Teachers and the Epistemology of History

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This edited volume, *Teachers and the Epistemology of History*, begins with a striking observation: that understanding how we know what we know—the epistemology—is often seen as harder in history than in other school subjects. This challenge, argue the editors, is exacerbated by the multiple and often contradictory aims of history education—like promoting national cohesion and the ability to engage critically with historical evidence—each with different assumptions about what history is and for. The nineteen chapters of this book explore how history teachers respond to this tension, in ways both intentional and unintentional.

The book is divided into three parts, admittedly with significant overlap. Part 1 'Epistemology and Context' reflects on how different contexts might have implications for teachers' epistemologies. Part 2 'Professional Development and Reflections on Applied Epistemologies' looks at how various interventions might influence teachers' epistemological beliefs. Part 3 'Reflections on Measurements and Instruments' is an overview of research regarding how epistemological beliefs and epistemic cognition are measured. A range of contexts are discussed, including Sweden, South Africa, the Netherlands, Canada, Turkey, Czech Republic, Taiwan and Norway.

Many, if not most of the chapters in this edited volume refer to the three-level-model of copier, borrower, criterialist epistemic stances developed by Maggioni (2010), and which Maggioni herself reflects on in Chapter 13. Within this model, a person taking a copier stance believes that history provides a copy of the past and that history is, therefore, fixed. A person taking the borrower stance would consider history to be subjective and borrow sources that fit their own view of a valid narrative. Lastly, a person holding a criterialist stance would see history as interpretative and would use disciplinary criteria to establish

valid narratives. Implied within this model is 1) that the purpose of history education is to move students from a copier to a criterialist stance, and 2) that history teachers who themselves have a criterialist stance will be best positioned to do this.

However, while working with reference to Maggioni's model, the authors within this edited volume make different assumptions regarding how teachers—as historians and pedagogues—make sense of knowledge and knowledge claims. One of the most interesting differences in authors' assumptions is whether the frequently observed inconsistencies in teachers' epistemological beliefs are unintentional 'wobbles' or intentional 'codeswitching', and related to this, whether inconsistency is a problem we should be concerned with.

Maggioni, in Chapter 13 for example, argues that fostering a consistent criterialist stance among both teachers and students is important, even if this causes emotional distress and ruptures long-held beliefs or narratives. In contrast, in Chapter 2, Parkes sees inconsistency as a form of "*epistemic fluency*" (p.23), what the author describes as the ability to be flexible and adept with respect to different ways of knowing. Parkes makes a persuasive argument that epistemic reasoning—for example, one's causal beliefs—are shaped by our epistemic communities, and may thus change depending on the community an individual is in. Curricula themselves might constitute a form of epistemic community, which teachers reason in relation to. According to Parkes, teachers should be encouraged to develop epistemic fluency rather than consistency, "*so that the formal and practical epistemologies they adopt are not simply the artefacts of fate, but become resources with which to explore historical discourse in the classroom, with critical insight, and empathy, arising as a result of the historical (self) consciousness*" (p. 35). Indeed, if Parkes is taken seriously, the project of attempting to measure static epistemic stances or identities requires reconsideration. Nitsche attempts this reconsideration in Chapter 14.

Two chapters (4 and 5) of particular interest for readers of *Yesterday & Today* are those drawing on data from South Africa. Both chapters contribute to the question of whether a consistent criterialist stance is desirable. In Chapter 4 for example, Wassermann and Angier discuss the "*epistemic battleground*" (p. 65) of historically White institutions, which are training future history teachers in a time of acute historical revisionism. The history teacher trainees these authors interviewed largely rejected the cognitive, 'disciplinary', epistemological orientation of the school history curriculum they had been taught. The authors were instead motivated by a history education that would facilitate a personal connection with the past and promote African history and perspective. According to Maggioni's model, these teachers might be accused of adopting a borrower stance, which

selects sources to support a desired narrative. In the context of South Africa, however, where a 'settler grammar' posing as disciplinary history has justified a curriculum disconnected from most people's lives, an emphasis on narrative, rather than evidence is perhaps understandable.

In Chapter 5, Sarah Godsell similarly interviewed pre-service teachers and explored how their epistemic stances change according to context. Mostly, the pre-service teachers adopted a criterialist stance, however, when teaching about Apartheid they latched onto the phrase 'both sides of the story' as a good and necessary position for any history teacher. Within this 'both sides' approach, pre-service teachers favoured a narrative which claimed that not all Black people were victims during apartheid and not all White people were perpetrators. As Godsell points out, this narrative—while evidenced in small ways—is not representative of the larger evidentiary-based history, and renders both the present and the history nonsensical. Yet, for the pre-service teachers, the 'balanced', 'neutral' narrative (reflective of the borrower stance) provided them with some respite from the emotions and painful micro-social negotiations that are involved in teaching history in a South African context. As one of the pre-service teachers explained, "*we don't want to rile our students up because of the emotional nature of the work*" (p. 88).

The two chapters (4 and 5) from South Africa make a challenging and provocative contribution to this edited volume for two reasons: First, they suggest that a teachers' capacity for epistemic reasoning is not indicative of what a teacher *chooses* to do in a classroom. Second, they explore how epistemic stances are negotiated in history classrooms where multiple factors interact, including the relationship between students, the emotions of the teacher, and the political objectives of history education as a project. When considering these contributions, I particularly enjoyed Zanazanian's reflections in the concluding chapter of this edited volume. Zanazanian—himself a scholar of historical consciousness—challenges history education researchers to reflect on their own overreliance on history-as-discipline for viewing history and how it should be taught. Instead, he asks us to consider whether teachers' switching and wobbling epistemic stances could be better understood from the perspective of the overarching presence of their lived and embodied histories. In this regard, South Africa with its ever-present past, has much to offer the study of the epistemology of history.