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Editorial: Perspectives on history and moral encounters

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Introduction

We are at a time in world political history that seems to be on a precipice. Over the past decade, it is difficult to ignore the global growth in popularity for autocratic governments, also in some countries which for decades were either strong democracies or moving towards stable democratic governance. The current Russian attack on Ukraine brings into stark focus the political instability many citizens are facing—historical problems are causing, or used as a pretext for, current conflicts. History educators across many sectors—primary, secondary, university, and in public spaces such as museums and galleries – are curious about how these and other current events and issues can and should be approached. The events raise anew the questions of whether and how we can learn from the past, what we value as good and bad in the past, and how these insights might affect our present and future judgements. In relation to this it becomes vital to ponder how educators and members of the public can communicate the situation in Ukraine and similar events to others, while avoiding the bias that *presentism* can bring.

This special issue is a capstone of our project, History and Moral Encounters: Exploring theoretical and empirical intersections of historical and moral consciousness from a history didaktik perspective. The project, funded by the Swedish Research Council from 2018-2021 aimed to increase knowledge and understanding about intersections of historical consciousness and moral consciousness to develop new theoretical tools for history teaching that can support education for democratic citizenship. Modern history teaching is expected to contribute to developing students' critical thinking and commitment to democratic values and human rights; yet there was little research on how historical interconnections are interpreted by students and linked to their moral consciousness when the project began. Over the four years, members of the project team undertook two major research activities, with sub-projects within them. They include:

- 1) A large-scale theoretical overview of the research on intersections of historical consciousness and moral consciousness within history education from 1980-2019; which culminated in theoretical articles that explored the understandings of key theorists and a systematic literature review of existing publications mapped across almost four decades; and
- 2) An empirical comparative study of high school students from Finland, Sweden, and Australia that sought to investigate, using a history text, how students express their understanding of moral consciousness through a lens of historical understanding.

Members of the Historical and Moral Encounters research group that make up the project, include: Professor Niklas Ammert (Principal Investigator), Linnaeus University, Sweden; Professor Silvia Edling, University of Gävle, Sweden; Associate Professor Jan Löffström, University of Turku, Finland; and Associate Professor Heather Sharp, University of Newcastle, Australia.

Comparative research

A focus on comparative research has been at the centre of the empirical component of this project, with research being carried out in high schools across three countries: Australia, Finland, and Sweden. Building on this research, comparative work that enables the exploration of traumatic, contested, and/or difficult pasts across more nations will enable a clearer picture of the differences and similarities including whether there are culturally specific norms of how high school students engage with historical texts and how they express their ideas and thought processes that can then be analysed according to notions of intersections of historical consciousness and moral consciousness.

Outcomes of the project show that there is potential to develop nuanced understandings and strategies of intersections between historical and moral consciousness that can be used in history education to stimulate students' democratic citizenship. This is an area the project team—now expanded—is investigating in further depth.

Publications

In addition to this special issue, the following research outputs have been published from the funded project:

Ammert, N., Edling, S., Löfström, J., & Sharp, H. (2023, forthcoming). *Att lära från, om och med det förflutna I nuet*. Gleerups.

Ammert, N., Edling, S., Löfström, J., & Sharp, H. (2022). *Historical and Moral Consciousness in Education: Learning Ethics for Democratic Citizenship Education*. London: Routledge.

Löfström, J., Ammert, N., Edling, S., & Sharp, H. (2021). Advances in ethics education in the history classroom: after intersections of moral and historical consciousness. *International Journal of Ethics Education*, 6(2), 239-252. doi:[10.1007/s40889-020-00116-w](https://doi.org/10.1007/s40889-020-00116-w)

Edling, S., Löfström, J., Sharp, H., & Ammert, N. (2021). Mapping moral consciousness in research on historical consciousness and education - a summative content analysis of 512 research articles published between 1980 and 2020. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 54(2), 282-300. doi: [10.1080/00220272.2021.1970817](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2021.1970817)

Edling, S., Sharp, H., Löfström, J., & Ammert, N. (2020). The good citizen: Revisiting moral motivations for introducing historical consciousness in history education drawing on the writings of Gadamer. *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education*, 19(2), 133-150. doi:[10.1177/2047173420936622](https://doi.org/10.1177/2047173420936622)

Sharp, H., Edling, S., Ammert, N., & Löfström, J. (2020). A Review of Doctoral Theses Since 2000: Historical Consciousness in the Australian Context. *International Journal of Research on History Didactics, History Education and History Culture*, 41, 123-142. Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1426491>

Löfström, J., Ammert, N., Sharp, H., & Edling, S. (2020). Can, and should history give ethical guidance? Swedish and Finnish Grade 9 students on moral judgment-making in history. *Nordidactica : Journal of Humanities and Social Science Education*, 4, 88-114. Retrieved from <https://journals.lub.lu.se/nordidactica/article/view/22345/19929>

Ammert, N., Sharp, H., Löfström, J., & Edling, S. (2020). Identifying aspects of temporal orientation in students' moral reflections. *History Education Research Journal*, 17(2), 132-150. doi:[10.14324/HERJ.17.2.01](https://doi.org/10.14324/HERJ.17.2.01)

Edling, S., Sharp, H., Löfström, J., & Ammert, N. (2020). Why is ethics important in history education? A dialogue between the various ways of understanding the relationship between ethics and historical consciousness. *Ethics and Education*, 15(3), 336-354. doi:[10.1080/17449642.2020.1780899](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449642.2020.1780899)

Sharp, H. L., Ammert, N., Löfström, J., & Edling, S. (2017). Bridging Historical Consciousness and Moral Consciousness: Promises and Challenges. *Historical Encounters Journal*, 4(1), 1-13. doi:[10.52289/hej4.100](https://doi.org/10.52289/hej4.100)

In addition, to the joint publications listed above, the project team guest edited a special issue of Historical Encounters Journal (HEJ) in 2017 that provided a basis for the project that was subsequently funded the following year. In this first special issue, scholars investigated what it might mean to bridge historical consciousness and moral consciousness from a predominately theoretical perspective, including: examining the ethics of teaching, proposing models to analyse historical and moral consciousness, investigating plurality in education, developing historical consciousness through teaching democracy; analyzing teenager reasoning about historical

responsibility using social psychology, and exploring historical consciousness and the moral dimension.

Moral encounters and historical consciousness

Members of the public, which also extends to high school students, are fascinated by what happened in the past and how and why it is relevant today. We can tell this by the growth in genealogy over recent decades, popularity of blockbuster films that depict historical events, popular historical fiction through novels and picture books, visits to museums and memorials, and commemoration of key historical events such as national and international wars to mention just a few ways history is practiced and learnt about outside of the formal school or university classroom. There is, or at least it appears this way, to be a need to navigate and orient in time as a foundation for individuals to interpret the past, to understand the present, and to consider possible futures. This process may seem abstract, but in everyday life people do consider themselves and positions they take regarding what has happened before, what is going on around them, and what may occur into the future. The process is an expression of a historical consciousness, a central concept in this research. The fascination and the perceived relevance of the past and intersections between the past, the present, and the future is often based on ethical ‘problems’ or fueled by moral reflections—interpretations of current upheavals in world politics impacting civilians are an example of this.

The aim of the four-year project that this special issue capstones, was to increase knowledge about intersections of historical consciousness and moral consciousness to develop new theoretical tools for history teaching that could support education for democratic citizenship. As the Swedish Research Council funded project comes to a close, and our project team moves into an ongoing research group, *Historical and Moral Encounters*, we reflect on our research outputs across the duration of the project. Most recently, our book *Historical and Moral Consciousness in Education: Learning Ethics for Democratic Citizenship Education* was published by Routledge. Sectioned into two parts, this book reflects the aims of the project. First, it examines the theoretical component of our research into the intersections of historical consciousness and moral consciousness and second, its application in empirical research with a focus on educating for democratic citizenship is examined.

Stepping back before the project began, in 2015 the Historical and Moral Encounters research group, whose core formed the Swedish Research Council grant application, organized a workshop in Helsinki, Finland, with invited experts from several countries to explore and discuss what intersections between historical consciousness and moral consciousness could mean, especially in an educational context. A strength of this workshop was that it drew on scholars from a range of disciplines, meaning interdisciplinary insight was at this project’s inception. The authors who contributed to the resulting special issue published in this journal ranged from backgrounds in history didaktik to social psychology to philosophy of education—central in research addressing historical consciousness and moral consciousness. Sample sub-questions posed at the workshops included: *do intersections exist, how could we search for them, how could we identify them, how could we analyse them and how could we explain them?* The workshop helped to define and to frame the project. From the 2017 HEJ special issue through to this one, the project team has learnt a lot about the intersections of historical consciousness and moral consciousness and how this can then be applied to support students in learning for democratic consciousness.

Special issue overview

Towards the end of the funded project, in 2020 a group of international colleagues were invited to a new symposium. This time they were asked to reflect on the results of the project team, namely through key research outputs, and to position the research in relation to, or in light of, new or other theoretical perspectives and interpretations. This second special issue presents an

opportunity to report on how scholars in the field reflect on the work conducted throughout the project's duration.

From the invited researchers to the symposium, this special issue contains articles by the following authors:

Tyson Retz examines what he considers to be the three largest ethical challenges faced by history educators in the Anthropocene. The challenges he outlines include: locating the human in the immensity of geological time; navigating the paradox of human agency; and leaving open the future to individual and collective decision-making.

In consideration of the empirical data of high school students in Finland and Sweden from the Historical and Moral Encounters research group, Liisa Myyry and Mia Silfver-Kuhlampi analysed student responses to a source document meant to encourage historical perspective-taking through consideration of how history teaching could contribute to the moral development of adolescents. They looked at integrating historical and moral consciousness and identified common elements that were shared, including: reflecting on others' perspectives to understand their motivations and emotions for action; and how cognitive development facilitates the development of the two consciousnesses identified here.

Fredrik Alvéén focused on temporal orientations through a comparative study of initial teacher education students from Spain and Sweden. Informed by perspectives of institutionalised gender inequalities, his research examined how the students use temporal orientation when they reason about a subject deeply influenced by moral perspectives. This research has the potential to be far reaching beyond the personal to other topics of interest to historians and history teachers that seek to understand change and continuity in cultural contexts and on matters requiring historical empathy or perspective-taking.

Ethics as an organising concept in history education is the topic of focus for the article by Lindsay Gibson, Andrea Milligan, and Carla Peck. They contend that ethics remains an under-acknowledged, under-emphasized, misunderstood, and contested aspect of history education. They examine intersections between ethical judgements, history education, and citizenship education, emphasizing the importance of ethical decision making within the study of history via school curriculum. Linking to historical consciousness, and acknowledging the complexities of schools, the authors assert that making ethical judgements about the past in terms of what should be celebrated, commemorated, and otherwise remembered connects between the past, present, and future. It is important, as part of developing students' citizenship, for them to understand the role they can play—from a historical standpoint—now and into the future.

About the Authors

Niklas Ammert, PhD, is a professor of history with a special focus on educational science (History Didactics) in the Department of Cultural Sciences, Linnaeus University in Sweden. Since 2014 he has been affiliated as an international collaborator of the HERMES research group, based out of University of Newcastle, Australia. Ammert's research mainly focuses on history teaching, history education and the uses of history – how individuals and groups in society encounter, interpret, and communicate history at school, in higher education, in politics and in other cultural and societal contexts. He has a special interest in inter-relations of history and moral aspects.

Silvia Edling, PhD, is a professor and excellent teacher at the Academy of Education and Business Studies, University of Gävle, Sweden. She specialises in research questions concerning democracy, teacher profession, ethics, and historical consciousness in education and higher education. Edling is particularly interested in developing teacher perception in the crossroad between past, present, and future as well as between knowledge, democratic citizenship, and equity. In 2019 she was appointed as the scientific director of the Programme Democracy and Equity: Learning Processes for Social Sustainability at the University of Gävle.

Jan Löfström, PhD, is an associate professor of History and Social Studies education in the Department of Teacher Education, University of Turku, Finland. In 2020–2021 he was a visiting professor at Linnaeus University, Sweden. His interests in research include historical and moral consciousness, historical reparations, history and social studies curriculum, and young people's civic knowledge and attitudes. Among other topics, he has focused on historical apologies as gestures of symbolic inclusion and exclusion, young people's views on historical responsibility, and the meaning of History to students.

Heather Sharp, PhD, is an associate professor in education with a focus on History education at the University of Newcastle, Australia. In 2015 and 2019 she was a visiting scholar at Linnaeus University, Sweden and in 2016 was awarded a competitive residency Fellowship to the prestigious Georg Eckert Institute in Braunschweig, Germany. She is a founding member of the HERMES research group, convenor of the Tertiary History Educators' Australia group (THEA) and founding special issues editor of the *Historical Encounters Journal*. Sharp's research interests include historical representations in school curriculum particularly around topics of significance to a nation's history, connecting outbound mobility experiences with public history, and students' views on the history they study.