilthey), of the possibility of historical empathy because of the connections between the social worlds of the past and the present. Hence empathetic explanations are also based on an understanding of how this past way of life fits into a broader pattern of ideas, goals and beliefs which extends to the present.

Although the above does not constitute a definition of historical empathy, Shemilt's suggestions offer a clear and coherent picture of some of the major issues related to attempting empathetic explanations in history. As in the case of clarifying what historical empathy is not, the

[174] Ibídem, 48.
[175] Lee and Shemilt, «The concept that dares not speak its name: Should empathy come out of the closet?», 40.
[176] Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 47.
[177] Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 25.
[178] Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 39-84.

identification of what we need to take into consideration when we attempt to make sense of people in the past is also quite valuable in terms of avoiding misuses of the concept.

As mentioned in the previous section, the emphasis given on the cognitive aspects of historical empathy, 'does not mean that the feelings of people in past should not be acknowledged or respected. People in the past did things also because of the way they felt. Therefore, in history we seek to understand the feelings too'.[179] Megill discussing the use of historical memory (i.e., the memories of people who participated in historical events) suggests that in order to reconstruct the participants' experience historians need to study 'what went on in their minds and feelings'.[180] Atkinson claims that history 'depends on an assumption of shared humanity. That assumption involves feeling… historians who fail to register the importance of feeling, whether explicitly or not, cut themselves off from the roots of their discipline'.[181] Also, as Lee points out '[e]mpathy requires that the historian knows *that* the subjects believed what they did with regard to facts and values, and *that* they felt as they did. It does not require that historians share either the beliefs or the feelings. What it does demand is that they can recognize at some level their appropriateness in their context'.[182]

In order to do this, we need to see and respect the people in the past as human beings and to care about understanding them. Lee reminds us that if we 'treat people in the past as less than fully human and do not respond to those people's hopes and fears, …[we]… have hardly began to understand what history is about'.[183] As I argue elsewhere,

> [t]his is something that we strive to do, though, not only for those whom we like or for whom we feel pity, but also for those who did things with which we disagree, whom we consider to be the wrong-doers, the perpetrators and even evil. In this sense historical empathy is also a disposition of respecting the people in the past, their ideas, feelings and beliefs and caring to understand them.[184]

Lee argues that, 'if empathy as achievement is a necessary condition of historical understanding… acquiring the disposition to empathize may be regarded as an essential part of learning to think historically' and acknowledges that this is an affective aspect of historical empathy. [185] If we do not want to understand people in the past, then it is unlikely that we will

[179] Perikleous, «Deanna Troi and the TARDIS: Does Historical Empathy have a Place in Education?», 25.
[180] Allan Megill, *Historical knowledge, historical error a contemporary guide to practice* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 29.
[181] Alan Atkinson, «Do good historians have feelings?», in *The historian's conscience: Australian historians on the ethics of history,* ed. for Stuart Macintyre (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 23.
[182] Lee, «History Teaching and Philosophy of History», 40.
[183] Lee, «Putting principles into practice: understanding history», 79.
[184] Perikleous, «Deanna Troi and the TARDIS: Does Historical Empathy have a Place in Education?», 25.
[185] Lee, «History Teaching and Philosophy of History», 37.

try to understand them. Barton and Levstik echo Lee by claiming that '[e]mpathy without care sounds like an oxymoron. Why would anyone expend energy trying to understand historical perspectives if they had no care or concern for the lives and experiences of people in the past? Care is the motivating force behind nearly all historical research, and it shapes our interest in its products'.[186]

In the light of the above, it can be argued that despite the fact that historical empathy is primarily a cognitive act and that, as discussed earlier, feeling what people in the past felt and/or sympathising with them can be impossible and/or problematic, understanding why people in the past did what they did does have affective aspects. This is in the sense that a) understanding people in the past involves understanding their feelings and how these affected their behaviour and b) understanding people in the past can only be achieved if we care to understand them. In other words, despite the fact that we cannot feel what people in the past felt, we do need to take into consideration how they felt. Also, despite the fact that sympathising with people in the past can distort our understanding, we do need to care about understanding them. These distinctions are not a matter of quantity, they are not about more or less affective empathy. They are a matter of quality. Taking one's feelings into consideration is different to sharing them. Caring to understand someone is different to sympathising with them.

Megill describes four key historian's tasks. These are description (what happened in the past), explanation (why this happened), argument/justification (how do we know), and interpretation (what is the meaning of what happened in the past for people in the present and the future).[187] One could argue that historical empathy, with its primary aim being to explain past actions, falls within this description of historical explanation. However, Megill warns us that this distinction is primarily a conceptual one that helps as to think about the different aspects of the historian's writing and not a practical one.[188] In a similar vein and in some aspects, Shemilt points out that in order for empathetic explanations to be considered as historical explanations they need to satisfy criteria that have to do with the coherence of what they describe, the efficiency of their arguments, their agreement with other accounts and the degree to which they privilege the less exotic explanations when the previous three criteria are satisfied.[189] What Megill and Shemilt remind us here is that historical explanation, in general, and historical empathy, in particular, are not disconnected from the other aspects of historical thinking and the discipline of history.

The above also relate with the idea that, as many authors argue, historical empathy involves a strong substantive knowledge of the past (knowledge of the views and ideas of people in the

[186] Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good…*, 228.
[187] Megill, *Historical knowledge, historical error a contemporary guide to practice….*
[188] Idem.
[189] Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 39-84.

past and of the historical context in which the historical agents lived).[190] Substantive knowledge of the past, though, is not simply to be discovered (since the past is not hidden to be discovered), but to be reconstructed based on the available historical evidence.[191] In this sense, the historian reconstructs the past using the methods and the logic of the discipline of history in order to do so. As Megill argues, history is a discipline in which what passes as knowledge has to be based on the questioning of historical sources.[192] As discussed in previous paragraphs, the idea of understanding people in the past being depended on historical investigation is also to be found in the work of earlier thinkers (i.e. Humboldt, Droysen, Dilthey, and Collingwood). Therefore, historical empathy cannot exist on its own in the absence of sophisticated disciplinary and substantive knowledge.

As also discussed earlier in this article, dealing with our contextuality and biases, while attempting to understand people in the distant past, poses a challenge. As argued there, understanding people in the past cannot happen by abandoning our own historicity since this is the only way we have to do so.[193] Instead, we can attempt a 'fusion of horizons' between our world and the world of the past by acknowledging our own contextuality and biases, allowing in this way the meaning behind past actions to emerge as different from our meanings. In this sense, historical empathy is also an acknowledgment of our own contextuality and biases and the role they play in our understanding of past behaviour.[194]

In the light of the above, a brief answer to the question posed in the title of this section is that historical empathy is a cognitive act and a disposition. It is a cognitive act of explaining why people in the past did what they did by thinking of what it would be reasonable for them to think, by taking into consideration their beliefs, ideas and intentions and also their situation, and the wider historical context. It is a disposition in the sense that it demands treating people in the past as human and caring to understand them. It is also a disposition in the sense that it involves an acknowledgment of our own contextuality and biases when attempting to explain past behaviour.

Students' capacity to understand people in the past

Research in students' ideas of historical empathy is part of a wider approach in history education research that investigates students' ideas of second-order disciplinary concepts such as historical

[190] See, for example, the discussion of the ideas of Collingwood, Dilthey, Schleiermacher, Humboldt, and Droysen earlier in this article. See also, Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 39-84; Foster, «Historical empathy in theory and practice: some final thoughts», 167-179.
[191] Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts…*.
[192] Megill, *Historical knowledge, historical error a contemporary guide to practice*.
[193] Gadamer, *Truth and Method…*; Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts…;* Retz, «A moderate hermeneutical approach to empathy in history education», 214-26.
[194] Gadamer, *Truth and Method…*.

accounts, evidence, causal explanations and historical significance. The first attempt to explore students' ideas of historical empathy was the one by Alaric Dickinson and Peter Lee in 1978. In this study, students were asked to explain the decision of Admiral John Jellicoe to turn his fleet away from the Germans in the Battle of Jutland (31 May- 1 June 1916) during WW1.[195] Subsequent small-scale studies of students' ideas of historical empathy by the Institute of Education group of researchers (Rosalyn Ashby, Alaric Dickinson and Peter Lee) essentially laid the ground for the historical empathy component of the CHATA project study during the 1990's.[196] Shemilt's evaluation study of the Schools Council History Project 13- 16 and the work of Dickinson, Lee and Ashby in CHATA project were the two most important studies in the area in the 20th century.[197] At the beginning of the 21st century, Wineburg argued that these two studies provided the most in-depth analysis of students understanding in history to date.[198] Barton and Levstik repeated this claim for the case of the CHATA project.[199] This is arguably the case until today, especially due to the fact that, unlike the majority of the available studies on students' ideas of historical empathy, the SHP Evaluation Study and the CHATA project used a variety of tasks to explore the ideas of relatively large samples from a variety of schools.

Perhaps the most important contribution of these two studies was that they challenged established beliefs at the time, according to which children do not possess the cognitive abilities to explain past behaviour. Shemilt's Evaluation Study showed that adolescents can think effectively about past behaviour and that this can improve with teaching that aims to develop such kind of thinking.[200] CHATA project showed that the potential of providing empathetic explanations is not a phenomenon observed only in older students, but also primary age ones.[201] Despite the Evaluation Study and CHATA project being the most comprehensive ones, other studies during the same period (i.e., the last two decades of the 20th century) also suggested that students can attempt to explain actions, institutions and practices in the past in

[195] Alaric Dickinson and Peter Lee, «Understanding and research», in *History Teaching and Historical Understanding,* ed. for A. K. Dickinson, P. J. Lee (London: Heinemann, 1978), 1-20.

[196] Alaric K. Dickinson and Peter J. Lee, «Making sense of history», in *Learning History*, ed. for A. K. Dickinson and P. J. Lee and P. J. Rogers (London: Heinemann, 1984), 117-154; Rosalyn Ashby and Peter J. Lee, «Children's concepts of empathy and understanding in history», in *The History Curriculum for Teachers,* ed. Christopher Portal (London: Falmer Press, 1987), 62-88; Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50.

[197] Denis Shemilt, *History 13-16 evaluation study* (Edinburgh: Holmes McDougall, 1980); Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 39-84.; Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50*;* Peter Lee, Alaric Dickinson and Rosalyn Ashby, «Just another emperor': Understanding action in the past», *International Journal of Educational Research* 27, Nº 3 (1997): 233-244.

[198] Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts….*

[199] Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good….*

[200] Shemilt, *History 13-16 evaluation study…*; Shemilt, «Beauty and the philosopher: Empathy in history and classroom», 39-84.

[201] Lee and Ashby, «Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding», 21-50.

sophisticated ways, both at the ages of secondary and primary education.[202] During the 21st century these findings are confirmed by studies in a variety of educational contexts again for both adolescents and younger children.[203]

These findings challenge the criticisms for teaching historical empathy in education, according to which students, especially younger ones, do not possess the mental capacity and knowledge to make sense of people in the past. This is not to claim that students' empathetic explanations can be as sophisticated as the ones of professional historians. The research cited above also shows that students hold a number of problematic ideas. However, history teaching is not about creating mini historians.[204] History is about contributing to the education of people who think historically, and this involves that the distinct ways of thinking in history should be taken into consideration.[205]

Conclusion

This article discussed the introduction of historical empathy in English history education and the phenomenon of the concept becoming a contested issue and addressed the main objections for its implementation in the teaching of history. Apropos the claim that empathy is an affective and not a cognitive exercise, reference to the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of history demonstrate that there is a long tradition of empathy being considered as also a cognitive act.

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[202] Peter Knight, «A study of children's understanding of people in the past», *Educational Review* 41, Nº 3 (1989): 207-219; Dickinson and Lee, «Understanding and research»,1-20; Sam Wineburg and Suzanne Wilson, «Subject-matter knowledge in the teaching of history», in *Advances in Research on Teaching,* ed. for Jere Brophy (Greenwich, Conn: JAI Press, 1991), 1-15; Ashby and Lee, «Children's concepts of empathy and understanding in history», 62-88; Dickinson and Lee, «Making sense of history», 117-154; Hilary Cooper, «Historical thinking and cognitive development in the teaching of history», in *Teaching History*, ed. for Hilary Bourdillon (London: Open University Press, 1994), 101-121; Matthew Downey and Linda Levstik, «Teaching and learning history: The research base», *Social Education* 52, Nº 5 (1988): 336-342.

[203] See for example Frans Doppen, «Teaching and learning multiple perspectives: The atomic Bomb», *The Social Studies* 91, Nº 4 (2000): 159-169; Anna Emilia Berti, Isabella Baldin and Laura Toneatti, «Empathy in history. Understanding a past institution (ordeal) in children and young adults when description and rationale are provided», *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 34, Nº 4 (2009): 278-288; Martyn Davison, «Teaching historical empathy and the 1915 Gallipoli campaign», in *History matters: teaching and learning history in New Zealand secondary schools in the 21st century*, ed. for Michael Harcourt and Mark Sheehan (Wellington, NZ: ZCER Press, 2012), 11-31; Hilary Cooper, *History 3–11: A guide for teachers* (London: David Fulton Publishers, 2007); Lukas Perikleous, «Why did They Treat Their Children Like This?: A Case Study of 9-12 year-old Greek Cypriot Students' Ideas of Historical Empathy», in *The Future of the Past: Why history education matters,* ed. for Lukas Perikleous and Denis Shemilt (Nicosia: Association for Historical Dialogue and Research, 2011), 217-252; Lukas Perikleous, '*They were not as rational as we are today': Students' and teachers' ideas of historical empathy in Greek Cypriot Primary Education*, unpublished PhD thesis (London: UCL Institute of Education, 2022); Huijgen, van Boxtel, van de Grift and Holthuis, «Testing elementary and secondary school students' ability to perform historical perspective taking: The constructing of valid and reliable measure instruments», 652-672; Barton and Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good….*

[204] Shemilt, *History 13-16 evaluation study…*; Lee, «Putting principles into practice: understanding history», 79-178.

[205] Megill, *Historical knowledge, historical error a contemporary guide to practice…;* John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008).

Options against the claim that other minds are strictly private and inaccessible were provided, based on the idea of the experience of a common social world and an intentional effort to take into consideration the perspective of the Other. Furthermore, claims against the possibility of empathising with people in the past, were countered with arguments for the possibility of the human mind to transcend time. The latter is not approached as a fictional ability, similar to sending a Betazoid or a Vulcan into the past using a TARDIS, but as a cognitive act that is based on rational thinking, disciplined reconstruction of the past and the acknowledgment of our own contextuality and biases.[206]

In order to provide a possible answer to the issue of meaning confusion, this article discussed different notions related to the meaning of historical empathy and distinguished between those that can be problematic (i.e., identification, sympathy, sheer imagination) and the ones that can be helpful (i.e., a cognitive act of understanding past behaviour and a disposition of respect of people in the past and acknowledging our own contextuality and biases).

As I acknowledged earlier, I do not claim that this article provides an exhaustive discussion of these issues. Such a claim cannot be sustained within the constrictions of space of a single article. However, this it provides a justification of my conception of historical empathy and discusses the main arguments upon which this is based.

Finally, in order to challenge objections based on students perceived lack of mental capacity and experience to understand past behaviour, this article discussed research findings that reject such claims and demonstrate how even younger students can think is sophisticated ways about the past and its people.

The most important conclusion of this article, is that teaching historical empathy is possible despite the limitations which derive from the effort to make sense of other people who lived in a different world and our students' young age. Below I cite two 10-year-old students, Deanna (who was one of the participants of the study for my doctoral thesis) and Liam (who is currently a student of mine). Both cases are examples younger children can think in sophisticated ways about how we understand people in the past.

In my last meeting with Deanna's class, after the data collection, I asked about the possibility of feeling what people in the past felt and, in this way, understand them better. Deanna responded by saying: 'We might understand what happened, but we don't feel the same emotions as in that moment. Erm.. because it didn't happen to us… you might feel sadness for something that happened to someone, but you don't feel the same as they did, you don't go in their place'. One can only hear here the arguments (discussed in this article) voiced by Peter Lee and Rosalyn Ashby, Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, and also the philosophers Max Scheler and

[206] Betazoids and Vulcan are fictional species from the popular science fiction franchise Star Trek, who can literarily access other minds and share feelings and thoughts. A TARDIS is time machine in the Doctor Who fictional universe.

Robin George Collingwood who argued about the impossibility of sharing the feelings of people in the past and the illusion of understanding that feelings can create.

Last year, during a history lesson about the customs of people in Cyprus during the Geometric Era, many of my Year 4 students commented on Ancient Cypriot 'stupidity' and 'nonsenses'. Liam, however, disagreed with his classmates and said: 'No, they were not stupid. They look stupid to us because we live in a different time. People in the future might also think of us and our habits as stupid'. Again, here Liam voices arguments similar to ones used by Denis Shemilt, Arthur Chapman[207], Sam Wineburg, Keith Barton and Linda Levstik, and also the philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer who remind us about the dangers of presentism and that our views of the people in the past are conditioned by our own contextuality (also discussed in this article).

Deanna and Liam are not ready, of course, to teach history or philosophy of history. In a number of occasions, they exhibited problematic ideas of historical empathy themselves. However, they 'teach' us that even children as young as them can think in sophisticated ways about people in the past. They are two of the numerous examples from research and everyday classroom experience that support Peter Lee's argument that 'developing students' understanding of history is worthwhile without implying any grandiose claims'.[208]

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[207] Arthur Chapman, «Introduction: Historical knowing and the 'knowledge turn'», in *Knowing History in Schools: Powerful knowledge and the powers of knowledge*, ed. for Arthur Chapman (London: UCL Press, 2021), 1-31.
[208] Lee, «Putting principles into practice: understanding history», 79-178.

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