

## An Updated Theoretical and Practical Model for Promoting Historical Empathy

Jason Endacott  
*University of Arkansas*

Sarah Brooks  
*Elmhurst College*

---

*Over the past two decades significant attention has been given to the topic of historical empathy, yet the manner in which historical empathy is currently defined, operationalized, and put into classroom practice lacks consistency and often is based on dated conceptualizations of the construct. Scholars have employed a variety of theoretical and practical approaches to utilizing historical empathy with students, leading to persistent confusion about the nature, purpose and fostering of historical empathy. Our goal is to present an updated conceptualization that clearly defines historical empathy as a dual-dimensional, cognitive-affective construct and differentiates historical empathy from exclusively cognitive or affective modes of historical inquiry. We further provide an updated instructional model for the promotion of historical empathy that includes consideration for historical empathy's proximate and ultimate goals. We aim to highlight where research has produced some consensus on best practice for promoting empathy and where further study is needed.*

*Key Words:* historical empathy, affective engagement, perspective recognition, historical inquiry, theoretical model, instructional model

### Introduction

Historical empathy is the process of students' cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions. Historical empathy involves understanding how people from the past thought, felt, made decisions, acted, and faced consequences within a specific historical and social context. Over the past two decades, the fostering and display of historical empathy has received significant attention by scholars concerned with the teaching and learning of history in Kindergarten-12 classrooms. Various authors have attempted to define precisely what historical empathy is and identify what it looks like when demonstrated by students (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Blake, 1998; Bryant & Clark, 2006; Dulberg, 2002; Endacott, 2010; Foster & Yeager, 1998; Foster, 1999; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Riley, 1998; Stern, 1998; VanSledright, 2001). Numerous researchers, meanwhile, have focused their energies on demonstrating how various instructional methods and strategies might be used to promote historical empathy or elements of it (Brooks, 2008; Colby, 2008; D'Adamo & Fallace, 2011; Davis, 2001; Doppen, 2000; Endacott, 2010; Grant, 2001; Jensen, 2008; Kohlmeier, 2006; Yeager et al., 1998). Other scholars have theorized about or sought to demonstrate how historical empathy leads to positive outcomes within and beyond the history classroom (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brooks, 2011; Gehlbach, 2004; Kohlmeier, 2006).

Scholars have employed different, and in some cases competing, theoretical and practical approaches to utilizing historical empathy with students, leading to persistent confusion about

the form and fostering of historical empathy. Over a decade has passed since Stuart Foster (2001) referred to historical empathy as a “problematic and contested term” (p. 167), yet current references to historical empathy are arguably just as problematic and contested. The manner in which historical empathy is defined, operationalized and put into classroom practice lacks consistency and is often based on dated conceptualizations of the construct. It is for this reason that we enter the fray with the express purpose of synthesizing the related scholarship in order to present (1) an updated dual-dimensional cognitive-affective conceptualization of historical empathy that differentiates historical empathy from exclusively cognitive or affective modes of inquiry, and (2) a corresponding instructional model for cultivating historical empathy through historical contextualization, cognitive perspective taking, and affective connection to historical figures.

### **An Updated Conceptualization of Historical Empathy**

Many early researchers characterized historical empathy as a primarily cognitive construct (e.g. Foster, 1999) and, as a result, much of the early research into historical empathy was based on the assumption that historical empathy is roughly equivalent to the cognitive act of perspective taking (e.g. Doppen, 2000). More recent research (Brooks, 2011; Endacott, 2011; Kohlmeier, 2006; Stoddard, 2008) suggests that historical empathy is more fully realized as a dual-domain construct, one in which the historical investigator both examines the thoughts of historical figures and connects with the affective dimensions of their situations. Aware of these competing conceptualizations, many scholars have substituted terms such as “perspective taking” (Doppen, 2000; Dulberg, 2002; Gehlbach, 2004), “perspective recognition” (Barton & Levstik, 2004) or “rational understanding” (Lee & Ashby, 2001) when explicitly referring to the cognitive aspect of historical empathy. We find these substitutions to be problematic in cases where these terms are used synonymously or interchangeably with “historical empathy.” The exclusively cognitive act of perspective taking is not historical empathy, though we submit that perspective taking is certainly one very indispensable aspect of historical empathy.

Among social psychologists, the dual-dimensional cognitive-affective nature of empathy is widely accepted. Engaging in empathy with our contemporaries in the here-and-now involves an affective connection to the situation faced by another person, which is shaped by our cognitive understanding of the person’s perspective and the extenuating circumstances surrounding it (Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 1984). The people we empathize with every day are dealing with simultaneous cognitive and affective reactions to the situations they face. Our connection with them, in turn, also must span both of these domains if we are to better understand their condition. We try to understand how they are thinking, how they might be feeling, and how these two elements might shape their response to the situation they are facing.

Historical empathy requires one to discern the difference between life in the present and life in a distant past while maintaining the possibility that past perspectives hold some validity (Barton & Levstik, 2004); this can only be accomplished through a cognitive-affective approach. Consider attempts to understand the seemingly irrational, such as 17th century peoples’ belief in witches or General George Pickett’s decision to continue charging Cemetery Ridge (Stewart, 1987). If students examine such situations from a purely cognitive standpoint, why wouldn’t they consider themselves superior to people of the past since rational people are better than irrational people? If asked only to apply logic or reason when exploring historical figures, then

students are at a disadvantage when trying to understand people who were influenced by concerns such as pride, fear, love, hate, desperation, or greed.

In order to display historical empathy, students must alternate between focusing on the other as they recognize what another person was likely to be feeling in a given situation and focusing on the self as they are reminded of a similar experience in their own lives that caused a similar affective response. The process of forming affective connections to the past enables students to view historical figures as human beings who faced very human experiences and leads to a richer understanding than perspective taking alone. Humans often face circumstances in which placing equal weight on cognitive and affective considerations is not possible or even desired. By connecting to the likely affective responses of historical figures, students can make better sense of situations in which one domain held a greater influence over the historical figure's experience. Affective connection to another human's situation does not make a Puritan's belief in witches or Pickett's decision to charge reasonable, but it can make such historical ideas, beliefs, and decisions more comprehensible. Failure to purposefully investigate the possible impact of affective forces on the lived experiences and actions of historical figures puts students at greater risk of either jumping to presentist conclusions (Wineburg, 2001) or engaging in "egoistic drift" by inserting their own affective positionalities into the historical figure's situation (Endacott, 2010).

We propose a theoretical conceptualization of historical empathy that is closer to the commonly accepted psychological dual-dimensional conceptualization of empathy than history educators have previously claimed. Of course, historical empathy will always remain qualitatively different from contemporary empathy in that historical empathy involves people from the past who likely utilized different ways of thinking that were dependent upon the political, social, and cultural context of a different time and place. Historical empathy therefore requires the following three interrelated and interdependent endeavors (see Figure 1):

- **Historical Contextualization** — a temporal sense of difference that includes deep understanding of the social, political, and cultural norms of the time period under investigation as well as knowledge of the events leading up to the historical situation and other relevant events that are happening concurrently.
- **Perspective Taking** — understanding of another's prior lived experience, principles, positions, attitudes, and beliefs in order to understand how that person might have thought about the situation in question.
- **Affective Connection** — consideration for how historical figures' lived experiences, situations, or actions may have been influenced by their affective response based on a connection made to one's own similar yet different life experiences.

Considered independently, each of these endeavors are worthwhile and educative. Combining these elements can provide for a more powerful experience. As mentioned previously, many teachers and researchers have recognized the power of combining historical contextualization with the cognitive act of perspective taking, while others have explored the benefits of exploring students' affective connection to history (e.g. Rosenzweig & Thelen, 2000). We believe that a deeper and more holistic understanding of the past can result from the concurrent use of all three of these aspects. Further, we contend that any attempt at "historical empathy" must include historical contextualization, perspective taking, and affective connection. Historical inquiry not

encompassing all three of these aspects may be accurately described as “historical perspective taking” or “affective connection to history,” but cannot be called “historical empathy.”

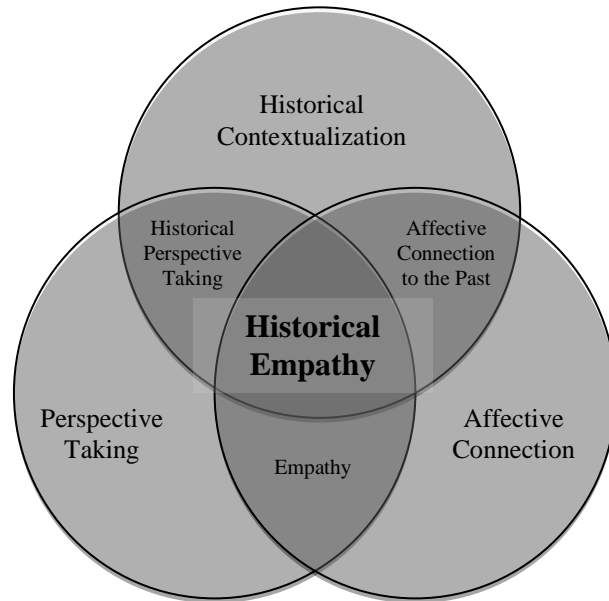


Figure 1: Visual Conceptualization of Historical Empathy

The development of dual-dimensional historical empathy has the potential to promote both proximate goals (i.e. those that are related to immediate curricular objectives in the classroom) and ultimate goals (i.e. those that deal with understandings, skills, and dispositions that an individual might benefit from for a lifetime). Much of the research on historical empathy to this point has focused on the ways in which it might support proximate goals. The majority of studies have shown how different exercises aimed at fostering historical empathy have helped students recognize past perspectives and situate these sufficiently in a historical context (Brooks, 2008; Davis, 2001; Doppen, 2000; Endacott, 2010; Grant, 2001; Jensen, 2008; Kohlmeier, 2006; Yeager et al., 1998). When the affective component of historical empathy has been emphasized and examined, students have demonstrated various forms of care for the subjects of their study, thereby increasing their interest in history (Barton & Levstik, 2004). At times students appear deeply moved by or drawn to a historical topic and this leads to active engagement with course content (Endacott, 2010; Kohlmeier, 2006). Such findings demonstrate how historical empathy can further immediate social studies curricular aims: active student engagement with, and deep understanding of, historical content.

In addition to proximate benefits, we contend that dual-dimensional historical empathy can engender broader understandings, skills, and dispositions that might impact the entirety of a student’s life. To begin, exercises in historical empathy help students understand the complexity of idea formation, decision-making, and acting (Doppen, 2000; Endacott, 2010; Foster, 1999). Students who attempt to empathize with an 18th century argument for slave holding or a U.S. President’s decision to go to war are invited to think about just how many factors can influence a given perspective. They also have the opportunity to consider the ways in which individual perspectives are rooted in the social, political, economic, and cultural context of the time. The

ultimate goal in promoting such thinking is to help students understand that all perspectives often are the products of a multitude of variables and to “recognize that our own are just as much the result of context” (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 219). This understanding puts students in an advantageous position to analyze and evaluate their own beliefs and actions and those of others they encounter in the present.

Exercises in historical empathy also can help students learn to establish connections between the past and the present, a skill that could benefit them for a lifetime. In her study on the use of lecture to foster historical empathy, Sarah Brooks (2011) found that students who were encouraged by their teacher to draw parallels between historic events and present-day affairs, were able to see aspects of the past and present as analogous and thereby better understand their current world. In other cases, historical empathy helps students find antecedents to present day perspectives and practices. In Brooks’ study, a teacher invited her students to empathize with notions about the middle class that were beginning to form in 19th century Western Europe. She wanted her students to see the roots of current beliefs about the middle class in these ideas. Here again, historical empathy enabled students to connect the past and the present and thereby better understand the context that influences their thoughts and actions.

Finally, historical empathy can ultimately promote a dispositional appreciation for the complexity of situations faced by people in the past and the need to act for the good of others. Exercises in historical empathy invite students to form moral judgments about the past when teachers expect students to learn something from the past that helps them face the ethical issues of today (Levstik & Barton, 2011). For students, notions of justice are often partisan concerns that are based upon contemporary positions and concerns (Barton, 2005), which makes temporal considerations of historical empathy all that more important. Students who attempt to empathize with the lived experiences of women at the Seneca Falls Convention or Jamestown settlers or victims of the Holocaust are invited to form their own opinions about historic perspectives and actions. The ultimate purpose in promoting such moral responses is to foster a desire to prevent similar wrongs or to perpetuate similar rights in the present. As a cognitive and affective endeavor, historical empathy can help students develop a stronger awareness of needs around them and a sense of agency to respond to these needs.

### **When is it Appropriate to Promote Historical Empathy in the Classroom?**

It is important that practitioners carefully evaluate the available historical evidence and the abilities and dispositions of their students as well as the nature of the historical content to be studied in order to determine if historical empathy is appropriate for a given instructional situation. The availability and suitability of primary and secondary historical evidence must be sufficient to support historical contextualization, perspective taking, and affective connections. In the following section, we expand on the type of source material that is best suited to these tasks and how this evidence might be used to encourage historical empathy.

In addition to having a solid cache of source material, teachers should consider their students’ abilities and dispositions for connecting with the cognitive and affective dimensions of a particular historical figure’s situation or lived experience (Cunningham, 2007; Endacott, 2010). Students should be willing and able to think beyond their own positionalities in order to accept the perspectives of historical figures as valid (Barton & Levstik, 2004). They must be capable of understanding their own limitations in accepting these perspectives. Researchers have

demonstrated that, even in the elementary grades, students are developmentally capable of taking on the perspectives of others (Davis, 2001; Dulberg, 2002). At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that greater distances (in space, time, status, culture, etc.) between students and historical figures will present increased challenges to perspective taking. Teachers must purposefully encourage their students to be cognizant of these limitations and use them to their advantage when reflecting on their understanding of the past.

To engage in historical empathy, students must be able to find an affective connection between the experiences faced by historical figures and similar experiences in their own lives. As with perspective taking, there are limitations to this affective connection based on experience and difference. Those students who are incapable of moving beyond their own feelings or experiences in order to also focus on the experiences of others are hindered by a phenomenon known as “egoistic drift” (Endacott, 2010; Hoffman, 1984). It is also possible that the nature of the historical situation might have the opposite effect. If students are empathizing with historical figures who experienced particularly horrible or traumatic situations with drastic consequences they may actually sympathize rather than empathize with them. When students sympathize with others they feel *for* them rather than *with* them, thereby projecting their feelings of sorrow or compassion on another person instead of trying to understand them (Eisenberg, 2000).

### **An Updated Instructional Model of Historical Empathy**

In this section we present an updated model for the promotion of historical empathy that scaffolds student thinking through the process of engaging with people from the past and applying this understanding to the present. The model presented here includes: (1) an introductory phase designed to introduce the historical situation and/or the historical figure(s) with whom the students will engage in historical empathy, (2) an investigation phase in which students study primary and secondary source material in depth to develop a deeper understanding of historical context, historical perspective and related affective considerations, (3) a display phase in which students demonstrate the understanding they have developed, and (4) a reflection phase in which students are invited to make connections between the past and the present while considering how their personal views may have changed as a result of engaging in historical empathy. By identifying phases, we do not mean to imply that these four aspects of instruction for historical empathy must occur in isolation. Rather, we present these phases because doing so allows us to clarify the elements of instruction that should be included if historical empathy, and its potential benefits for students, is to be truly realized. Any of the four phases in isolation could be valuable to the learner but would not likely foster historical empathy as it is conceptualized in this paper.

#### **Introduction**

Opportunities for historical empathy can arise whenever there are historical situations or decisions that pique student interest. In order to engage in historical empathy, students need to explore historical context, historical perspectives and affective connections to the lived experiences of a historical figure or group of people. Because this is no small task, students must be prepared for and assisted in it. The introduction phase is relatively brief when compared to the later phases and can take many forms, but it should maintain the ultimate purpose of setting the scene and providing a lens through which the students will investigate the source material and media that follows. Given the wide range of historical situations and historical figures that

students might be asked to empathize with, the introduction to an exercise in historical empathy is largely dependent upon what the teacher determines the students *absolutely must have* in order to provide focus for the remaining phases. Without some sort of introduction to the process of historical empathy, students are likely to fail to appreciate that their task is to consider the historical evidence that follows from the position of another person who existed in a very different time.

With that in mind, the introductory phase frequently requires students to explore background historical context. A textbook reading or a documentary segment might be used to introduce students to a historical time, situation, or event (Brooks, 2008, 2011). Primary sources, such as statistics from national or regional polls, can offer students information about sentiments that predominated at a particular historical time. A chronological list of events or a timeline might help students visualize how a historical circumstance is a part of a broader chain of events (Doppen, 2000). When students are adequately introduced to historical context, the stage is set for an exploration of an individual’s thoughts and feelings grounded in an understanding of the social, political and cultural norms of the time period.

Useful background information could focus specifically on an individual to be studied. In one research tested example, Jason Endacott (2010) began his instructional units by providing students with personal information about the backgrounds, lived experiences, beliefs and principles of three historical figures — George Mason, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison — in order to give students a foundation from which to explore their situations in greater depth. This information allowed students to view these figures as humans and, in many cases, determine similarities between themselves and the subjects of their study.

Table 1 <i>Sample Questions for Introductory Activities for Historical Empathy</i>	
To consider personal similarities and differences between students and historical figures	Have you ever had to make a difficult decision? What made the decision difficult? How did you handle it? How do you think you are similar to or different from Susan B. Anthony? Do you think Harry Truman was the kind of person who would back down from a fight?” How would you describe the situation this historical figure faces? Have you ever been in a similar situation?
To draw attention to historical context	How was New England changing in the first half of the 19 <sup>th</sup> century? How was life in China after Mao similar to or different from life in America today? What are five key events that you think

	<p>led up to Protestant Reformation? How does this particular situation reflect what was going on in this society at that time?</p>
<p>To emphasize the importance of a historical situation</p>	<p>Why do you think we are going to spend three class periods studying the lives of mill workers? Why do you think it is important to think about what we might have in common with John Smith?</p>

An exercise in historical empathy alternatively might be introduced by having students reflect on prior experiences they have had that might connect to the content to be explored. In other words, an exercise in understanding President Jefferson’s difficult decision to make the Louisiana Purchase could be introduced by asking students to reflect on a difficult decision that they have had to make (Endacott, 2010). Students might begin a study of the lived experiences of American child laborers by recalling and describing a situation in which they personally felt they had little or no control. Prompts of this kind prepare students to utilize affective responses they have experienced in their own lives to inform their understanding of the lived experiences of historical figures. Whatever form the introductory activities take, their purpose is to ready students to grapple with historical perspectives that will likely differ from their own. This introduction is important to help students understand the significance of the related perspectives and circumstances to be explored. Finally, it is wise for teachers to share their objectives related to historical empathy with students. Students should know that the activities in which they are about to participate are aimed at understanding the thoughts and feelings of a historical person or persons and that this undertaking will hopefully help them better understand the world they live in today.

**Investigation**

Investigation activities aimed at historical empathy allow students to explore the nuances of historical context in depth as well as the thoughts and feelings of historical figures involved in particular situations and actions. Several studies have revealed that a variety of instructional resources and activities can promote this type of work; but primary source work is at its heart. Documentaries and feature films (Stoddard, 2008) as well as secondary texts (Brooks, 2011) have been effectively used to invite empathic responses from students. It is critical, however, that whenever possible, students view, touch, and read primary historical evidence concerning the perspectives with which they are to empathize.

Rarely can students examine all the available evidence related to a particular historical situation or action, so choices must be made about the sources that will best promote historical empathy. Several scholars have chronicled the implementation of different instructional units that each required students to examine an extensive collection of — in some cases 20 or more — primary sources (Brooks, 2008; Doppen, 2000; Endacott, 2010; Foster, 1999). Such a wide variety of sources is intended to provide ample information about the historical context and



varying entry points into the thoughts and feelings of historical figures. Typically, these sources are best excerpted and edited in order to allow students to efficiently work with a significant body of historical material and to focus their attention on relevant information.

One teacher explained that she purposefully selects visual and textual sources that enable her students to hear and see the people with whom she wants them to empathize (Brooks, 2011). To promote historical empathy for workers impacted by the Industrial Revolution in England, she gave students photographs of working class housing, large families doing piecework in their homes, and children laboring in factories and mines, as well as first-hand accounts of the hardships suffered by many workers. These sources prompted students to bring their own affective responses to personal situations to bear on their understanding of the lived experiences of workers in the context examined. Endacott (2010) found that primary sources such as journal entries and letters or speeches that originate from the historical figure can most effectively provide students with a sense for how historical figures thought and felt. Less can sometimes be more when selecting primary sources for investigative activities. When Jada Kohlmeier (2006) asked students to use a single, first-person narrative to examine the perspective of a historical figure, her students responded by displaying both the cognitive and affective dimensions of historical empathy. It should be noted that, in some cases, the available evidence related to a given historical event or situation does not provide much indication of the thoughts and feelings of individuals. Historical topics falling into this category are less suited to classroom-based exercises in historical empathy.

Whenever students are to work with primary sources, they need to consider basic sourcing questions (Foster, 1999). “Who created the document or artifact?” “When and why was it created?” “For whom?” “Under what circumstances?” Several studies additionally indicate that students benefit from questions specific to each historical source utilized (Doppen, 2000; Foster, 1999; Yeager et al., 1998). Brooks (2008) asked her students to work with a number of primary sources in order to empathize with a young woman’s decision to leave farm life for work in the mills in the mid 19th century. She devised questions for each document such as “What can you learn from this letter about the complaints Barilla had about boarding house life?” and “What about these advertisements might have been attractive to a young woman?” Such prompts ask students to closely examine historical sources and focus on the relevant information within them. Students should also ask questions of themselves regarding their own biases and positionalities as historical investigators (VanSledright, 2001). “How aware am I, and must I be, of the assumptions I am making?” “How can the evidence be assembled in different ways to help me best make sense of the larger context of the period in question?” Reflecting on their investigative process allows students to account for their own biases and perspectives that inevitably shape their conclusions about the past.

Research further suggests that essential questions can be used to encourage empathic engagement with historical persons. Overarching queries such as, “Why did young women choose to leave farm life to find work in the mills?” (Brooks, 2008) serve as a guide for all of the multi-lesson primary source work students engage in. When inviting her students to examine the perspectives of different historical women, Kohlmeier (2006) asked questions such as: “Was Magdalena happy?” “What would Irina consider the greatest contributing factor to her sufferings?” and “Will Ji Li be a true revolutionary?” Essential questions of this sort promote inferential thinking, as they do not have one right answer. They focus students on perspectives

and on the influence that emotions may have had on historical figures' lived experiences, situation or actions. At the same time, the teachers who took part in Deborah Cunningham's (2007) study found that poorly conceived, off-the-cuff questions, such as "What would you want to ask yourself to find out more about your life?" shifted students' attention away from trying to understand how the historical figure might have thought differently to wondering why the figure would ever find the need to ask themselves that particular question in the first place.

Questioning is best thought of as a premeditated act in as much as it is possible.

As has been previously stated, historical empathy requires students to situate their perspective recognition and affective connections in an understanding of historical context. Therefore, the investigation phase should include analysis of sources that shed light on the social, political and cultural norms of the time period. If significant attention is given to historical context in the introduction phase, then the questions that guide later investigation must push students to employ their understanding of context. For instance, as students analyze some of Harry Truman's personal correspondence in an attempt to understand his decision to use the atomic bomb, the following question might be posed: "How can the ideas and emotions Truman expresses in this letter be better understood in light of American public opinion about the Japanese at this time?" (Hint: Refer back to the 1945 poll results discussed in the previous class.)

Multiple studies have shown that primary source work can be quite rich when it involves discussion (Brooks, 2011; Doppen, 2000; Kohlmeier, 2006). When students are asked to consider questions in small groups or as a whole class, they are able to hear and respond to different ideas. If students discuss with each other the types of personal connections they are able to form to the experiences of past peoples, they then have a larger pool of affective responses to draw from in their attempts to empathize. Classroom discussion enables teachers to hear how students are thinking and feeling about the evidence at a formative stage. Kohlmeier (2006) found discussion exercises in historical empathy to be effective because she could "remind students of their prior knowledge of the time period, challenge their assumptions about the beliefs and practices of the historical figures, and assist them as they analyzed what information was important and what was inconsequential" (p. 40, 41). Similarly, in a case study conducted by Brooks (2011), an Advanced Placement (AP) European history teacher, used discussion as an opportunity to challenge her students to consider the legitimacy of very difficult historical perspectives by continually pushing for contextualization. Key to a meaningful discussion aimed at promoting historical empathy is a consistent emphasis on keeping all student ideas and reactions rooted in the available evidence.

Some teachers have taken a very active role in student investigations by supplementing written sources with oral and visual materials, providing vocabulary support, adjusting the amount of repetition for slower learners, providing more guidance or freedom where appropriate, and asking students to entertain various viewpoints through extra challenge questions (Cunningham, 2007). In research that examined a teacher who primarily utilized lecture as a mode of instruction to promote historical empathy (Brooks, 2011), it was discovered that lecture held unique affordances because it allowed the teacher to shape students' understanding of the multiplicity of perspectives, to make distinctions between historical perspectives, to respond to pejorative comments regarding the perspectives of others, to prompt students to consider the shared normalcy of perspectives, and to highlight the origins of modern perspectives by modeling contextualization of the present. Ultimately, the investigation phase, much like the

introductory phase, requires teachers to engage in an iterative process with their students in which they try to anticipate their needs ahead of time but are willing and able to adjust the investigation on the fly if need be.

Table 2

*Sample Questions for Investigation Activities for Historical Empathy*

<p>General Investigative Questions</p>	<p>What does this source tell you about how the historical figure may have <i>thought</i> about his/her situation?          How do you think the information in this source might have influenced the historical figure’s thinking?          What does this source tell you about how the historical figure may have <i>felt</i> about his/her situation?          Can you relate this feeling to something similar that you have faced in your own life? How were they same? Different?          Do you think we can really understand how the historical figure felt in this situation? Why? Why not?          What does this mean to you?          What do you think about this? Is it fair?</p>
<p>Document Specific Questions</p>	<p>What does this engraving suggest about medieval ideas about death?          What can you learn from this letter about Franklin Pierce’s beliefs about the Constitution?          What about this painting might move a colonist to support independence from England?          How do you think a woman living in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century would have reacted to this poster?</p>
<p>Essential Questions</p>	<p>Why were many American men and women resistant to extending the vote to women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century?          How did many Chinese citizens maintain support for Mao amidst the difficulties of the Cultural Revolution?</p>

### **Display**

Exercises in historical empathy must make space for students to utilize and synthesize their knowledge of historical context and perspectives and their affective connections to the past. Once students have been acquainted with a historical situation and figure(s) in the introduction phase, they should now be given opportunity to formally display the empathy they have been working at. Display activities frequently return to an essential question previewed in the introduction phase and used to guide the investigation of historical evidence. Opportunities to display empathy allow students to draw their own conclusions or make their own historical argument about a past experience, belief, decision, or action. Productive display exercises require students to contextualize their claims by rooting them in available evidence, and discourage them from ignoring the legitimacy of past perspectives or imposing their own positionalities on historical figures.

Students have most commonly been asked to display historical empathy through writing. Third person essay assignments, structured around questions that invite attention to historical thoughts and feelings, are the most traditional manner in which students can display empathy (Foster, 1999; Doppen, 2000). First person writing assignments are popular because they provide an easy forum in which students can express what they believe a historical figure would have thought and felt about a situation (Endacott, 2010; Skolnick, Dulberg & Maestra, 2004). Studies, however, have shown that first person writing assignments may tempt students to stray from the evidence and simply imagine how they might have felt in the historical situation under question (Brooks, 2008). Studies indicate that historical essay writing can encourage students to make factually accurate claims that are supported by historical evidence (Brooks, 2008; Kohlmeier, 2006). At the same time, these assignments are limited by students' ability to communicate using the written word, which may discourage the inferential thinking and attention to affective concerns that historical empathy requires (Brooks, 2008).

Alternatives to the written historical argument may be more appropriate for some students. High school students were asked by Franz Doppen (2000) to display historical empathy for President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb through the creation of a museum display. He suggests that students may benefit from initial modeling on the part of the teacher as to how to effectively display multiple perspectives, because while students appeared to enjoy the assignment, they struggled to "transfer their acquisition of multiple perspectives to a museum display" (p. 165). In a structured a debate in which her students were expected to represent, and argue from, the perspective of a particular group associated with American westward expansion, Jill Jensen (2008) posed the following questions: "Was life harder for American women in the east or the west?" "Did the benefits of moving a family out west outweigh the dangers?" "Did the land out west belong to the Native Americans or the settlers?" The role-playing debate was found to help students distinguish between different historical perspectives. Much like first person narrative assignments, role-play activities sometimes encourage presentist claims about the past because they place students directly in the role of the historical figure. Jensen (2008) writes that the debates allowed her to "see where misunderstandings lie, so that I could go back and re-teach" (p. 64). To this point, researchers have not investigated how assignments such as museum exhibits and role-playing debates influence students' display of the affective dimension of historical empathy.

Additional instructional activities that are potentially well suited to the display of historical empathy are described by Levstik and Barton (2011) as they require students to demonstrate their understanding of historical situations from the perspectives of individuals. Poetry assignments, such as “I Am” poems or biographical poems, invite students to explain what a historical figure might have experienced, felt, aspired to, believed in, etc., using specific prompts. Historical roundtables and similar role playing activities such as “Hot Seat,” require students to take on the roles of specific individuals from a particular historical situation or era, while other students act as the reporters who interview their classmates. Students are expected to represent goals that motivated the historical figures they personify. While these activities may be appropriate for the display of historical empathy, research is yet needed to determine the effect they actually have on students’ demonstration of historical empathy as a cognitive and affective endeavor.

### **Reflection**

Many exercises aimed at promoting historical empathy conclude after students have participated in a display activity and demonstrated mastery of historical empathy’s proximate goal of curricular content acquisition. We contend that one final phase is necessary if the ultimate benefits of a dual-dimensional historical empathy — the understandings, skills, and dispositions discussed above — are to be realized. Students must be guided through the process of using their understanding of the past to inform their thoughts, emotions, and actions in the present. One ultimate goal of historical empathy is for students to understand that both past and present ideas are the product of historical context. So, for instance, as a follow up to studying the experience of Chinese immigrants to America in the 19th century, students might be invited to consider how current opinions about immigration to the United States are a reflection of historical context. The goal would be to emphasize how a personal opinion can be the product of any number of influences outside of the individual. The aim is to have students learn to analyze these influences in order to better weigh the relative merit of the perspectives in question.

Reflection activities can focus students on finding situations in the past that are similar to, and therefore might help explain, circumstances in the present. In one case study, after a lively classroom debate about Napoleon and his supporters and detractors, the teacher simply posed the question: “Do you think that there are societies or places that are going through this type of debate, this type of struggle—a Napoleon vs. chaos? Is this a dilemma that still faces people today?” (Brooks, 2011, p. 183) As a result, her students were challenged to, and did, draw meaningful parallels between the past and the present. As long as oversimplified analogies are avoided through attention to context, students can productively use their historical empathy in this way to shape their understanding of the present.

Finally, reflection activities should invite students to form opinions about the historical perspectives, feelings, actions, and circumstances they have closely examined. Historical empathy does not require relativism. Rather, students should be encouraged to make moral judgments about aspects of the past and invited to channel such opinions toward action in the present (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Why else would students be asked to examine the lived experience of an American slave if not to feel disdain for the practice and a desire to prevent similar acts of injustice from occurring in the present? Similarly, historical empathy allows students to see how historical figures, often very normal people like themselves, were agents of positive change. In some cases, students spontaneously react to historical content in ways that

can fuel reflection, and teachers should be prepared to respond to these opportunities. At the same time, teachers cannot expect students to make moral decisions about the past and think about their ramifications in the present without guidance. Educators should make deliberate space for students to express their reactions to historical content, to make moral judgments, and to use these responses to motivate actions in the present. Reflection activities should prompt students to develop a stronger awareness of needs around them and a sense of agency to respond to these needs. Unfortunately, despite the critical importance of concluding exercises in historical empathy by connecting to present day and personal concerns, little empirical research has focused specifically on how teachers can and do create such opportunities for reflection.

Table 3

*Sample Questions for Reflection Activities for Historical Empathy*

<p>To invite reflection on the context of present perspectives</p>	<p>How has the Vietnam War shaped the way Americans think about war today? How are the perspectives of people in the past similar or different from the perspectives we hold today? What are the factors that influence these differences? How has our view of this historical situation changed over time?</p>
<p>To consider parallels between the past and the present</p>	<p>How are 19<sup>th</sup> century explanations for poverty similar to or different from how we understand the causes of poverty today? How might this event have been different if it had happened today? Do you think anyone is experiencing a circumstance like this historical character today?</p>
<p>To invite moral judgments and a disposition to act for the good of others</p>	<p>Do you believe that Truman was right in deciding to drop two atomic bombs? Why or why not? What aspect of this unit was the most difficult for you to deal with? Why is it important to study the lives of people who lived in the past? How can that change the way we see people today? How do we determine what was right or wrong in the past? Can something be</p>

---

	right in the past and wrong in the present? How can your knowledge of this historical figure's situation inform or change your view of the world today?
--	--

### Conclusion

The history education community needs to move past the problematic and contested use of historical empathy in order to fully realize its potential for deepening students' understanding of the past and the present. If this is to happen, both scholars and teachers must incorporate research-based conceptualizations and classroom tested strategies. While we would never disparage any attempt to engage students in historical inquiry that is exclusively cognitive or affective, we also strongly believe that historical inquiry that is not dual-dimensional is not historical empathy. Historical empathy relies upon the tried and true methods of historical investigation that include source analysis and reasoned judgment. The affective domain, however, provides another universally human dimension with which students can engage. Classroom-based exercises in historical empathy are by necessity both a teacher and student driven endeavor. Teachers must decide when and how historical empathy can be utilized, while shaping the exercise with the sources and questions they provide. Meanwhile, students construct their understanding of historical situations and figures through their own interpretations of evidence, appreciation of relatable life experiences, and interaction with their peers.

We conclude with an invitation. We call upon the history education research community to abandon dated and limited conceptualizations of historical empathy. Future research concerned with historical empathy as a dual-dimensional construct would do well to focus on the affordances and constraints of alternative activities for the display of empathy. Only a small subset of potential display activities have been examined, and most of these studies have not given any attention to the affective dimension of historical empathy. There is considerable need for scholarly attention to historical empathy's ultimate dispositional benefits. If these benefits are to be better understood, classroom teachers need to experiment in what is largely uncharted territory. Researchers need to carefully study the ways in which teachers can and do invite their students to use historical empathy to shape their understanding of themselves and the world around them. Likewise, there is a need for analysis of students' responses to these efforts. We are hopeful that future research which draws on an updated, research-based conceptualization of historical empathy will unpack the exciting potential that this endeavor has to influence students' thoughts, feelings, and actions.

### References

- Barton, K. C. (2005). Best not to forget them: Positionality and students' ideas about historical significance in Northern Ireland. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 33(1), 9-44.
- Barton, K., & Levstik, L. (2004). *Teaching history for the common good*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Blake, C. (1998). Historical empathy: A response to Foster and Yeager. *International Journal of Social Education*, 13(1), 25-31.
- Brooks, S. (2008). Displaying historical empathy: What impact can a writing assignment have? *Social Studies: Research and Practice*, 3(2), 130-146.
- Brooks, S. (2011). Historical empathy as perspective recognition and care in one secondary social studies classroom. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 39(2), 166-202.
- Bryant, D. & Clark, P. (2006). Historical empathy and Canada: "A people's history". *Canadian Journal of Education*, 29(4), 1039-1063.
- Colby, S. R. (2008). Energizing the history classroom: historical narrative inquiry and historical empathy. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 3(3), 60-78.
- Cunningham, D. L. (2007). Understanding pedagogical reasoning in history teaching through the case of cultivating empathy. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 35(4), 592-630.
- D'Adamo, L., & Fallace, T. (2011). The multigenre research project: An approach to developing historical empathy. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 6(1), 75-88.
- Davis, O. (2001). In pursuit of historical empathy. In O. Davis, Yeager, E., & Foster, S. (Eds.), *Historical empathy and perspective taking in the social studies* (pp. 1-12). New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Doppen, F. (2000). Teaching and learning multiple perspectives: The atomic bomb. *The Social Studies*, 91, 159-169.
- Dulberg, N. (2002). Engaging in history: Empathy and perspective-taking in children's historical thinking. *Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*. New Orleans, LA, April 1-5, 2002
- Eisenberg, N. (2000). Empathy. In K. E. Alan (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of psychology* (Vol. 3) (pp. 179-182). Washington, D.C.
- Endacott, J. L. (2010). Reconsidering affective engagement in historical empathy. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 38(1), 6-49.
- Foster, S. (1999). Using historical empathy to excite students about the study of history: Can you empathize with Neville Chamberlain? *The Social Studies*, 90(1), 18-24.
- Foster, S. J., & Yeager, E. A. (1998). The role of empathy in the development of historical understanding. *International Journal of Social Education*, 13(1), 1-7.
- Foster, S. 2001. Historical empathy in theory and practice: Some final thoughts. In O. Davis, E. Yeager, & S. Foster (Eds.), *Historical empathy and perspective taking in the social studies* (pp. 167-182). New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Gehlbach, H. (2004). Social perspective taking: A facilitating aptitude for conflict resolution, historical empathy, and social studies achievement. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 32(1), 39-55.



- Grant, S.G. (2001). It's just the facts, or is it? The relationship between teachers' practices and students' understanding of history. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, 29(4), 63-108.
- Hoffman, M. L. (1984). Interaction of affect and cognition in empathy. In C. E. Izard, J. Kagan, & R. B. Zajonc (Eds.), *Emotions, cognition and behavior* (pp. 103-131). Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.
- Jensen, J. (2008). Developing historical empathy through debate: An action research study. . *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 3(1), 55-66.
- Kohlmeier, J. (2006). "Couldn't she just leave?": The relationship between consistently using class discussions and the development of historical empathy in a 9th grade world history course. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 34(1), 34-57.
- Lee, P., & Ashby, R. (2001). Empathy, perspective taking, and rational understanding. In O. L. Davis, E. Yeager, & S. Foster (Eds.), *Historical empathy and perspective taking in the social studies* (pp. 21-50). New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Levstik, L. S. & Barton, K. C. (2011). (4th ed.). *Doing history: Investigating with children in elementary and middle schools*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Riley, K. L. (1998). Historical empathy and the Holocaust: Theory into practice. *International Journal of Social Education*, 13(1), 32-42.
- Rosenzweig, R. and Thelen, D. (1998). *The presence of the past*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Skolnick, J., Dulberg, N., & Maestre, T. (2004). *Through other eyes: Developing empathy and multicultural perspectives in the social studies* (2nd ed.). Toronto, Ontario: Pippin.
- Stern, B. S. (1998). Addressing the concept of historical empathy: Wit Frauen: German women recall the Third Reich. *International Journal of Social Education*, 13(1), 43-48.
- Stewart, G. R. (1987). *Pickett's charge: A microhistory of the final attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Stoddard, J. (2008). Attempting to understand the lives of others: Film as a tool for developing historical empathy. In A. Marcus (Ed.) *Celluloid blackboard: Teaching history with film*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- VanSledright, B. (2001). From Empathetic Regard to Self-Understanding: Im/Positionality, Empathy, and Historical Contextualization. In O. Davis, Yeager, E., and Foster, S. (Eds.), *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies* (pp. 51-68). New York, NY: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Wineburg, S. (2001). *Historical thinking and other unnatural acts*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Yeager, E. A., Foster, S. J., Maley, S. D., Anderson, T. & Morris III, J. W. (1998). Why people in the past acted as they did: An exploratory study in historical empathy. *International Journal of Social Education*, 13(1), 8-24.

**Authors' Bio**

**Jason Endacott** is Assistant Professor of Secondary Social Studies Education at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, Arkansas. His research interests include historical empathy and the integration of art into student investigation and display of historical knowledge. He teaches graduate courses in social studies education, teacher research, and content area literacy. E-mail: jendacot@uark.edu

**Sarah Brooks** is Assistant Professor of Education at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois, with research interests related to the teaching and learning of history in K-12 classrooms. She teaches undergraduate methods courses and maintains a particular interest in middle level, social studies education.