

# WHEN “HISTORY” HAPPENS TO RESEARCH: A TALE OF ONE PROJECT, TWO RESEARCHERS, AND THREE COUNTRIES IN A TIME OF GLOBAL CRISIS

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In this article, we have examined how historical events shape the research process, even when research is carefully planned and rigorously executed. Through an examination of our experiences conducting international data collection during a three-year SSHRC funded period in which the War on Terrorism and the War in Iraq began, we suggest that social context affects all aspects of every research project, from planning, to funding, to data collection, analysis, and dissemination. History, particularly significant world events, should be re-examined and redefined so that it is no longer understood as a variable that affects poorly planned research, but rather as an integral part of the research design and process.

Key words: international education, mixed methods, foreign language

Dans cet article, les auteurs examinent comment les événements historiques transforment le processus de recherche, même lorsque la recherche est soigneusement planifiée et rigoureusement exécutée. Par le biais d'une recherche subventionnée par le CRSH et au cours de laquelle commença la guerre au terrorisme et la guerre en Irak, les auteurs font un examen de leur propre expérience de la collecte de données internationales, faite durant une période de trois ans. Ils suggèrent que le contexte social influence tous les aspects de la recherche, de la planification jusqu'aux résultats, de la collecte des données à leur analyse et à leur diffusion. Ils affirment que l'histoire devrait être réexaminée et redéfinie de telle manière qu'elle ne soit plus considérée comme une variable mais plutôt comme une partie intégrante du plan directeur de la recherche et de son contenu.

Mots clés: éducation internationale, méthodes mixtes, langue étrangère

*The respondent survey, or questionnaire, seemed the most comparable way of looking at countries, for example, attitudinal comparisons. We learned about its problems. First, the assumption is that individuals are differentiated, separate from the group or system, and have acquired values, attitudes and other attributes that differ from others. This is widely disputed. Values, for example, are often not acquired characteristics of individuals that influence their behaviour but, rather, emanate from the system (such as an ideology), or from situation (such as crises). Second, it is likely that social development or a culture determines individual differentiation, which defines the 'normal' distribution, or bell-shaped curve, of individual characteristics found in some countries. (Teune, 1990, p. 54).*

*However, probably no theory that deals with a social/psychological phenomenon is actually reproducible, insofar as finding new situations or other situations whose conditions exactly match those of the original study, though many major conditions may be similar. Unlike study of a physical phenomenon, it is very difficult to set up experimental or other designs in which one can re-create all of the original conditions and control all of the extraneous variables that may impinge upon the social/psychological phenomenon under investigation. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 250)*

All researchers, qualitative, quantitative, or those (such as ourselves) using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, set themselves the goal of collecting data that accurately represents a situation or social phenomenon. In quantitative research, researcher concerns with the scientific "holy trinity" of reliability, validity, and generalizability (e.g., Kvale, 1995, p. 20) are the means by which researchers establish control (or at least theoretical control) over the accuracy, stability, and consistency of the research process, and thus establish a kind of control over the research findings. In qualitative research, researchers begin with similar concerns, but over time notions of reliability, validity, and generalizability have been reworked or replaced by notions of dependability, expanding concepts of validity, conceptions of resonance, and discussions about reflexivity and representation vis-à-vis the role of the researcher and her or his power/influence in the research situation (e.g., Lather, 2001). Such concerns expressed by both quantitative and qualitative researchers have been raised before even considering, much

less negotiating, the complexities of cross-cultural research and the potential impact of current world events on international research. In this article, we explore the implications of current and significant world events on the research design and process, with special attention to questions such as those of power and agency, latter-day military and linguistic colonialism. Our aim in this article is not to re-tread the well-known path from what one of our anonymous reviewers has referred to as "naïve empiricism" to a more nuanced sense of the machinations of power, politic, and pandemic, but rather to tell the tale of how two researchers, already somewhat familiar with the argument in the post-structuralist, post-modern research literature, found themselves caught up and trapped by it through forces beyond their control. We are these two researchers, Sandra and Nathalie.

Because we were doing both quantitative and qualitative research, we looked at all the biases and threats to validity, reliability, and resonance in both qualitative and quantitative research. One frequently cited variable is referred to as the "history effect," a threat to internal validity in which other events coexisting with treatment or events intervening between two treatments in a time series research design significantly impact the research results (see below). The history effect is normally described as local, temporary, and confined to a particular population, location, or individual.

In this article we explore, by contrast, lasting, even permanent, effects on research data caused by world events as they become a part of recorded history, events that "make history" or "go down in history," but which intervened in a multi-year, international research project. Constrained by grant proposal stipulations, programmes of research such as ours may be vulnerable to the extraordinary events, in this article referred to as "history," that construct our ordinary research lives. We use specific examples of world happenings and political unrest to examine how any particular point in history can have multiple impacts on research. It is not the particular events we recount that are of importance, nor the fact that the events precipitated crises, but rather we emphasize the momentary interruptions, and the realization that the contexts for the researchers and the researched are constantly evolving and responding, influencing the perceptions and positionalities of both.

At the same time, we thank the reviewers of this manuscript for pointing out to us the contradictions between our research voices and our argument, between standard definitions of history and a specific research definition of history, and for helping us to further reveal ourselves.

Given debates like those mentioned above, researchers, such as ourselves, engaged in cross-cultural, international, comparative research are faced with a tremendously complicated task (Oyen, 1990). In our SSHRC-funded study of "social-suggestive norms" (Miele, 1982, p. 18) in language teaching and learning in France, Japan, and Canada, we considered how to be flexible enough to accommodate both the opportunities and constraints imposed by the roles of languages and cultures, (e.g., Kouritzin, 1999), the complex negotiation of researcher identities in countries where we did not reside, and the multiple sites and contexts in which we would be collecting data. We focused particularly on context and site, given that "social suggestive norms" were defined as the social and historical norms, institutional and economic influences, perceptions of pedagogical practice, public attitudes, perceived opportunities for multilinguals, collective values, and perceptions of governance and administrative structures on foreign language learning, which we thought was a fairly comprehensive description of context. Already personally and professionally familiar with the contexts of education in both France and Japan, we also familiarized ourselves with the historical influences on education in each country, as well as any recent educational policy change or innovation dealing with languages. The French Minister of Education, for example, acknowledged that France could not participate in the emerging globalized EU economy through the medium of English or French only: "Tout montre que l'avenir de notre pays et des jeunes Européens impose la maîtrise d'au moins deux langues vivantes étrangères en plus de la langue maternelle," (Lang, 2001, p. 10), while Ministries of Education in both France (Ministry of Education, France, 2001) and Japan (Mombusho, 1998) introduced foreign language teaching in primary classrooms, with the intent of creating global citizens.

In terms of research design, we were cognizant that critiques of international quantitative research are often directed toward developing

a research design and research instrument(s) in one country for testing or implementation in another. We therefore included international students and participants in our survey and interview construction, and used focus groups so that we could address (to the best of our ability) issues and ideas cross-culturally. We were also cognizant that international qualitative data involves translation, complicated issues in research ethics (e.g., Piquemal, 2001), intercultural understanding, significant knowledge of multiple contexts and history, and cross-validation or triangulation (Benjamin, 1968; Easterby-Smith & Malina, 1999; Ember & Ember, 2001). As Bertaux (1990) writes:

In the classic paradigm of comparative research, the goals of cross-national or cross-cultural projects are ultimately theoretical. Comparisons 'allow variables to vary', to use a vocabulary which is heavily biased but has become universal. What in a given country, or culture, is taken for granted does not apply, does not exist, or exists differently in another one. The variation that is thus introduced helps greatly in determining what is linked to what, what is produced, with which effect, and how powerful are the consequences of a society's main structural features whose considerable consequences, precisely because they are structural, invariant, are too easily forgotten. (Bertaux, 1990, p. 166)

To be safe, we therefore planned for mixed method research (i.e., quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and document analysis), "a type of research design in which qualitative and quantitative approaches are used in its type of questions, research methods, data collection and analysis procedures, and/or inferences" (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003, p. 711; see also Creswell, 1994, pp. 173-192). We constructed a survey using the most rigorous means possible to ensure that cross-cultural viewpoints were included from the outset. We distributed the surveys widely within our sample population in each country, collecting a total N in excess of 7000. We used the surveys to construct culturally appropriate, open-ended interview protocols and questions, following which we interviewed 125 people from each of five sample populations in each country. In terms of research design, we felt comfortable that we had tackled the holy trinity, and ensured significant controls over the data collection. Although we were not planning to make claims in terms of generalizability (random sampling was simply not possible), we had sufficient numbers of 100 per cent samples of certain populations that we

felt we would be able to make some significant comparisons, which could later lead to claims. In short, we were covered in terms of the principles of cross cultural measurement described by Ember and Ember (2001): we understood that our measurement was indirect; we reflected the cultural context and purpose of the study; we aimed for reliability, precision, validity, and explicitness, and we used multiple methods (p. 39). Despite our planning, our careful adherence to research design considerations and our rigor, we were, as it turns out, unprepared for what happens *when history happens to research*. The effects of history in a quantitative research paradigm we were prepared for; Capital H History, also known as significant current events, we were not.

#### HISTORY EFFECTS

History is normally viewed as a confounding variable, a threat to validity in experimental research that may cause failure to eliminate a rival hypothesis, thereby leading to poor conclusions (e.g., Graziano & Raulin, 2000, 190-191). Silverman (2001, pp. 9-13) suggests that in designing research projects, social science researchers must ensure that they consider and account for historical, political, and contextual effects on the research design. He suggests that historical sensitivity in thinking through the research topic would enable researchers to take into account "relevant historical evidence" (p. 9) thus preventing researchers from falling into the trap of viewing social phenomena through the filter of present day thinking (see also Marshall & Rossman, 1995, pp. 89-90), and thus producing social science research which is what Kouritzin (2000) has referred to as "contemporaneously grounded" (p. 15). Similarly, Silverman (2001) warns researchers against failing to grasp the politics behind the way a problem is formulated in the social sciences, by which he means failing to understand that there are official explanations of social problems or questions that are important for attracting funding from granting agencies, but which also may start researchers on research based on false assumptions. He refers to this as political sensitivity. Finally, Silverman posits that contextual sensitivity must be developed, in which researchers ask questions differently, avoiding ethnocentrism. Failure to develop historical, political, or contextual sensitivity would, apparently, seriously undermine the reliability of a study.

In this article, we use Silverman's position as a starting point, arguing that researchers do not cultivate historical, political, or contextual sensitivity at the beginning of a research project, but rather these questions must be considered throughout the research process. In this article, we have considered historical and political sensitivity, illustrating how we struggled to understand how "history" happens to research through our own research experiences and contributions of our research participants.

#### A RESEARCH MOMENT: DOES HISTORY AFFECT WHAT IS FUNDED AS RESEARCH?

In the summer of 2001, we decided to collaborate in seeking funding for an international comparison of social suggestive norms (Miele, 1982) in foreign language teaching and learning in a Western Canadian, a Japanese, and a French university, guided by the following three questions: (a) What are the social-suggestive norms that encourage or discourage foreign language learning in Canada, France, and Japan? (b) How do national, regional, or local policies and/or strategies in promoting the learning of foreign languages compare with one another, and how have these impacted or been impacted by social-suggestive norms? (c) What conditions and strategies are transferable to the Canadian context that might promote the learning of foreign languages for all Canadians? We decided to use our educational experiences and professional contacts in Japan, France, and Canada to plan and execute data collection across multiple sites over a three-year period. Our research proposal, including both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, was in draft form on September 11, 2001, when three jet airliners hit their American targets, and the world was introduced to Al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the growing obsession with terrorists living among us, terrorists posing as students, who were concealing their identities by learning to speak English, taking flying lessons, and engaging in American cultural pursuits, leading to concerns about terrorists who were home grown. On October 15, 2001, we submitted our research proposal to SSHRC program on Initiatives in the New Economy.

Given our junior positions in the academy, and given that our proposal did not address a current “hot topic at the time of writing, we were prepared not to receive funding for the research proposal, but reasoned that we would get some good feedback from the SSHRC grant reviewers to resubmit successfully the following year. Then, slowly through the fall and winter of 2001, it was revealed that a lack of Arabic-English translators to read intercepted messages was at least partly responsible for the failure of US intelligence to issue prior warnings for the attacks. Media reports cited the low number of Arabic speaking employees in the federal system, and the fewer still who were fluent in Arabic, and working for the CIA. In the months after 9/11, talk show and water-cooler conversations focused on the role of linguistic and cultural understanding in global conflict, often drawing [unwarranted and unfair] parallels to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour and the controversy over whether or not American intelligence authorities had or had not broken the Japanese communications code, and whether or not there had been sufficient expertise in Hawai'i to understand the Japanese language.

In March 2002, we learned that our research proposal was funded at the level we requested, over \$160,000, a very large amount of money for young, untenured, assistant professors. Reviews of the grant identified our proposal as an important topic, a well thought out plan, and, although none of the reviewers cited events intervening between the time we submitted our research proposal and the time they adjudicated it as affecting their judgments, it is hard to imagine that the multiple legends that began to surround the events of 9/11 did not influence the peer review process. We also became aware that foreign language learning had developed into a hot topic for our colleagues, and that our own identities as language teachers and international researchers had morphed us into the Cinderella story of the faculty.

It is possible that History began to affect our research project from the beginning. We cannot cite evidence, yet our lived experiences of having our research proposal funded suggested that a cataclysm in world events partially enabled us to carry out a research project without being subject to the normal constraints of limited time and money. This is not to argue that our research design was ineffective, nor that our



proposal was weak, but rather to raise the question "would the reviewers have been as easily convinced of the urgency of the research were it not for the events of history, and the aftermath of media attention?" In medical research, it is a common-place, at least among lay-people, that funding is directed toward hot topics, diseases, or issues that have an impact on a large number of lives, often within the demographics of the powerful.<sup>2</sup> The questions that get asked, and those chosen by funders to be worthy, result from political forces and motivations because the answer to "what is important research?" is "whatever the public wants/needs to know." Social suggestive norms in the form of historical and social influences, public attitudes, and institutional or economic factors smudge the lines between interested research and non-interested research, and continued to have an unpredictable and unexpected impact on our data collection and findings throughout the research process.

#### A RESEARCHER MOMENT: WHEN HISTORY AFFECTS THE RESEARCHER/S (SANDIE)

My primary concern before flying to Japan for data collection was the murmuring about pandemics which began with the SARS outbreak. Fearing that our flight might originate in Toronto, the centre of Canadian SARS, I arranged to leave on the first flight out of Winnipeg, one not coming from Toronto. On March 21, 2003, in the wee small hours of the morning, I boarded a plane from Winnipeg to Vancouver, just hours after the Americans attacked Iraq. By the time the flight landed in Vancouver, our airline announced that anyone holding tickets for that day was permitted to exchange them for a time later in the year. Already traveling, I continued to Osaka, then on to Okinawa, from Vancouver.

Data collection took me from Okinawa, where 80 per cent of the American bases in Japan are located, to Akita, a fairly remote northern city, to Fukuoka, the original target for the bomb which hit Nagasaki, to Tokyo, the seat of government, to Osaka, where I collected data at a university famous for its connections to the West, for its commitment to Christianity, and for upholding the principles of peace and justice. Visiting classrooms to explain the research project, and to distribute surveys, I found myself answering pointed questions from students who

first wanted to make sure I was not American, and second wanted to know how Canada had managed to keep from joining the coalition forces. The university students whom I encountered did not endorse their government's decision to support the United States, even as they were aware that the American military presence in their country compromised their ability to make independent decisions. They were, it appeared, particularly interested in Canada's political position because of Canada's proximity to American military installations, and what they perceived to be our shared cultural assumptions. During the opening months of the war in Iraq, discussions about the war dominated, leading to conversations about American global proprietary interests, English as a global lingua franca, English as a colonizing language, and English linguistic imperialism.

Because I am Canadian, I also found myself under suspicion about SARS. Trying to remain on schedule with data collection, I traveled extensively, adhering to a demanding regimen of 14 hour days, seven days a week, carrying cases filled with the surveys, forms, envelopes on one arm, and my luggage on the other. It was only a matter of time before I came down with a barking seal cough and a high temperature. Coupled with my Canadian passport and the fact that I had entered SARS-free Japan after the outbreak in Canada, I found that at times I could not gain an audience with administrators who were concerned that my symptoms resembled those of SARS. In short, there were student populations I wanted to survey, but I could not negotiate access to students or classrooms because of the pandemic. On the good side, I also frequently got a seat to myself on busy trains once my travel companions realized I was Canadian.

#### A RESEARCH MOMENT: WHEN HISTORY AFFECTS THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS (NATHALIE)

It was in the early afternoon of a week day in February 2003. I was walking back from my lunch break to the University of Paris IV (Sorbonne) ready for what I hoped would be a productive data collection afternoon. I had planned to administer a significant number of surveys to first, second, and third year university students enrolled in foreign language classes. I had arranged to meet with three classes that

afternoon which, according to my calculation, would amount to about 400 surveys minus a probable return rate of 30 to 40 per cent. I had two months to gather 2000 surveys from various universities and I had a pretty tight schedule. As I got closer to the university, I came across a demonstration against President Bush and the war in Iraq. Because it was quite a big crowd that had taken over the entire street and most of the sidewalks, I had to slow down quite a bit, which caused me to worry that I might miss my appointment with my first class. I did not want to miss an opportunity to "get the data." I finally arrived at the university and ran to the class from which, to my surprise and disappointment, students seemed to be walking away. I waited a few minutes and asked a student who wasn't rushing away as fast as the others if the class had been cancelled. The student looked at me and seemed surprised by my question. He said

Well, they are all out in the street demonstrating against Bush and the war in Iraq. That's where I'm going too. I don't think anyone is going to show up. This is a really big deal, you know. This demonstration is coordinated internationally. Today, there will be students demonstrating against the war in Iraq in many different parts of the world. (personal communication, author's translation, February 2003)

I responded to him as politely as I could while trying to hide my disappointment at the thought that I was about to miss an opportunity to gather a couple of hundred surveys. Paris IV is a big university and there were going to be about 200 students in one of the classes. I had only two more days scheduled in Paris after which I had to travel to another university in another part of France. I told the student, "Of course, I understand, thank you." As I watched this student join his contingent for this political action, I thought back to the moments in my student life when I chose to skip a class to become part of a public body that had chosen to express a voice against some political decision. The classroom was not where life was unfolding back then nor that day. As I could not really picture myself running after students with my surveys in the streets of Paris, I walked back to the demonstration and enjoyed the expression of this public socio-political energy. I wondered what kind of impact this political event would have on my data collection. Quantitatively, I was confident I would still be able to reach my quota by

perhaps contacting another university or re-scheduling meetings with these classes at a different time, provided that history would “leave my research alone” (Indeed, I eventually returned to Canada with substantial data, though not quite as substantial as I had originally planned). I wondered, however, whether such an event in which students participated actively, would affect the data qualitatively. Perhaps students might respond differently on issues related to social-suggestive norms in foreign language learning after having gone through the experience of taking a stand on issues related to international relationships and political decisions. I reminded myself, did our study not focus on, among other things, social and historical norms, institutional and economic influences, collective values in relation to perceptions of foreign language learning? If so, could we not, should we not recognize that when history happens to research, research data themselves are informed, changed, and perhaps even validated by this history?

This seems to suggest that research involving human participants is a social process influenced by historical, public, and political forces, such as demonstrations against the war in Iraq, that have the potential to create, shift, or affect a political consciousness that may result in changes in public and personal perceptions on many different issues, including perceptions of foreign language learning.

#### A RESEARCHER MOMENT: WHEN HISTORY RECONSTRUCTS RESEARCH (SANDIE)

Shortly after I traveled back to Japan for the second time on March 1, 2004, the country was abuzz with the situation faced by the Imperial family. Princess Masako, the wife of the Crown Prince, had borne one daughter, and then suffered a miscarriage. In ten years of marriage, she had produced no other heirs, and she had not been seen in public for nearly a year. Her husband, the Crown Prince, pled her case to the nation, explaining that she was exhausted from living within the constraints of the Imperial Household, and by the public nature of her role. He reminded Japan that Princess Masako had been a diplomat before marriage, that she was fluent in German and French as well as English, and that she had looked forward to international travel and

diplomacy. After marriage, however, she had traveled outside the country only once, and her talents as a polyglot were being wasted. Media reports, especially editorials and opinion pieces in English language dailies like the *Asahi* or the *Mainichi*, openly speculated on whether or not the Crown Prince would divorce her.

At least in their interviews with me, women interviewees found the situation faced by Princess Masako compelling, perhaps because I was Western and accustomed to news of divorce, perhaps because I was a career woman who found herself similarly occasionally trapped by my assigned identity position in Japan, perhaps because it was a convenient segue into discussing how they had themselves given up careers and study to be wives and mothers. Particularly during the preamble to an interview when participants explained their rationale for participating, interviewers often cited Masako-san's roles as princess and mother, versus her role as a diplomat. There appeared to be tremendous sympathy for her situation, and identification with her situation, particularly among the women participants who had quit their own careers after getting married to focus on child-rearing. Because of the demographics of power in Japan, therefore, this particular news story affected my sample groups differentially; although administrators, government leaders, and businessmen (all male) were not affected at all, female language teachers, female students, and housewives were. Whether the media attention linking Princess Masako's language abilities with her unhappiness with her constraint influenced volunteer participants by encouraging them to volunteer (the topic and sample questions were displayed on the call for volunteers), or whether they were simply influenced to answer the questions with reference to Princess Masako is impossible to determine, but there is no question that the story did affect the consciousness of participants. Some participants made comparisons between themselves and her situation, and assumed that I would also be aware of the story and all its details, meaning that I did indeed have to "stay on top of it." In response to question such as "Does the media affect people's attitudes toward foreign languages in Japan?" and "Can you name three well-known Japanese people who can speak more than one language?" comments ranged from the oblique "you know, [the Royal family] situation" to "the mass media coverage

[about Princess Masako] influences Japanese people" to an indirect criticism in "[the former Emperor] spoke French but no English; [the current Emperor] speaks English but no French....very surprising," implying sympathy with Princess Masako who comes out well because she is "a polyglot." Substantive portions of the interview data would not be interpretable for a researcher unfamiliar with that particular moment in Japan's history, when and how it occurred, the likely consequences it will have over time, and why it impacted different categories of interviewees differently.

#### A RESEARCH MOMENT: WHEN HISTORY INTERROGATES DATA COLLECTION (NATHALIE)

The second stage of data collection, which involved semi-structured interviews of 125 participants in each site on language learning beliefs, attitudes, and motivations, aimed at teasing out some of the trends and contradictions revealed in our surveys. As I began these interviews in March 2004, the Ministry of Youth Education and Research in France published a research report ranking seven European countries according to their abilities to learn foreign languages (Ministère de l'Education Nationale, 2004). This study, conducted in 2002, evaluated the level of competence in English of 15 and 16 year-old students across Europe. It was made clear in this report that French students came last. Because this report was presented and discussed in many circles, both academic and non-academic, a large portion of the population had come to know about these findings. As a result, rarely did an interview go by without the respondent making a pointed remark on French people's ability and willingness to learn foreign languages. To interview questions such as, "Do you think that speaking more than one language is important?" "How would you describe French people's level of competency in a foreign language at the end of high school?" "How is learning foreign languages encouraged in France?" responses pointing to these recent findings included responses ranging from "Did you read the report that says that we are the worst in Europe?" to "Obviously if we are that bad, this means that it is not a priority in France," responses which were often accompanied by a sarcastic sometimes bitter laugh. Would the

respondents' judgments have been as severe had these reports ranking France last not been published at that time?

The extent to which this news release had an impact on the participants' responses points to the need for different ways of analyzing data as well as different ways of theorizing about data analysis. We wondered how these comments may affect the comparative dimension of our analyses. Indeed, the French educational system mandates that study of two foreign languages is required in both junior and senior high school, a factor that we identified as a strength and reason for further investigation in our research proposal particularly in contrast to Canadian language policies. As well, recent initiatives aimed at integrating foreign language learning in elementary classrooms in France have been identified as positive, yet reactions of the respondents to the publicly released news of the country's ranking seemed to momentarily overpower and hide some of the positive thoughts that were briefly expressed about these initiatives. Indeed, most participants recognized that the study of a foreign language in elementary schools and the study of two foreign languages in junior and high schools were among the most positive government initiatives, these positive remarks were almost systematically followed by expressions of discouragement and hopelessness because these participants almost never failed to mention the Ministry's report. Had these interviews been conducted prior to this news release, participants' responses might likely have been more positive. We, therefore, have to address the following questions in our data analyses: Is this negative perception of French people's ability to perform well in a foreign language something permanent, which would make it a relevant descriptor when defining national and comparative portraits? Or, rather, is this perception only temporary, meaning essentially related to current events, in which case comparative analyses will have to reflect the extent to which history might have conditioned the participants' responses?

#### A RESEARCH MOMENT: WHEN HISTORY "INTERRUPTS" RESEARCH DATA

Fifty of the 125 participants who were interviewed in each country were students, many of whom had participated in demonstrations or protests

against the war in Iraq. Although at the time we wrote our research proposal, we believed that we would be positioned somewhat neutrally, given the statistical and large-scale nature of our research methodology, we had not anticipated the extent to which we would be positioned politically. After collecting the surveys during a time of world crisis, we both felt that politically something was happening to our research, although we could not identify its specificity, significance, or relevance. We therefore decided to add a question to our interview protocol, that we thought might address the potential impact of history happening to research: "How have recent world events (like SARS, the Iraq war, the war on terrorism) affected your feelings about learning foreign languages?" Upon reflection, the simple fact that we decided to ask such question seems to suggest that our research was not only politically motivated by the general state of the world (purpose, significance, and potential implications as outlined in the research proposal) but was politically interrupted, altered, and influenced by sudden current events in the general state of the world.

To the question, "How have recent world events (like SARS, the Iraq war, the war on terrorism) affected your feelings about learning foreign languages?" many participants responded that these events did not affect them at all, which caused us to wonder how educational institutions such as universities are positioned (and position students) with regard to world events. However, some students contended that not learning foreign languages could potentially further complicate and worsen international relationship, making connection to the need for language education. Specifically, quite a few participants specifically suggested that the war in Iraq could have been avoided or "better handled" had the two parties (or at least the one who is in power and about to invade) sought to understand each other's worldviews and values. This type of understanding, the participants contended, can only happen through foreign language learning. The following questions arose: Did the war in Iraq affect our research methods? Furthermore, did the war in Iraq, affect the respondents' responses? If so, are the data we gathered much different than if they had been collected at a time that was not so historically/politically charged in terms of the divisions between the haves and the have-nots, and the visibility afforded globally



by news media that provides daily evidence of the injustices wreaked upon nations and peoples by other nations and peoples? If data gathered are politically charged, does this mean that notions of validity and generalizability are context dependent, meaning dependent upon current fluctuations and interruptions in political, social, and economic forces?

## DISCUSSION

### *History as Process and Product*

Over the three year period of data collection, our beliefs about research were profoundly affected. In the beginning, we had held to the argument that research, carefully conceived, and incorporating many careful triangulation elements, can produce a stable portrait of the social fabric, that:

A piece of research will be highly valued if it is so clearly reported that somebody else can do the same thing again and obtain the same results. Accurate reporting of a piece of research is therefore not just a matter of good manners: the practical possibility of repeating the research means that it is open to a test of reliability. (McDonough & McDonough, 1997, p. 65)

By contrast, at the end of the research project, we were convinced that no matter how carefully research in the human sciences is planned and executed, it may not necessarily adhere to the values of reliability or validity. It may pass tests of reliability, but it would not be reliable over a century, perhaps not over a decade. Put another way, in response to Ember and Ember's (2001) argument that, "If a test is supposed to measure some enduring characteristic of an individual, it should give approximately the same result when that individual is tested again," (p. 127), we suggest instead that what appear to be enduring characteristics of individuals are likely to be threatened by sudden events that may lead to their developing different senses of positionality in the world. Individuals are shaped by social phenomena, and social phenomena are fundamentally unstable.

These research moments suggest that history does affect both the process and the products of the research. History, along with

maturation, repeated testing, and attrition, is often listed as one of the major confounding variables that may affect research data, potentially leading to erroneous analysis and interpretation. Particularly in quantitative inquiry, history is generally referred to as a factor, a *disturbance* that may affect internal validity, leading to such admonitions as: "During the course of the study, many events that are not of interest to the researcher can occur and possibly affect the outcome. In general, threats to internal validity due to history are greatest with longer times between pretest and posttest measurements" (Graziano & Raulin, 2000, p. 191).

Our research moments, in contrast, suggest that although history does alter data, careful research design cannot predict, eliminate, or minimize the effect. We instead suggest that rather than looking at history as a threat to validity, it might be more appropriate to consider history as contributing to knowledge production in a way that enhances relevance and meaningfulness. Such approaches would then acknowledge that research, whether quantitative or qualitative, involving human participants is historically and socially bound. Holding a vision of research free of historical disturbance as a utopian principle is unrealistic, and even unattractive. This view of research as contemporaneously grounded divorces research from the historical forces that shape the questions asked, the research funded, the way data are collected or analyzed, or the way those who answer the research questions are regarded. Although divorcing research from history may be tactical for researchers concerned with the agendas of academic enterprises, and although it may be expedient for some engaged in knowledge production or consumption, it is not without its own severe limitations in terms of knowledge stability. Moreover, our concerns may not be limited to social research; in medical research for example, who is to say whether or not clinical cancer drug trials administered to carnivorous, obese, car-obsessed North Americans have any relevance at all to devout, ambulatory, vegetarian monks in the Himalayas?

In short, the question that we are raising is whether history should be/may be looked at as a temporary variable that produces *undesirable* effects that may be/should be controlled through additional methodological measurements, or whether history should be/may be

looked at as a permanent, though evolving variable, that researchers may learn to rely on and take account of, and that produces effects that are an integral part of knowledge production and data interpretation. We suggest the latter: that history is a process and a product. History affects the political position of the researcher and the positions of the interviewees, while current events produce both the questions researchers ask and the answers given. History is a process that may affect many aspects of any research project, and it is a product, at this point, a mostly undocumented and unrecognized portion of the results of any and all research projects. In fact, history is an underlying determinant of human perception, the force at work in producing power relationships. History is not a fixed variable; there is nothing vary-able about it. As I (Sandie) have argued in another context, "wind speed is variable. The colour of one's socks is variable. Power relations which begin work on individuals during early childhood are not" (personal research journal). The course of history and even specific current events determine who holds health, who has wealth, who asks questions, who funds the answers, who "counts" as researchable, and who does that counting.

#### *Positionality*

Because our study focused on contextual influences on foreign language learning in Canada, France, and Japan, we initially regarded positionality as a key concept, considering that we needed to recruit participants who could reflect opinions from various socio-economic, political, educational, and cultural positions within the social fabric of each nation. From those positions, the respondents were asked to speak, among other things, about their own perceptions of the social value of foreign language learning, with special attention to the incentives and disincentives in social contexts that encourage or discourage foreign language learning, including social and historical norms, institutional traditions, pedagogical practices, and innovation. What we did not consider was that the extent to which the various social positions our respondents occupied might shift as the respondents re-positioned themselves socially and politically to the sudden world events.

Indeed, during the course of our data collection, we came to realize that the respondents' answers to our questions about foreign language learning were significantly influenced by the sudden historical crises much of the world was experiencing, and that the events unfolding locally, nationally, and internationally gave us a shared context that determined how we approached our roles in the research project. In turn, this led us to understand that our data resembled detailed snapshots of the highs and lows of bull and bear markets, but without capturing an image of general tendencies of the stock market over an extended period of time. The highs and lows of individual stocks within the stock market cycle produce bull and bear runs; it is only the long term investor who can attest to the general tendency of the markets to increase. In fact, it is only the investor with a truly long term outlook who will acknowledge that stock markets themselves are a historically recent innovation, and that they are artifacts relevant only to this particular period in time. By contrast to Graziano and Raulin's (2000) suggestion that "threats to internal validity due to history are greatest with longer times between pretest and posttest measurements" (p. 191), we suggest that threats to excellence in knowledge production due to history are greatest with shorter times between pretest and posttest measurements. Qualitative research cannot be seen as a short term investment. All research results must be viewed as contemporaneously grounded events on which the effects of history are paramount. With such an orientation, it also becomes apparent that knowledge, once produced, is not fixed. It is inherently unstable, mutable, and historically contestable.

In short, we became aware that, although we had planned our research to take into account various social and cultural positions in each country, we did not (and indeed could not without the gift of clairvoyance) locate our research project within the larger social and cultural conversation in which history produces those social and cultural positions, and in which any effort to control for the effects of history could be seen as a barrier to good research, rather than an indication of having produced it.

## CONCLUSION

We suggest that the research process produces particular results because the process itself is a political process. It is one thing to be a feminist, critical theorist, post-structural, post-colonial scholar, but what does that mean in the context of doing research that is further complicated by the struggles of women, questions of power and agency, or latter day military and linguistic colonialism? And, when data collection is profoundly affected by events, how could history not impact the research findings? History affects researchers' relationships with participants. It affects how researchers present ideas. It affects respondents' interpretations of questions. It affects respondents' answers to questions. It affects the way in which researchers view the results, analyze the results, and write up the results. "History" as a variable is a polyvocal research participant.

In terms of our specific research project, this led us to wonder about the role of education in facilitating the emergence and the expression of political consciousness. Although we cannot advocate that universities should become an arena for political sparring, when we reflect on many of the written comments that students made on their surveys or those documented in our interviews, we realize that many of the concerns expressed relate to the perceived lack of teaching focus on current world events, leaving students to feel that what they learn in foreign language classes did not make enough room to explore the role of languages in international relationships, as well as who they were and how they were positioned in an increasingly globalizing world. This could also explain why most of the respondents responded to the question about how recent world events affected their feelings about learning foreign languages with surprise, often stating that they did not see the connection between the two: How indeed is language learning/education positioned with regard to world events?

We came to reconsider current events only as history by reflecting on the intersection of qualitative and quantitative data in our research project. Although there have been many discussions about the limitations of quantitative inquiry as mainly preoccupied with methodological rigor – discussions that suggest the need for more interpretive methods grounded in the socio-historical contexts of inquiry

– much of the focus of such debates revolves around an “either/or” paradigm, meaning that research is either scientifically based, grounded in traditional objective methods, or interpretive, inherently shaped by the social, cultural, historical, and ethical contexts in which the inquiry is taking place.

At a time when the field is deemed to be awakening to multiple paradigms of inquiry, we find, rather paradoxically, that a great deal of the dialogue within colleges of education is characterized by a simplistic either-or mentality. This mentality pits quantitative and qualitative research against each other without informed exploration of the substantive historical and intellectual traditions behind the methodological frameworks, focusing instead on straw men erected to dramatize the shortcomings of the opposing methodology. The debate often becomes a shallow one in which those defending traditional quantitative methods argue issues of rigor, validity, and generalizability, while those defending qualitative methods argue issues of meaningfulness, relevance, and sensitivity to individuals and contexts. (Paul & Marfo, 2001, p. 538)

One response to the either/or paradigm of quantitative and qualitative research has been to advocate for the need to engage in mixed method research, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies and longitudinal and cross-sectional research. Our experiences tell us that mixed method research too has its limitations, especially in terms of comparison, as history affects the research. There may not be any solution but there is a need to document the historical context of the research not only as the researchers are collecting and analysing data, but also at the moment when they are writing up the data. Accordingly, we suggest that research should be subjected to the scrutiny afforded by poststructural worldviews to take into account issues of historical power, and those of historical positionality, to engage in a constantly metamorphosing contextual struggle, balancing the context with the data, with research/ed positions, and to do so without viewing history as a disturbance, and we suggest that it is valuable to do so without trying to develop and apply yet more tests or criteria to establish reliability, validity, and credibility.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The names should be read as equal authors as this paper was written with equal collaboration.

<sup>2</sup> For example, one of the authors has a son who has an illness which is rare, often fatal in its acute phase, almost unheard of, and therefore unfunded.

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