

**“When it became equal”: How Historical Consciousness and Theories of Agency Can Explain Female Students’ Conceptions of Feminism**

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This paper describes the results of two research projects, which were focused upon female students’ historical understanding of feminism. In both cases the researchers found that the student participants harbored ambivalent or negative attitudes towards feminism and saw little connection between the present and feminist struggles in the past. While this attitude could be attributed to a wide range of variables, the authors illustrate that a focus upon the students’ form of historical consciousness and theories of agency can explain the tendency to see a “gap” between past and present. This paper concludes with a call for further research into the interaction between historical thinking, historical consciousness, and theories of agency.

**Introduction**

This paper began when the two of us met, by chance, at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in 2017. Marie-Hélène attended Congress to be a part of a Canadian Historical Association panel, where she gave an overview of the research she had recently completed for her doctoral dissertation at the Université de Montréal. Marie-Hélène’s research had focused upon students’ understanding of narratives of feminism in textbooks (Brunet, 2017a). Meanwhile, Scott had come to Congress to be part of a Canadian Society for the Study of Education panel, where he described an action-research project he had recently completed (Pollock, 2017). This research had investigated how high school aged girls think about historical significance. While our work, described in more detail below, was conducted in different provinces—with differing socio-linguistic realities—and used different methods, we quickly saw many similarities. In particular, we had both been surprised by our participants’ attitudes towards feminism, which, in line with research in the United States (Levstik & Groth, 2002; Colley, 2015), were often dismissive and at times outright negative.

As we re-examined our work to try and better understand our participants’ thinking, we considered the possible impact of a number of factors that are often discussed within the scholarly literature on historical thinking such as the influence of textbooks (Clark 2009; Porat, 2004) and popular culture (Porat, 2006; Seixas, 1994) on student’s thinking about the past. Further reflection, however, led us to the conclusion that a different analytical approach might offer richer, or at least different, insights. Specifically, we began to focus on our participants’ forms of historical consciousness and their personal theories of agency, noting how our participants made use of narratives of ‘Girl Power’ to deny the existence of gender inequality today, and to thereby conclude that the past is disconnected from the present.

An important aspect should be emphasized here. Feminism is a polysemous term, referring to a multitude of theoretical and practical approaches, which are sometimes complementary, but can also conflict in important ways. To name a few, Marxist, radical (lesbian), post-structural, or postfeminist perspectives have developed views and conceptualizations of feminism that can seem irreconcilable, particularly when they are studied in a way that ignores the socio-spatio-temporal context in which they emerged (Zancarini-Fournel, 2005). However, this research focusses, first and foremost, on feminism as viewed by students. Program documents and associated resources such as textbooks – what constitutes history in schools – share a quite homogenous and limited portrait of feminism that can be associated with liberal feminism. The emphasis of this historical understanding of the past focuses on achieving sexual equality (of rights), which is seen as an objective that should be won through legal and political reforms (Sandwell, 2003).

The dominance of this narrative in school history is particularly visible in the prominence textbooks give to the first and second waves of feminism, which are presented in a very brief fashion, and moreover, are not situated in a broader context (Dumont, 1992). Gender, as a category of historical analysis (Scott, 1986) is equally not used or even mentioned in textbooks (Brunet, 2013). Intersectionality, involving interlocking oppressions (i.e., race, class and other identities), similarly, does not seem to make its way into the narratives found in social studies' classrooms (Moisan, Brunet & St-Onge, in press). As a result, we were expecting to hear statements reflective of liberal feminism from our participants but were surprised that even the most tenuous calls for gender equality, were questioned by female students.

In order to clearly illustrate how our participant's attitudes towards feminism were shaped by their historical consciousness and theories of agency, this paper will undertake several tasks. It begins with an overview of our two research projects. The main purpose of this section is to describe our participants' attitudes towards feminism. As a result, the discussion of our methods and findings will be brief<sup>1</sup>. Having thus provided more context, we then discuss the existing research into historical consciousness and theories of agency. We follow this with a third section in which we illustrate how these concepts can explain our participants' thoughts about feminism. We conclude with a brief discussion on the implications of our research.

### **A Tale of Two Projects**

Scott's research sought to understand how gender could influence students' conceptions of historical significance. In order to gain insights into this question, Scott completed an action-research project within two high school history classes in an Independent, all-girls, school in an affluent suburban community (Pollock, 2017). The first class was a group of 16 female grade ten students, enrolled in Ontario's Grade Ten Canadian History course. The second class was a group of 12 female students, enrolled in Grade Twelve World History. In order to shed light on the students' historical thinking they were presented with a series of 53 picture cards dealing with events in Canadian history and were asked to select the ten most significant. Students were observed during this process, interviewed as a group afterwards, and asked to complete a brief individual survey. The picture cards and other procedures drew from Peck's (2009) earlier work; however, over a dozen new picture cards were added to the ones Peck included in her original

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<sup>1</sup> More detailed discussions of these projects can be found in Marie-Hélène's original thesis (Brunet, 2016) and related articles (Brunet, 2017b) as well as Scott's CSSE paper (Pollock, 2017).

study. This included, for example, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, the Ecole Polytechnique Shooting, and the legalization of birth control. Most of these events could be seen as significant because of their connection to women's rights.

Following Peck's (2009) approach, this data was coded in two ways. First, the students' explanations of historical significance were analyzed and placed into five categories representing different approaches to the idea of historical significance.<sup>2</sup> Second, the students' chosen events were examined as a whole in order to identify any narrative templates that might be influencing their choices<sup>3</sup>. In the end, this led to results similar to those of Peck (2009), with most of the groups creating a *diverse* but *conflicted* narrative that focused upon the tensions between the many communities in Canada. Somewhat surprisingly, however, these narratives paid little attention to gender. While all of the groups, except for one, included a topic of specific significance to women, only two groups included two such items, and no group included more. When Scott followed up on this point in a subsequent interview, he found the participants saw themselves and their future as unconnected to the struggles of women in the past. One participant, for example, remarked that "All of those events are important. We included suffrage because it allowed for the others to happen. But, those sorts of issues aren't relevant anymore" (Pollock, 2017, p. 5).

When pressed on this point through reminders of existing inequality, such as the wage gap between men and women, many students wanted to deny the systemic nature of discrimination, arguing that these instances can be dealt with using existing laws. As one participant noted, "women who get paid less than men now have the ability to do something about it. It is, of course, unfair that they have to, but they can go to HR, they can sue" (Pollock, 2017, p. 5).

Marie-Hélène's doctoral research (Brunet, 2016), conducted in French, combined different methods of data collection to see how high school students in Quebec dealt with feminism and narratives related to gender equality. In the initial research, 575 grade 10 students (including 342 girls) from three urban regions (Québec, Montréal, Gatineau), coming mostly from privileged private schools, responded to an individual survey that included questions related to their use of history textbooks, their understanding of historical agency, and their views of feminism. Data from these surveys was enriched by nine individual interviews (including six with females), during which the students were invited to work with and compare narratives about feminism that came from four different textbooks.

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<sup>2</sup> Specifically, these were: contemporary, causal, pattern, symbolic, and present-future. These categories were first devised by Cercadillo (2001) and later used by Peck (2009).

<sup>3</sup> Peck (2009) found her students' timelines followed three narratives. First, was the *founding the nation* template, which focused upon the creation of Canada as a nation-state. Second, was the *diverse and harmonious Canada* template. This narrative sees the history of Canada as the overcoming of prejudice and discrimination in order to establish a multicultural identity. Finally, *The Diverse but Conflicted Canada* narrative focuses on the history of multiculturalism in Canada, with an explicit emphasis on conflicts that have occurred as a result of the nation's changing demographics.

Marie-Hélène's data was coded using a semi-open grid<sup>4</sup> and she found, not only that most students made very few links between women's struggles in the past and ongoing inequalities, but that they also saw themselves as having no role to play in connection to these issues. In fact, most of the participants saw these struggles as related only to the past or to other parts of the world. People from other nations or religions still needed feminism, but not them. The interviews were, perhaps, the most interesting part of this research process as they showed how students could manipulate narratives from the textbooks so that the narratives confirmed their beliefs. For example, when faced with the task of choosing which excerpt best described feminism in their view, a student rejected one textbook excerpt, which was the only narrative in the grouping that talked about ongoing inequalities (domestic violence, salary disparities, and underrepresentation of women in high administrative and political positions). In response, the student stated: "this one is incomplete, because it doesn't talk about when it became equal" (Brunet, 2016, p. 174).<sup>5</sup> In relation to the same excerpt, another student added: "it can't be about today, because it's in the history textbook" (Brunet, 2016, p. 160).

### **Dazed and Confused: Puzzled by Our Participants**

If clearly antifeminist comments were few in both our studies, we were still astounded by the repeated implications that gender equality was no longer an issue in Canada. We struggled, however, with the question of how to best explain this phenomenon. Did this idea come from a simple lack of awareness or ignorance? Flawed resources? Poor teaching? Or, was this the product of an anti-feminist 'backlash' (Faludi, 1991)? We were also conscious of the need to take in account the many forms of oppression and how they intersect with gender, to further marginalize groups and individuals. In this regard, we were wondering if this would come up, at all, in our data, particularly considering the limitations of our sample of students. In particular, we wondered if the very limited narrative of feminist struggle presented in secondary schools (Moisan, Brunet & St-Onge, in press) might reinforce the idea of a seemingly uninterrupted progress towards equality. In the end, all these options offer viable explanations for our participants' attitudes towards feminism. However, we felt our participants' thinking might also be connected to their historical consciousness and theories of agency, and thus decided to focus on this area in order to shed new light on their thinking.

### **What is "Historical Consciousness"?**

The term "historical consciousness" has been used by a range of scholars in a myriad of ways (for a brief history see Laville, 2006). For example, Seixas (2006) defines it as "the intersection among public memory, citizenship, and history education" (p. 15). Given this definition, the use of the term historical consciousness in this paper follows the lead of Gadamer (2012/1975) and Rüsen (1993), arguing that a historically conscious individual has an awareness of existing within time. This insight leads to a recognition of the role of collective memory, communal values, and other social structures in the development of the self. This is well summed up by Gadamer (2012/1975), who writes that:

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<sup>4</sup> Categories are related to each question asked to student (see: Brunet, 2016, pp. 88-91). For example, on a question related to their views of contemporary feminism, students' answers could belong to 4 different categories: ongoing necessity of feminism, equality attained, antifeminism, indifference / no opinion.

<sup>5</sup> All quotations from Marie-Hélène's work, throughout the article, have been translated from French.

historical consciousness no longer simply applies its own criteria of understanding to the tradition in which it is situated, nor does it naively assimilate tradition and simply carry it on. Rather, it adopts a reflective posture toward both itself and the tradition in which it is situated. It understands itself in terms of its own history. *Historical consciousness is a mode of self-knowledge* (emphasis in original). (p. 228)

Gadamer's (2012/1975) conception of historical consciousness has been further theorized by Rüsen (1993, 2006) who argued that there are four levels or stages of historical consciousness. The first is the *traditional*, which sees events in the past as binding upon the present. This view, which likely seems strange to most contemporary citizens in the western world, holds that traditions underpin moral obligations. History acts to preserve our recollection of these traditions, which bind together social groups or societies. In terms of identity, individuals operating at this level of development work within a constrained horizon. Roles and morals are dictated by tradition and therefore cannot be questioned. The second stage of historical consciousness is the *exemplary*, which uses the past to devise universal laws or rules about human activity. This approach to the past will lead to a much wider horizon of time (a focus on tradition is a focus upon the history of a group, while in contrast, a focus on rules can draw upon any history). The third stage in Rüsen's model is the *critical*. Individuals operating at this level of consciousness use history to highlight the differences between past and present, to seek out counter-narratives to traditional beliefs, and to historicize human activities. In short, the critical type challenges existing morality by highlighting its contradictions, by pointing to cultural relativity, and illustrating the temporal conditions that led to the development of a society's belief system.

The final stage in Rüsen's (1993; 2006) model is the *genetic*, which focuses upon change and the dynamic nature of temporality. Individuals operating at this level of historical consciousness see themselves as "a cross-point, an interface of time and events, permanently in transition" (Rüsen, 2006, p. 77). Or, to put it another way, one of the key requirements in the development of a self-reflexive historical consciousness is, in line with Gadamer's (2012/1975) theorizing, an awareness of an individual's own existence within history. This requires an understanding that our actions are influenced or constrained by beliefs, ideas, discourses, institutions, organizations, and processes that have emerged out of the past. The way in which these influences or constraints operate is of great interest to historians, history educators, sociologists, and psychologists (among others), who often refer to this as the study of agency. While there are many areas of debate within these research communities in regards to agency, there is also a growing consensus regarding the operation and development of our sense of human agency. As will be shown below, an understanding of these basic assumptions about agency can help to shed light on the approach our research participants took towards feminism.

### **Research into Agency**

While agency has attracted attention from a wide range of scholars, it could be argued that psychologists have devoted the most consistent attention to the concept. According to Bandura (2001) agency is the ability of an individual to make things happen as a result of their own actions. As such, our sense of agency influences our self-development and adaptation to new situations. The study of agency, according to Bandura (2001), requires an analysis of an agent's consciousness, intentions, forethought, self-reflectiveness, and ability to act. While the process through which our sense of agency is developed is still debated, psychologists (e.g.,

Synofzik, Vosgerau, & Newen, 2007) have argued that our individual theories of agency develop out of a two-step process, which sees individuals engaged in their day-to-day life compare the results of their actions with their intentions. When we set out to do something and that something happens as intended, we experience both a judgement of agency and a feeling of agency. When things do not turn out as planned however, we are aware of a gap between our expectations and our reality, and are left to try and explain why we did not control events in this instance. It is at this moment that prior experience and cultural beliefs about agency are particularly important, as individuals will try to apply these to the particular context they are trying to understand.

The importance of cultural context has been documented by a number of psychologists conducting research into agency. For instance, Morris, Menon, and Ames (2001) compared theories of agency within American and Chinese cultures. This research found that American subjects, reared in a society that privileges an individualistic conception of agency will tend to explain an individual's behavior, such as cheating on a test, by appealing to individual characteristics and dispositions. Conversely, their Chinese subjects, socialized in a culture that privileges the idea of agency belonging to collectivities (e.g., families, organizations), were more inclined to explain individual action by pointing to institutions, groups, and social roles. It is important to note here, however, that these authors place emphasis on the term *inclined*, arguing that the activation of a particular theory of agency depends on the features of the stimulus. So, for example, when American subjects were asked to explain scenarios where a group was the actor they could not draw upon their favored, individualistic, theory of agency and, instead paid a great deal of attention to contextual factors (Morris, Menon, & Ames, 2001).

Significantly, this psychological research fits with, and is corroborated by, the work of many scholars who are interested in the learning of history<sup>6</sup>. Colley (2015), for example, describes historical agency as a sort of middleman that exists between historical structures and events, with the choices made by agents helping to explain the existence of continuity and change within history. Colley (2015) further argues that the analysis of historical agency requires students to place the choices made by agents — be they great individuals, common people, or collectives — within their historical context, while also recognizing that the many consequences of an action cannot be seen in advance.

History education researchers, much like their counterparts in psychology, have also noted the influence of cultural contexts upon students' theories of agency. In particular the work of Halldén (1994), Barton (2001; 1997), as well as that of Barton and Levstik (2004), has found that Western students tend to offer theories of historical change that focus upon the actions of individuals. Barton (2001), for example, compared students' conceptions of agency in the United States, where textbooks and teachers tend to focus on individual heroism to explain change, and Northern Ireland, where students are presented with narratives that assign less importance to individual achievements. In the end, he found Irish students had a more nuanced understanding of collective agency than their American counterparts. In Canada, den Heyer (2012, 2018) has also investigated practicing teachers' conceptions of agency. He has argued that "agency involves two distinct but related ontological dimensions: one concerns our beliefs about being human among others (shape) and the other concerns our explanations for human behavior (content)" (den Heyer, 2018, p. 236). Significantly, den Heyer (2012) found that teachers' understandings of agency's content and shape could be enriched by discussion and reflection,

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<sup>6</sup> Excellent summaries of this work can be found in den Heyer (2003), Barton (2012) and Seixas (2012).

however the initial inclination of many educators was to teach an individualistic conception of agency.

The influence of this individualistic conception of agency has also been commented upon by a number of sociologists and gender scholars (e.g., Douglas, 2010; Slaughter, 2015). Particularly important, in no small part because their research has been conducted within Canada, is the work of Pomerantz and Raby (2017). According to these researchers, teenage girls within the Niagara region of Ontario tended to draw upon two inter-related, celebratory postfeminist narratives as they try to make sense of their lives. First is the idea of *Girl Power*, which claims that girls can be, and do, anything they want. Second, is the idea of *Successful Girls*, which tells girls they are surpassing boys in school and work. Taken together these two ideas led many of Pomerantz and Raby's participants to deny or ignore the influence of structure upon individual agency. So, for example, some girls in this study would explain away the tendency of teachers to treat boys and girls differently in class by arguing that this was the result of individual relationships between the teachers and students, not an example of sexism. Even in those instances where the girls did recognize the existence of sexism, such as the double-standard around personal hygiene and the need to be physically attractive, some girls denied the idea that they were being systematically disadvantaged by these standards, and instead implied that expectations regarding femininity actually gave advantages to girls, who could, for example, use their femininity to manipulate boys (see: Pomerantz & Raby, 2017, pp. 23, 93-101, 104-108).

### Discussion

Taken as a whole then, the existing research into historical consciousness and agency suggests several points that can help to explain the puzzling perspective of our research participants. First, and foremost, the research into historical consciousness highlights that an individual's awareness of their own historicity can take many forms. This means, among other things, that researchers need to avoid assuming that their participants share the same sort of historical consciousness. Second, it is widely accepted that our implicit theories of agency are developed out of our everyday experiences, which are interpreted using beliefs or concepts, like individualism and *Girl Power*, that we inherit from our society (den Heyer, 2018; Pomerantz & Raby, 2017; Sandwell, 2003). While the activation of these concepts is dependent on context, the existing research indicates that these implicit theories are often applied subconsciously (Synofzik, Vosgerau, & Newen, 2007). As is often the case, these subconscious beliefs are very resilient and individuals will often resist attempts to change them. At this time there is a need for further exploration of the relationship between historical consciousness and personal theories of agency. As den Heyer (2012) stated: "we lack research into these dimensions of agency" (p. 294).

Nonetheless, it seems logical that highly individualistic narratives of agency, such as *Girl Power*, can act as a barrier to nuanced forms of historical consciousness. This is because the constraints of these narratives work to distort the degree of choice afforded to individuals, leading to the false belief that those in the present are uninfluenced by the past. In order to illustrate this, let us now discuss the findings that emerged when we reanalyzed our research through the lenses of historical consciousness and agency.

### Historical Consciousness, Agency, and Students' Attitude Towards Feminism

When we began to re-examine, our participant's comments with Rösen's typology of historical consciousness in mind, it became apparent that these students were operating primarily at the *exemplary* or *critical* levels of Rösen's (1993; 2006) continuum. Instances of exemplary type thinking can be seen most clearly in students who adopted the idea that history is a narrative of perpetual progress. One participant in Brunet's research (2016), for example, stated:

In fact, since the riots and everything, I find that it has evolved pretty well, women are now definitely equal to men, and that's good. We are no longer inferior, we have quite the same salaries. I would not think there are still differences. (p. 140)

While another remarked that:

Today there are many less [feminists] [...]. Before, we could see women who wanted more rights precisely because they had nothing, nothing, nothing. But today, since women may have [...] about two-thirds of men's wages, they complain less and they do with. (p. 160)

As these examples show, participants who were operating at this level of historical consciousness tended to have an ambivalent or negative attitude towards feminism because they believed that the issues feminism was meant to address were resolved. It should also be noted that the participants who displayed an exemplary form of historical consciousness tended to exhibit a rather unsophisticated conception of historical agency, which saw change as the result of intentional actions by significant individuals. A good example of this can be found in the way most participants in Brunet's (2016) research summarized their textbook readings by attributing historical change to a few notable individuals. This was the case, for instance, in the reduction of the abortion battle to the actions of Henry Morgentaler (p. 175).<sup>7</sup>

There were also a number of participants who displayed evidence of what Rösen (1993; 2006) referred to as *critical* historical consciousness. As noted above, individuals operating with this sort of historical consciousness should be quick to seek out counter-narratives and challenge traditional beliefs. An example of this kind of thinking can be seen in Pollock's (2017) research, when one of his participants justified their inclusion of Indian Residential Schools in their most significant events, by remarking that:

It was one of those events that reflected really poorly on Canada...It challenges the image of Canada being so perfect and welcoming...It was significant that we weren't respectful, that we were xenophobic...Even though they (First Nations) were here first we treated them poorly; it is an example of our treatment of others. (Pollock, 2017, p. 4)

While the ability of these students to question the traditional narrative of progress is heartening for us as educators, it should be noted that these students, like those operating at the exemplary level, tend to see a gap between the past and present. So, while these students recognized and discussed historic injustices they were still quick to draw a distinction between *then* and *now*, stating, for example that difficulties faced by women today were less serious "because in the

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<sup>7</sup> Colley (2017) found that pre-service teachers also tend to explain change through references to individuals.



past, [feminist] fought for [...] the right to vote, to get equal salaries, but now it's just, let's say, not to be judged for what we wear on the street [...]" (Brunet, 2016, p. 136).

A key factor in these students' separation of the past from present was their acceptance of a highly individualistic theory of agency that is in keeping with Pomerantz and Raby's (2017) description of "Girl Power." Perhaps the clearest indication of this came from one of Marie-Hélène's participants, who stated:

At this moment, I live a very happy and normal life. Like my other female friends, I feel I have the same level of power and possibility to have a useful future as any male: a proof, my mother earns more than my father. (Brunet, 2016, p. 161)

The ideas underlying this statement—that women are as powerful as men, that gender barriers no longer exist, that the present is somehow free from the prejudices of the past—came through in most, if not all, of our interviews.

Taken as a whole then, our reanalysis of our data, with a focus on historical consciousness and theories of agency, has drawn attention to several items of importance. First, and foremost, this analysis highlights the necessity of considering participants' historical consciousness and theories of agency when attempting to explain the ways they think about feminism. Our failure to do this initially, led to our confusion regarding our participants' thinking. By adopting what is essentially a more theoretically informed approach we were able to gain deeper insights into our participants' thinking. Second, this research has drawn further attention to the possible connection between historical consciousness and theories of agency. While these two concepts are logically connected the relationship between the two is, we believe, in need of further investigation.

Finally, the prevalence of the "Girl Power" frame in our participants thinking is troubling, as the idea of "Girl Power" promotes a hyper-individualistic approach to agency and would seem to act as a barrier preventing entry into Rüsen's (1993; 2006) genetic level of historical consciousness. As mentioned above, the genetic level of historical consciousness is characterized by a sort of self-reflexivity or metacognitive awareness through which the individual sees itself as a cross-point, recognizing the constraints the past places upon the future, but also seeing the possibility of change in the future. While there is no doubt that the "Girl Power" narrative is empowering, its denial of the existence of structural barriers leads to the false, and often damaging, impression that the failure to "have it all" and succeed in all areas of life should be seen as a personal failing (Slaughter, 2015).

### **Conclusions and Suggestions**

In the end, this paper has attempted to accomplish two goals: explaining a confusing set of findings and calling on researchers and teachers to devote more attention to a still under-researched aspect of history and social studies education. It began with a discussion of two research projects that investigated students' attitudes towards gender and feminism. It used the findings from these projects, which both authors found surprising and disappointing, to draw attention to an aspect of history teaching and learning that is under-researched: the connection between students' theories of agency and their historical consciousness. The paper then outlined some of the existing research on historical consciousness and conceptions of agency. This work

highlighted, among other things, the tendency of young women in Canada and beyond to operate within an individualistic “Girl Power” understanding of gender. Re-examining the findings from the two research projects with the “Girl Power” cognitive frame in mind helped to explain the tendency of our research participants to ignore or deny the limits that structures and beliefs place upon individual agency in the present.<sup>8</sup>

We argue that the case studies described here lead to two suggestions in regards to the teaching and learning of social studies and history. First, as noted, there is a need for more research into Canadian students’ historical consciousness and individual theories of agency. While there has been some scholarly interest in this area (e.g., den Heyer, 2003, 2012, 2018; Seixas, 2012), much of this work has sought to capture students’ attitudes towards history and to document the different narratives of Canadian history that are held by various groups (e.g., Conrad et al., 2013; Peck, Poyntz, & Seixas, 2011). While this work is undeniably important, we would like to see it supplemented by research that focuses upon the application of these narratives. Studies of this sort would move beyond documenting the existence of different perspectives on Canadian history, towards examining how the intersection of identities and culture influence the perspectives of individuals on the present. Research of this sort is beginning to be carried out with students in the United Kingdom (Foster, Ashby, & Lee, 2008) and may provide Canadian researchers with useful tools and approaches for their own work.

We also suggest that history teachers need to devote more time and energy to understanding and enriching both their students’ and their own individual theories of agency (den Heyer, 2012). While we are hesitant to generalize from our two case studies, it does seem probable that many students in Canada operate with highly individualistic theories of agency and they often bracket the past away from the present, believing that while structures and societal beliefs shaped the actions of those in the past, present-day actors are not similarly constrained. This paper is not intended to provide directions on how teachers might do this. We would suggest, however, that teachers begin by explicitly discussing the idea of agency, by providing students with an appropriate vocabulary for the analysis of agency, and, perhaps most importantly, by modelling for students how contemporary life can be better understood when it is placed in historical context. Anthropologists Mahoney and Yngvesson (1992) explain the paradox of wanting to present women as victims of a patriarchal society, while celebrating their victories and agency. The combination of these two reductive narratives is problematic as it reduces the diversity of experiences of women’s lives, focusing either on victimization or on complete free will. The reality is more complex and unequal power dynamics and marginalization should be studied not only as limitations, but as identity building factors leading to resistance.

In helping students to recognize the connections that exist between past and present, teachers would be assisting their pupils to develop the sort of rich and self-reflexive forms of historical consciousness that should be an aim of history education programs. For while the tendency of our participants to believe they possess complete agency is understandable—who would not want to have complete control over their own life—it is not only a false belief, but also a potentially dangerous one, as it can lead its adherents to blame themselves for things

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<sup>8</sup> We should mention here that we would both be curious to continue this research to see if the #metoo movement, which gained greater traction after our data had been gathered, has had any impact on understanding of women and group agency.

outside of their control and to also ignore things they might otherwise try to change. Zanzanian (2009) captures all of this quite well, referring to the triad of past, present and future to explain how “consciousness in the present of the usefulness and meaningfulness of things past affords security for tomorrow” (p. 58). Developing this sort of consciousness is not only a goal worthy of history education, but also a much-needed response to the idea of *Girl Power*.

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