

History and the Past: Towards a Measure of “Everyman’s” Epistemology¹
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I. Introduction

It is a commonplace that the word “history” in the English language, unlike its counterparts in German among many others, refers both to the past itself, that is, what happened, and to the stories, representations, and other claims that we make about the past. In this circumstance of the English language lies the central epistemological problem of the discipline: what is the relationship between the vast, inchoate, unorganized mass of “what happened,” and what we have to say about it. The problem is complicated by the fact that as soon as we start using language (or pictures or other symbols) to talk about “the past,” it is already on its way to becoming “history.” In this sense, the past is gone; all we have in the present is history (Lowenthal 1985)

There is a massive body of work exploring this problem in the philosophy of history, some done by historians, some by philosophers (and much by historians and literary critics trying to be philosophers (see Appleby, Hunt & Jacob 1994; Fay, Pomper & Vann 1998). Recently, following a trajectory which traces its roots to French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs (1925) and German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (1987), but which was also suggested by Carl Becker’s “Everyman his own historian” (1933), studies in collective memory and historical consciousness have attempted to probe how other people—those without formal training in history or philosophy—understand and use the past in their everyday lives. Much of this work has involved re-interpreting sites of memory, probing the changing representations embodied in memorials, monuments, museums, and school textbooks, for example. A related line of work examines the ideas of those who visit the Vietnam Memorial, tour the Canadian War Museum, read the school textbooks, research a family tree, or re-enact a medieval banquet, to see what *they* think they are doing.

Exemplary among the latter is Rosenzweig and Thelen’s (1998) study, using interviews with about 800 American adults, plus three special samples of 200 African Americans, Sioux Indians, and Mexican Americans, as a basis for exploring Americans’ interests and involvements in the past (see also Rosenzweig 2000). Rosenzweig and Thelen systematically avoided the term “history.” They assumed that it would be associated with the school subject and alienate their respondents with the ghosts of memorized dates,

¹. This paper is based in the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s Community-University Research Alliance project entitled, “Canadians and Their Pasts,” Jocelyn Létourneau, principal investigator, with the authors, Margaret Conrad, Gerald Friesen and Delphin Muise, co-investigators.

boring teachers, musty professors, and dusty archives. In their effort to demonstrate what they called Americans' "connection" to the past, they avoided "history's" connotations of distance, personal irrelevance and academic expertise.

In adopting this trajectory, as pointed out by Michael Kammen (2000), they largely sidestepped the epistemological problem posed by "history" and "the past." The broad sweep of "the past" to which they sought Americans' "connection" made no distinctions among myth, legend, heritage and history. As Kammen put it, "they substituted a seemingly innocuous phrase, 'the past,' and then permitted a very wide array of warm and fuzzy past-oriented activities to qualify as history ..." (p.233)

In a large-scale Canadian study, which in some ways replicates the American study, we wanted to take direct aim at this problem: the relationship between "history" and "the past" in the Canadian popular imagination. But direct aim is not easy with a research question of this kind. Is there a way to ascertain, empirically, how Canadians understand the difference between "history" and "the past"? On one level, this is a relatively simple semantic problem: how do people—beyond the academy—understand the two terms? But it is also an entry into the much bigger question, indeed the central question of historical epistemology in respect to public history: in what ways do people understand the problem of knowing the past?

II. The telephone survey

We worked in partnership with the Institute for Social Research at York University (<http://www.yorku.ca/isr/>) to conduct telephone interviews of a national sample of Canadian adults, stratified by five regions. We developed and then refined a survey using pre-tests from September 2006 to March 2007 and cognitive testing with a series of "think-aloud" groups with selected respondents. The final product includes both closed and digitally recorded open-ended questions. Question #1 asks, "In general, how interested are you in [history]?" and offers choices from "very" to "not at all." For a randomly generated third of the sample, "history" was replaced by "the past," and for the final third, by "history and the past." Questions #2 and #3 ask about interest in "your family's [history]" and "Canada's [history]," using the same sampling strategy. Other sections of the survey ask about participation in activities related to the past, the nature of their understanding of the past, the trustworthiness of various sources of knowledge about the past, and the importance of various aspects of the past. In a final section of the survey, another question returns to the strategy of dividing the sample into thirds.

Please tell us which of the following two statements comes CLOSEST to describing you?

One: you think about [history] as part of your everyday life; OR

Two: you mostly think about [history] when you go to museums or see a documentary and so on.

At the time of writing, we had completed a nationally representative sample of 2,003 interviews, with a response rate of approximately 50%.² Some of the questions in the survey involved open-ended responses to questions by the respondents. A sub-sample of 202 of the respondents' open-ended responses was transcribed at the time of the writing of this paper. Both the national sample of 2003 cases and the sub-sample of 202 with transcribed open-ended responses are used as data in this paper. (See Appendix I for the relationship between the national sample of 2003 and the sub-sample of 202.)

III. The empirical evidence: history and the past

Rosenzweig and Thelen claim empirical evidence for their hunch that people would respond differently to “the past” and “history.”

...extensive piloting and pretesting taught us two crucial lessons...we had to ask people about “the past” and not just about “history.” Our pilot survey showed that three quarters of those we interviewed thought of “the past” and “history” as different concepts, with most people defining the past in more inclusive terms and history as something more formal, analytical, official, or distant.(Appendix 1, p. 210)

As can be seen from the tables below, the data from our telephone surveys revealed no statistically significant differences among responses of the three groups who were asked the questions in the three wording variations, “past”, “history”, and “history and past”. Figures 1-4 display the response frequencies to each of the four questions by the wording group.

Figure 1: In general, how interested are you in history/past/history and past?

² . An additional sample, targeted at residents of large cities had accumulated 733 of a projected 995, with a response rate of 41%. Other special over-samples of Aboriginal people (100), new immigrants (100), and Acadians (100) are under way.

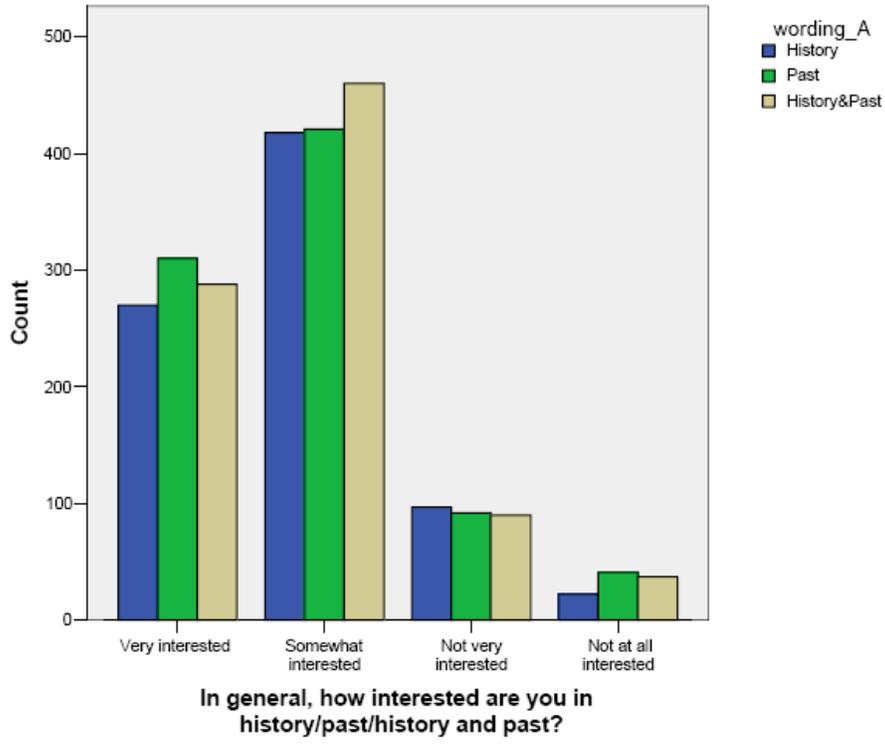


Figure 2. How interested are you in your family's history/past/history and past?

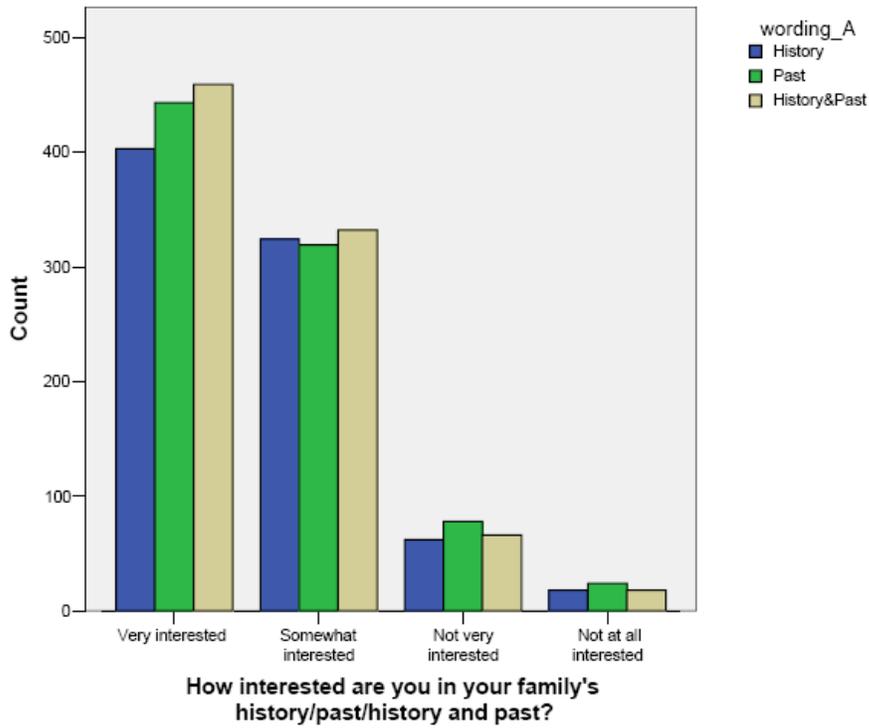


Figure 3. How interested are you in Canada's history/past/history and past?

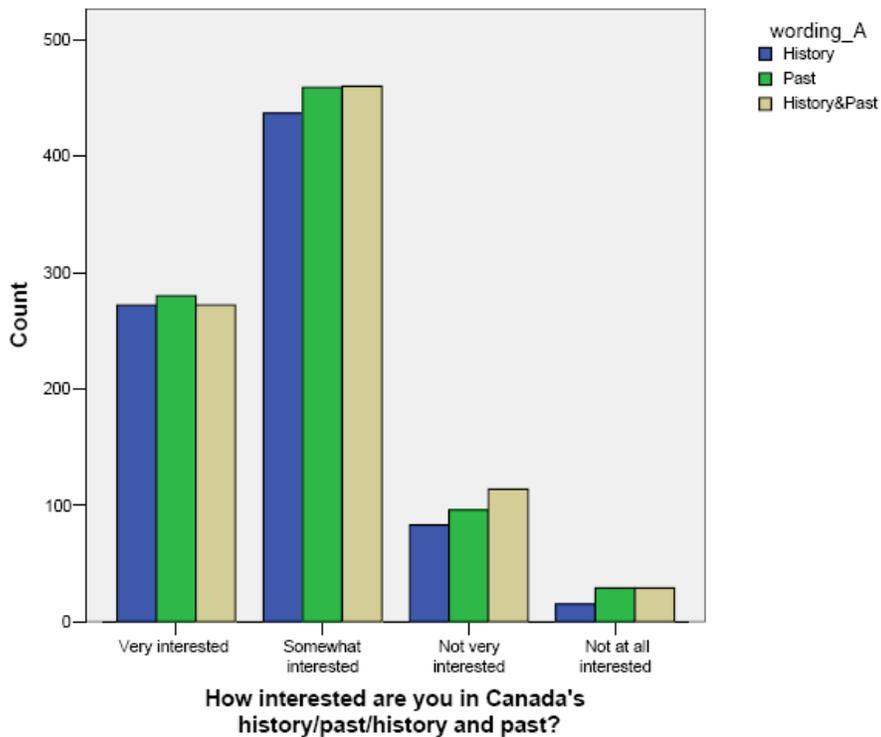
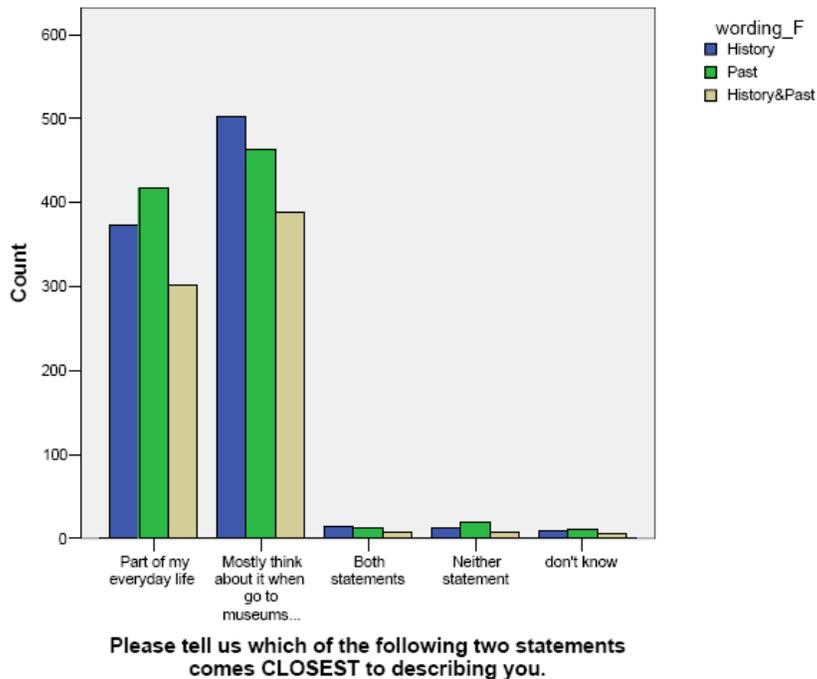


Figure 4. Please tell us which of the following two statements comes closest to describing you: (1) History/past/ history and past is part of my everyday life; (2) I mostly think about it when I go to museums, or watch a documentary, etc.



Clearly, we would have to search further to answer the question, in what ways do people understand the problem of knowing the past? Two other questions in the survey did, indeed, provide a much richer vein of evidence.

IV. Justifying trust in historical sources

The analysis that follows is based on responses to questions (following the model of the American survey) asking how trustworthy various sources of information about the past are: school history teachers, family stories, internet web sites, books, museums, and historical sites (see Appendix II). At the end of that series of questions, participants were asked (if there was more than one considered “very trustworthy”), which is most trustworthy (the question was skipped if the respondent did not consider any “very trustworthy”).

The next question was “Can you please tell us why you think [most trustworthy source] is a very trustworthy source of information about the past?” (Survey question d7b) This was intended to help us understand the reasoning behind assigning trustworthiness to different sources. This is where we struck pay dirt. Responses to this (and other open-ended questions) were recorded and transcribed, but the process has not kept pace with data collection. The analysis that follows is based on the sub-sample of 202 transcribed (see Appendix I).

The coding of these responses has proceeded to the point where we can provide a preliminary picture: while more new codes may arise as we examine further, almost all the new cases at this point are easily categorized into existing codes. It is fascinating to hear people grappling, most frequently without the terminology of academics, to explain how they allocate trust in particular sources of knowledge about the past. And we might simply let the coding exercise rest as examples of “different ways of knowing.” Yet some ways of knowing the past are far more powerful than others. And so we have tentatively assigned various codes to four levels of sophistication, along with some interesting outliers.³

In some responses, participants suggest that historical knowledge is based in sources of information, which must simply be found: it is only a question of getting to the right source. Other participants understand that judgments about what happened have to be made from limited surviving evidence: it will often not be found, whole cloth, in testimony from a witness or in a record of the event. The latter approach is the more sophisticated. It is often but not always clear from the short answers to the prompt questions, which of these understandings the respondent has.

A. Low level: faith and its friends

At the most basic level, participants simply expressed *faith*, in one way or another, in the source that they had chosen as most trustworthy. Thus, “it’s my belief that a historical site is just what it says it is... (964); or, “if I didn’t believe in [books] I probably wouldn’t continue to read them,” (3491); or “family wouldn’t lie to you” (7351). Being “trustworthy” in this framework is the commonsense opposite of someone or something that might tell a lie. But historical inquiry goes wrong in many ways other than false testimony.

“Faith” in archives comprises a special case: there is reason to believe that those who mention “archives” in somewhat similar terms understand the undigested nature of archival records and the work that it takes to make them say *anything*—worthy of trust or not. Thus we have not put mentions of archives into this level.

Some people believe in the trustworthiness of family stories but offer an additional justification—beyond mere faith—on the basis of the stories’ provenance: “Because it’s directly carried from generation to generation, person to person, and there’s no reason the father and mother will give the wrong information to son...” (3304). As in the “faith” responses, again we see the idea of not lying, but there is also the generation-to-generation handing down offered to support the accuracy of the story.

A third low level epistemology locates trust in the authority of the state or large institutions. Teachers are the most trustworthy because they “are not allowed to give any false information” (941). Similarly, for historic sites, “If they have put a plaque [there] then it must be true” (3503).

³ . Those familiar with the work of Peter Lee, Rosalyn Ashby and the CHATA project will recognize the influence of their work on what follows (e.g., Lee 2000, 2005).

Codes: F[x], FS, AS

B. Beginnings of an epistemology, but quite limited

The authority of a witness is *prima facie* a reasonable rationale for trusting an account. But this code is here (rather than in a higher category), when the participant provides no sense of the witness' testimony as a primary source, which should be situated in respect to the witness' position, but rather (directly in response to the question) that the witness is to be trusted *qua* witness: Family stories come from "relatives that know people who have actually experienced some first hand" (3310).

The authority of experts is very similar: there is *prima facie* reason to believe what people with expertise, education, and training in the area have to say. But at this level, both experts and witnesses are valued because they yield true accounts of the past—not because they may supply pieces of evidence to fit into a larger puzzle. Beyond trust in experts and witnesses lie other more active and more powerful understandings of historical knowledge.

Codes: AW, AE

C. Some notion of investigating traces as evidence

The next level is marked by the suggestion that primary sources of various kinds—documents, artifacts, testimony—provide evidence that can be interrogated. The frequency of museums' mention as a trustworthy historical institution appears to be buttressed by the presence of authentic objects and artifacts. Thus, museums "have artifacts there so they have the visual things that you can compare" (8613). The active language used here is very similar to those responses coded as "primary sources." A respondent trusts museums:

because it's primary source and I *can interpret it* through my own eyes, more for that rather than somebody deciphering history through their point of view. You know, if I can actually look at items and artifacts, primary source, right, I mean, clear physical evidence. (7903) [emphasis added]

At a similar level, but with a different emphasis are those who mention references and citations as a reason for trust in books. Thus, 3313 states: "[Books] give references. You can go verify yourself." Finally, at this level, are mentions of the multiple viewpoints of different actors in history. (These were not references to the multiple interpretations of different historians, which did not occur in response to this question). Thus, if a historical account included this kind of variety, it was more trustworthy. One respondent had been to a museum on apartheid in South Africa: you "actually toured the apartheid museum as if you were black person if you're white, and if you were black, you toured as if you were a white, so they gave you two perspectives" (4297).

Codes: OA, PS, AR, REF, MPERS

D. The strength of a community of inquiry

The highest level acknowledges the work that goes into knowing the past, but also makes reference to it as a social process. The idea that “many people have worked on it” offers a reason for trust in the view of these participants. Thus, 7375 justified his/her trust in books:

Well, because they've obviously been through a number of peer reviews, they're seen and read and understood by a lot more people than access the internet and if there are mistakes, you're gonna hear about it.

While this one uses academic language of “peer review,” there are many others, mainly for museums and books, which express similar ideas. Closely related, at the same level, is the idea that much time, research and commitment has gone into producing the historical representation, again, frequently applying to museums. The notion that a critical community enhances trustworthiness is extended from the producers to the consumers of historical accounts, with comments about concern over “reputation”:

Well, they would look awfully stupid if they say something that is for sure, and it's found out that it's not, so their credibility can be affected if they mess up (5559).

A low-frequency comment at the same level is the idea that is continually being revised with new information, and that it is “up-to-date” in respect to historical knowledge.

Codes: MP, MTR, REP, UTD

E. Miscellaneous oddballs or low frequency responses for D7b (possibly an appendix)

It is a challenge to decide exactly what to do with the following categories of responses. Each is somewhat idiosyncratic, but nevertheless potentially very interesting. For the time being, we will continue to note new instances of their expression.

MFLB – Sometimes a respondent claimed that a particular kind of source was “more factual”and/or “less biased.” This, for 4130, “a museum usually prints more of a generic statement of facts... a book can be more opinionated than museums.” This is a legitimate response to the question as worded, but it addresses the *outcome* of the historical inquiry, than the processes that went into assuring its trustworthiness.

POP “They’re the most popular, so there is reason to trust [museums]” (3409).

WS Written sources are more trustworthy than oral (316).

WIN “History is always written by the winners.” (4066) This response does not really answer the question; indeed, it appears to cast doubt on the trustworthiness of all accounts. But, because a number of people expressed such an opinion, it is worth recording.

PP A number of respondents express a palpable sense of the “presence of the past” in the terms not unlike those of Eelco Runia and Frank Ankersmit (2005) These come most frequently in relation to historic sites and museums.

Well, you're right there, that's where it happened. There's an aura about that.... I think a good example is in St. Johns, Newfoundland. They say at this point, the first explorers landed here and it didn't mean 100 yards down, it meant right there, right there, that's where the trail was. And I thought, "that's something". Yes, you stand on the shore of James Bay and think this is the trail that Henry Hudson had to walk down. That stuff just puts hackles up my back. I think it's

where the first explorers landed. It's an incredible feeling right there. I'm not sure if everybody feels that, but I did. (3609).

Notwithstanding the constructed nature of museums, some responded in similar ways to their exhibits: “It creates that picture and that sense of being there through the images of what it looked like, we can experience it for ourselves” (355). This “experience” of the past in the present may, however, be a dangerous basis for trust in an account (see Seixas, 2007).

V. Another avenue into historical epistemology: what do you do when people disagree about the past?

The next survey question was: “When people disagree...how do you think they can find out what is most likely to have really happened?” (Survey question D8) A number of people said “that’s an interesting question,” or “that’s a good one.” Respondent 8655 was candid: “That’s a toughie!”

There are two very different ways for us to interpret a response of “I don’t know.” Some respondents seem simply to throw up their hands, with no way to move forward. Others (see, e.g. 3414, 3416) think about how one might investigate, but then assert that, in the end, it is hard to be certain, even after you have gone back, as one said, to the “print of the actual event” (3414). Some of the transcripts give clues as to which of these senses of “I don’t know” is operative; others do not.

Code: DK

A. Weak moves

Some respondents failed to express the curiosity suggested by “that’s a toughie!”, and moved quickly to take care of the question in a somewhat perfunctory manner, saying “use common sense,” or “research it” without giving more idea of what that meant. Another relatively weak response, in that it too often leads to a dead end, is, “you have to have been there” or you would need to ask a witness what really happened, instances of searching for one “true account.” 7860 thoughtfully confronted a dispute in his/her family history:

Well because one side of the family said something and the other side said something else, so there's nobody around to say what was true or not...So I just don't take one story or the other because I don't believe either one. I don't take sides. But I don't feel like there's anywhere I could look it up because in those days people just didn't do things on records. (7860)

This participant understands the *problem* of historical knowledge: the past is gone. But his/her strategies for dealing with the problem are limited. S/he is right that if there is no record, then it is much more difficult, but historians can figure out what people have done, when, and why, often without a surviving witness and without their having “done things on records.”

The search for a “true account” is in clear contrast to the much stronger strategies employed under “c” below. (Note: currently the code WIT applies both to this, and to the

far more powerful idea that a witness' testimony could contribute to an investigation of what really happened.).

Codes: CS, RES, WIT, NW

B. A good start

Many people responded to the question of disagreement about the past by referring back to the most trusted source that they had just been discussing (??what is the term for this survey effect?*) Thus, "I would say go to the museum...Because all the stuff's there" (4504); "check a book" (6513); or "nowadays, it's the internet: you can find out a lot of information there" (7243). We might judge some of these to be more sophisticated than others, though it is frequently a difficult call. Again, checking the "archives" might be a stronger answer than asking a "teacher," and yet respondents may reasonably be considering convenience and practicality, in which case "the internet" ("it's the handiest," said 7292)) is probably more to be expected than "the archives." Beyond the specific sources that we had prompted them for on the question of "most trusted," respondents also mentioned encyclopedias, photographs, elders, and experts.

Another response that expressed a potentially limited strategy to know the past in the midst of controversy included simply "get the facts" (4565). The idea that everyone is entitled to their own different and irreconcilable view of things would not get investigators very far (this code MPERS is different from the same letters in response to the last question, D7b, in that the respondent refers to multiple perspectives of the disagreeing historical *investigators*, not the multiple perspectives of various historical *actors*.) In a closely related type of response, some suggested that one should use multiple sources or accounts, but then had a limited notion of what to do with them, once assembled: 3304 proposed to "compile, compare and contrast and then come to a consensus."

Codes: SS[x], GF, MPERS, MS

C. A strong response

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

You have to go and do all sorts of research and you have to decide reading the research, which presents the best case, like doing research on history in Toronto, you'll get all sorts of stories on a certain thing and you've got to go into all sorts of other sources and figure out who you think is the most accurate. It's beholden to you to do it. But you just can't accept the first thing you read. (4181)

I think it's more complex than that. I don't think it's what really happened or didn't happen. I think it's how we interpret what happened in the context of our own perspective on it so two people can watch the exact same events and facts and walk away with a different conclusion and that's legitimate. If I went to your

questionnaire and absolute basic, the nuts and bolts, who hit who first or something like that, then clearly one of the things that is helping nowadays in the very recent past is them changing how people look at things, videos, cell phone cameras and all those things that are actually capturing things on tape and causing people to interpret, you know, um, that is not really what we read in the paper. In terms of going further back, I guess multiple sources, first person account, people who are actually in the room though I'm reading books, historical books, you know you consider the sources and how close they were to the source but even then, people who were directly involved are coming in from a perspective and motivation. (4059)

Some focused more on the quality of the sources (“actual documents that were written or talked about at the time it happened” 3427) than on the number of sources.

Go to original sources, only through research. It's not so much that people agree or disagree about what happened in the past, it's that sometimes it's hard to figure out what really happened in the past and how things are reported in history are skewed by all kinds of factors, and sometimes it's hard to get at the truth. The way history is presented in official history is not necessarily the truth and the truth is not always guaranteed that you are going to find the truth [sic]. 3313

Others used the terms “verification” or “corroboration” to describe what was to be done with additional sources: “I would think by researching in books and historical documents and perhaps approaching universities for verification” (7971).

Codes: MS+, PS, V

D. An idiosyncratic tack

One type of response that came up a few times is difficult to fit into a level. This expresses the idea that interpretations change: in time, new artifacts will produce new interpretations: so perhaps the best approach to resolving historical disputes is to sit back and wait.

Well, it changes though, too, doesn't it? You know whenever anybody finds say a new artifact, then you know, they're off on a different tangent, right, so I don't know, I guess research waiting for things to happen, waiting for more information to come. (8020)

8682 also took a longer term approach, quite poetically: “... I like my history very cold. I just don't make a decision. I just wait for twenty years and see how it falls.”

Code: WME

Conclusion

North American media have devoted considerable attention to the public's knowledge (and lack thereof) of discrete historical facts (see Wineburg 2001, pp. vii-viii). Over the past decade, Canada's Dominion Institute has brought this attention north of the border. Poor scores or good scores, the exercises miss the point. As respondent 7292 told us, while you might have had to pore through an encyclopedia to find a fact “in days gone by,” now a quick Google is “the handiest.” The more significant measure of public

historical literacy is one that captures not the number of facts they remember but rather the sophistication of their strategies for coming to know the past.

People in contemporary culture are frequently confronted by conflicting histories. How does “everyman” assess claims that there was no Holocaust, that slavery was not so bad for African-Americans, or that the 20th century was one of uncertainty and disaster? Does he or she have ways to face these arguments?

This paper moves us significantly closer to being able to answer that question. A telephone survey, of necessity, misses some depth of response and opportunity for probing, in its drive for short duration and large sample size. But through the transcription of responses to our questionnaire, the construction of a typology, and its organization into a hierarchy of power and complexity, we are on the cusp of having a measure of the historical thinking of a large, random sample of Canadian adults. Already, we can see that there are a range of capacities.

The suggestion that people turn away from “history” to develop a deeply felt connection to “the past” may ultimately be counterproductive. If people embraced the disciplinary qualities of history *more* systematically and whole-heartedly—an understanding of evidence, context and interpretation—they might be better equipped to cope with the very real challenges posed by knowing and using the past in the contemporary world. A clearer picture is needed of how people actually do think about history. This paper and the work that will flow from it, contribute to that understanding. As we go forward with this research program, there will be significant implications, for schools as well as other institutions of public history.

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Appendix I

This preliminary sub-sample was not drawn randomly from the national sample and cannot be expected to be representative. The sub-sample severely underrepresented Quebec and overrepresented Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia. However, there were very small percentage differences between the sub-sample and the national sample on demographic variables of gender, age, education and household income. See figures below:

Figure 5. Percentage of respondents from each province

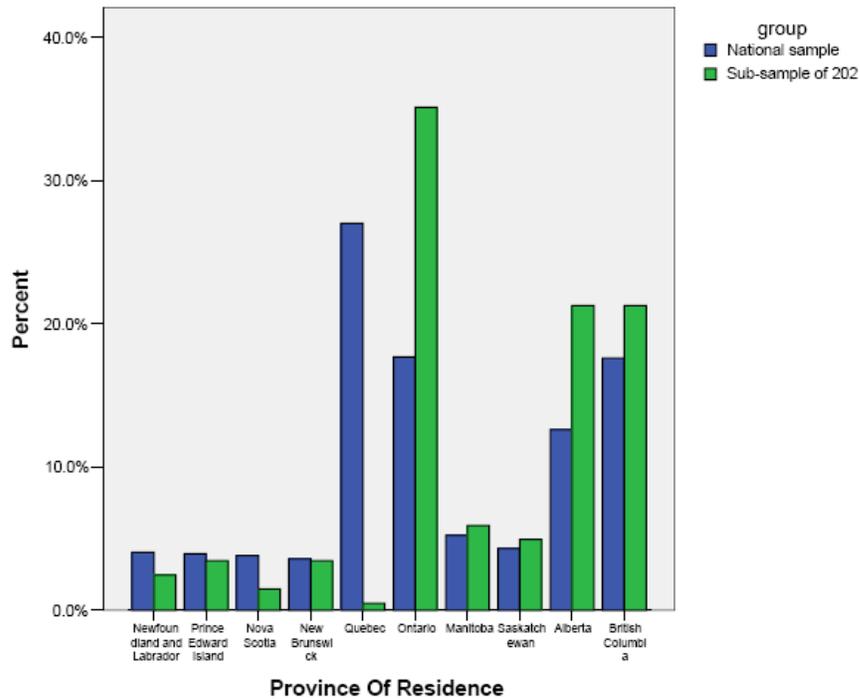


Figure 6. Percentage representation of gender groups

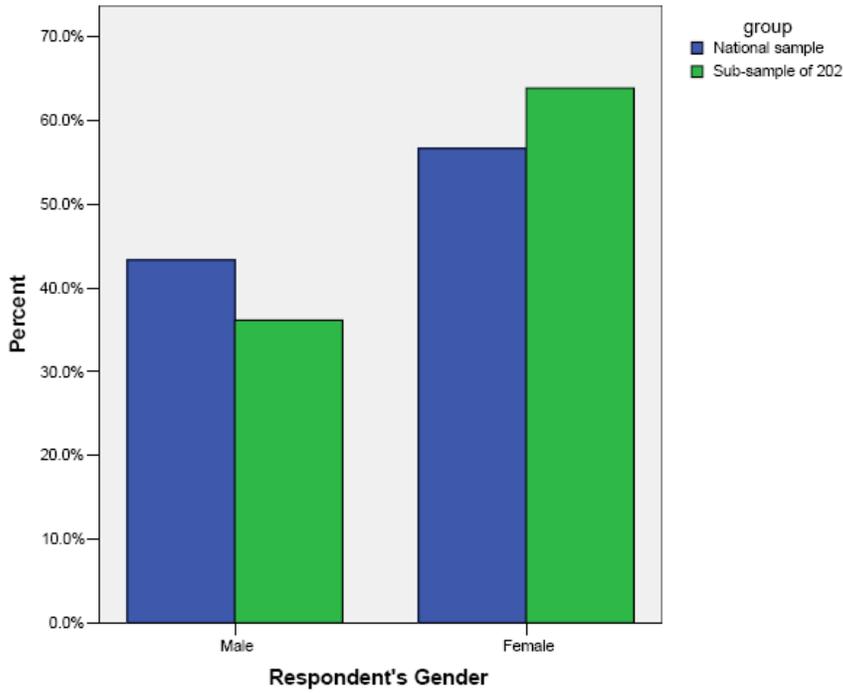


Figure 7. Percentage representation of age groups

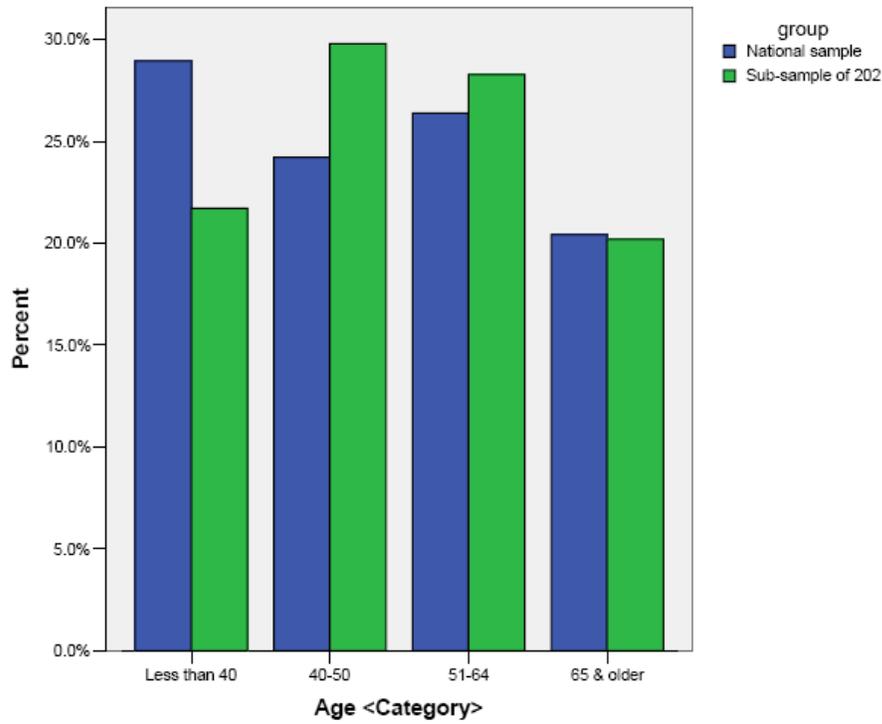


Figure 8. Percentage representation of education groups

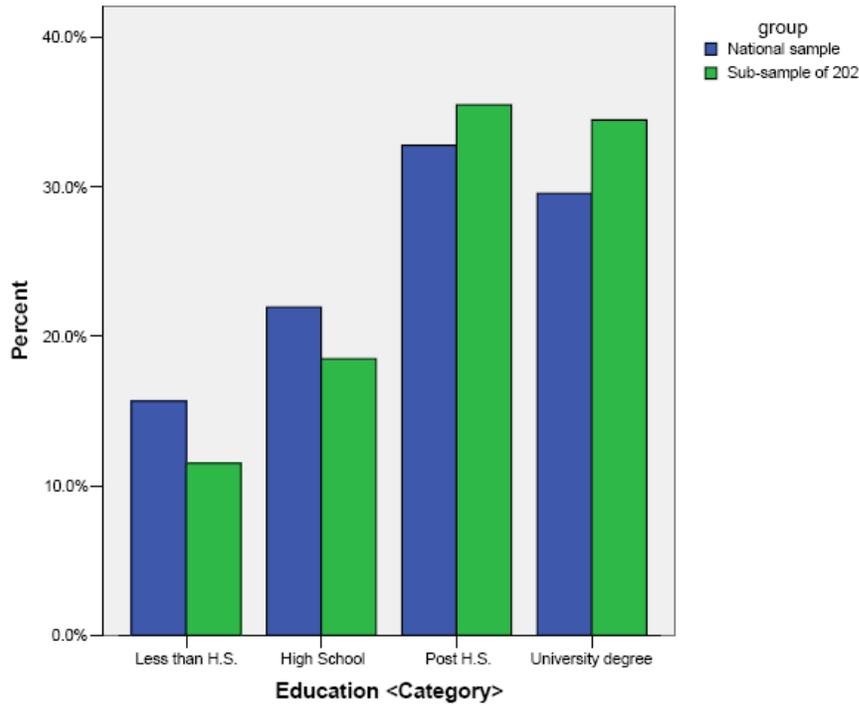
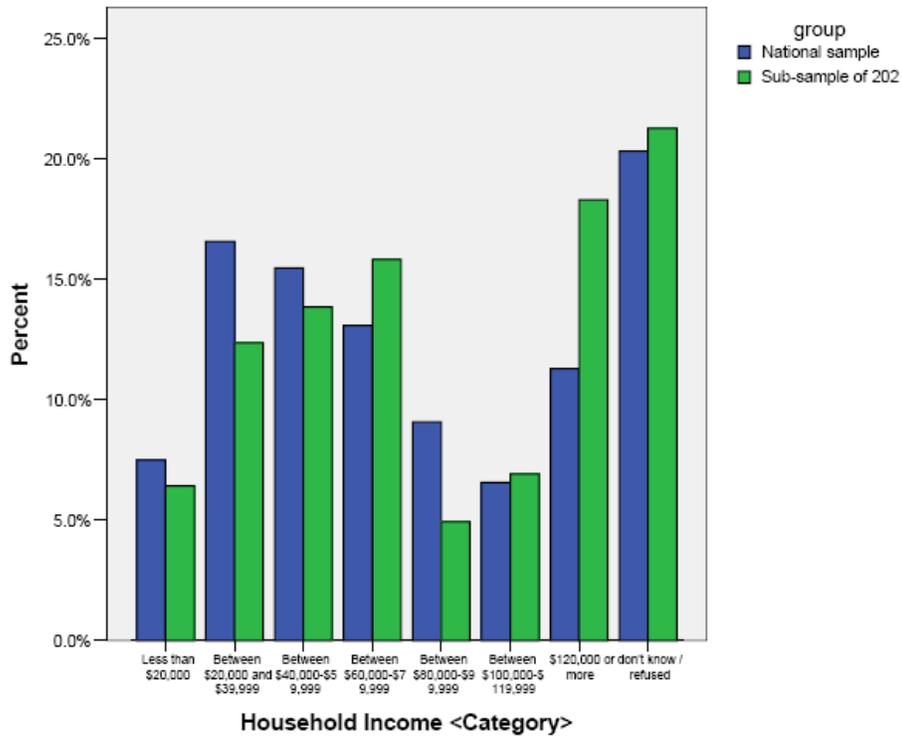


Figure 9. Percentage of respondents from different household income categories



Appendix II: Trustworthiness of various sources

As can be seen in this figure, respondents assigned highest levels of trustworthiness with three sources: teachers, museums and historical sites (Figure 10). This varied for respondents with different education levels. Respondents with the highest education levels assigned these sources with the highest degrees of trustworthiness (Figure 11).

Figure 10. Trustworthiness of various sources

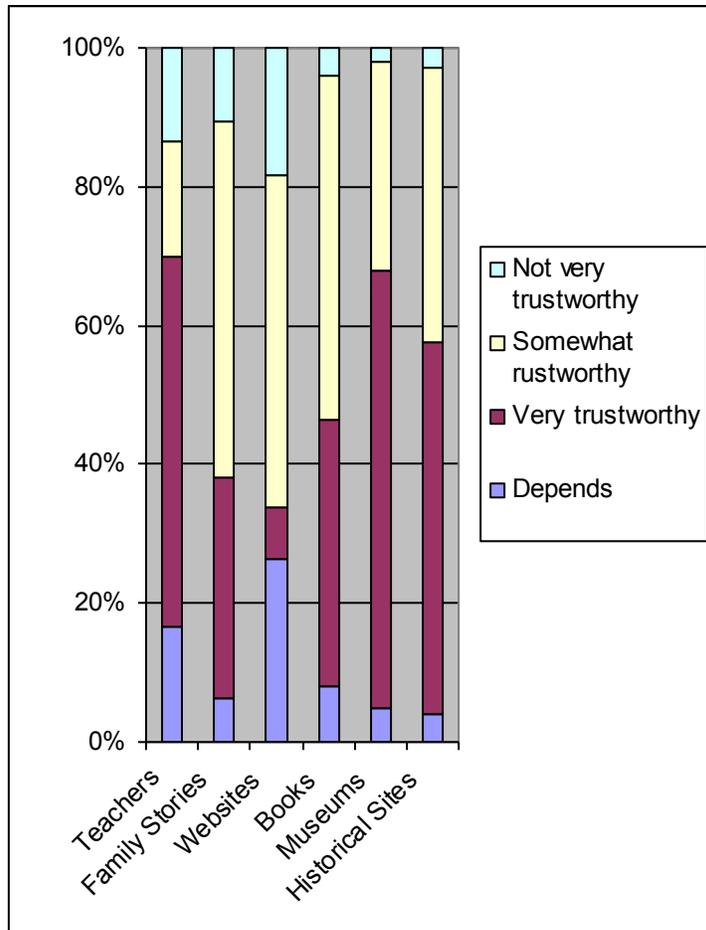
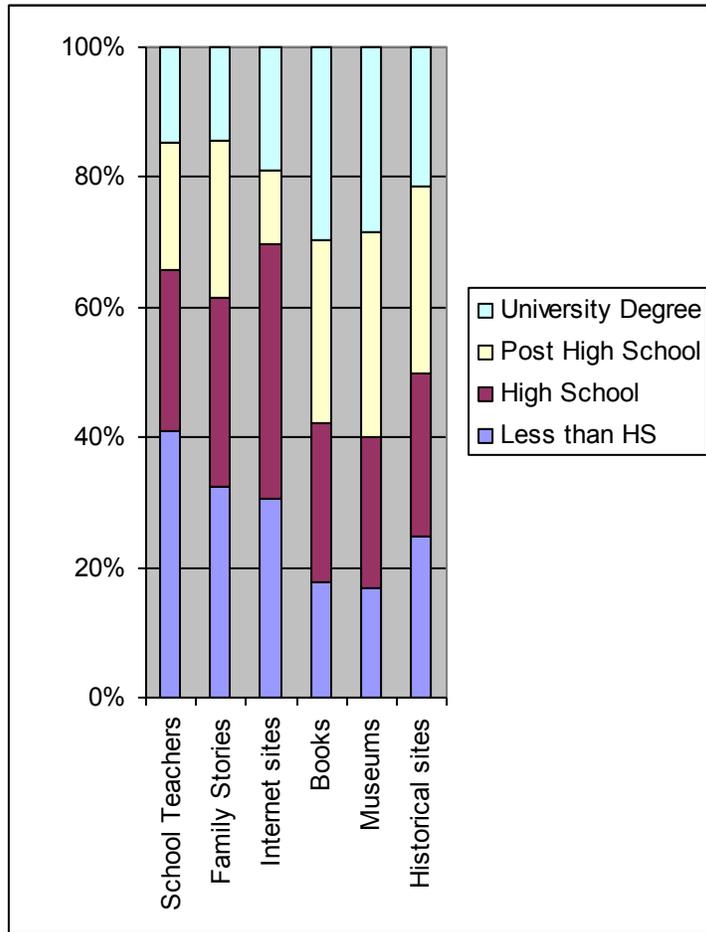


Figure 11. Most trustworthy sources by education



The respondents who tended to assign trustworthiness to one of these three sources (teachers, museums and historical sites) were more likely to assign high levels trustworthiness to the other two. The correlations between levels of trustworthiness of these three highly-rated sources were in the range of 0.316- 0.404, whereas the correlations among the trustworthiness of the other sources were in the range of 0.163 - - .208 with each other and in the range of 0.104-0.269 with the three sources identified as highly trustworthy.