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RESEARCH ARTICLES

Promoting Historical Empathy and the Sociological Imagination: A Three-Phase Educational Framework

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Critical Debates in Humanities, Science and Global Justice

Theorists of the historical discipline widely agree that historical empathy is a key gateway to developing historical thinkers, but minimal research has focused on whether the skills students develop when contextualizing historical actors have the potential to become a foundation for understanding contemporary individuals and social structures. Through an analysis of educator interviews and secondary literature, this article proposes a three-phase framework that educators can use to both cultivate historical empathy within students, and translate these skills to current contexts. The first phase of this framework serves to initially educate students on the basic components of a historical event. The second phase encourages students to collaborate and draw conclusions about the consequences of said event or action, and make connections across contexts to other moments in time. Finally, the third phase is focused on connection making and wider context exploration. Here I hypothesize students could gain a deeper understanding of empathy as a whole, and use the lessons they have learned from historical events, their peers, and class discussions, to look towards current contexts and social dynamics. The main framework proposal offers that historical events and actors can be studied as "cases" in broader experiences, dynamics, and patterns across time and context. This framework contributes to the existing literature through proposing an approach to connect historical empathy and the sociological mind.

Introduction

Humans often view history from the lens of "now." This tendency, known as presentism (Wineburg, 1999), has been shown to disable proper understandings of the past, and discourage tolerance of other perspectives. For example, Barton and Levstik (2004) found that students often struggle to understand the cultures, values, and norms of the past; they decided to approach from a place of ignorance that avoided the alternate social circumstances of differing contexts, which is vital to historical analysis and understanding. Furthermore, presentism stunts students from cultivating the capacity to empathize with others, and bias and polarization can thrive. Beyond the classroom, influential voices are now propagating the idea that empathy is itself to blame for many world problems. While speaking on

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Joe Rogan's podcast last year, Elon Musk claimed that "the fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy" (McCammon, 2025). Musk's antipathy towards empathy is rooted in an ideology that has recently been described as "reactionary technocracy" (Slobodian & Tarnoff, 2026), which supports governmental systems controlled by technical elites, in which algorithms and statistical data dictate all decisions. Reactionary technocracy and similar ideas motivated funding cuts to humanitarian programs, medical aid, and other social services that had benefited countless people. As emerging themes like 'reactionary technocracy' illustrate, developing empathy is vital in today's social climate, as it is one of the few ways we can understand the world around us, cooperate, and advance. This article aims to propose an implementable framework that could potentially cultivate historical and social empathy, and explains their importance as precursors to the sociological imagination.

Literature Review

Previous scholars have defined historical empathy as a combination of three main skills: perspective taking (Doppen, 2000), analysis of a historical actor's thoughts and their setting within their specific context (S. Brooks, 2011; Endacott, 2010; Kohlmeier, 2006), and affective connection to a historical actor and how their experiences and responses differ from that of the scholar (Endacott & Brooks, 2013).

To that end, Brooks and Endacott developed a historical empathy teaching plan that stresses the importance of evidence grounding and context for combatting presentism. Within context, Brooks highlighted primary sources as vital to student analysis, as they offer contradicting viewpoints to perceived notions. In this discovery, students can grow more aware of their generalizations of historical groups, periods, and events (S. Brooks, 2008). Furthermore, Wineburg suggests that traditional textbooks leave minimal room for discourse or personal understandings of a historical event, as they teach the notion that "the way things are told is simply the way things were" (Wineburg, 1999). Endacott found that primary sources offer students a view into what was seen, heard, and felt in the past, reinforcing their potential for increasing student engagement and learning retention (Endacott, 2014).

Thus, past literature underscores that learning the viewpoints of others is vital to developing empathy and understanding the world around us. Edwards explains that studying the opinions, decisions, thought-processes, and viewpoints of oppressors is essential to understanding power dynamics and influences within a specific context, and can be the key to guarding against oppression and injustice in the future (Edwards, 2023). Similarly, success from student sharing was prevalent across past research, as it has been found to encourage deeper reflections and tolerance of opposing views. Arksey and Knight found that class-sharing and debate opportunities offer students the space to clarify their thinking and build off each other's knowledge (Arksey & Knight, 1999). Studies show that after these discussions, students have a much further established understanding of the

perspectives of each notable historical actor involved in a specific event, as well as the larger historical forces that influenced their actions (Jensen, 2008). When studying her students' development through a structured debate, Jensen (2008) found that they were able to deepen their understanding and knowledge of a source, historical actor, moment and time period. Also, the discussion helped Jensen see areas of misunderstanding they needed to address before moving to analysis and student opinion. It is important to mention, however, that grounding each statement in evidence is necessary, as failing to could give students the opportunity to base their understanding of a historical actor in present ideas (S. Brooks, 2008).

Finally, essential questions were positively referenced across past research. Namely, Wiggins and McTighe focus much of their 2005 work on essential questions. They add, "by asking for essential questions, we are encouraging designers to avoid coverage and to commit to genuine inquiry— the discussion, reflection, problem solving, research, and debate that are the requisites for developing deep understanding of essential ideas" (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

In sum, previous studies have sought to define historical empathy and how to cultivate it, and have conducted deep examinations of specific teaching methods in historical and social inquiry. However, few have offered information on the function of historical empathy in connection to what it can offer a learner in broader society. This study argues that historical empathy can be cultivated as a base for the sociological imagination. Central to this is understanding the social and contextual forces that affected historical decisions, and repositioning those understandings to contemporary forces and those which they affect. Additionally, key to this is social empathy and its possible use as the bridge between historical empathy and the sociological imagination. Specifically, social empathy is regarded as the ability to understand the perspective of others, as guided by the social, political, economic, and other power dynamics that influence their viewpoint. Furthermore, sociological imagination is the ability to perceive your life and the lives of others, as situated within a larger system of societal and historical dynamics. I hypothesize that if we can teach students to understand both themselves and others as actors situated within context, we could train a generation to reject the bias and inability to empathize with those who view the world differently.

Methods

This article analyzed data collected from six total interviews with high school educators, and historians, and educational philosophers, including teachers from The Archer School for Girls in Los Angeles, California. Six total interviews were conducted, three of which involved independent high school teachers at The Archer School for Girls who work within history and rhetorical analysis disciplines. These educators were chosen due to the strong emphasis my high school places on innovative practices, including the development of historical empathy. Thus, each educator interviewed was

well-versed in different tactics and philosophies on the subject of history, pedagogy's impact on students, and empathy's place in education. The remaining three interviews surveyed historians and educational philosophers, each with multi-decade expertise in historical analysis. Each holds a unique perspective on the philosophy of education and modern curriculum practices, having worked on both k-12 and higher education projects across the nation. Each participant was selected due to their hands-on experience with teaching high school students, knowledge of forming curricula and experimenting with new teaching methods, or experience with history and its pedagogy.

Each participant was recruited through email, in which the article and proposed interview goals were outlined. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and one hour, and were electronically transcribed through Otter AI meeting software. Each interview was structured, as I designed a thorough interview guide of research questions aimed towards specific teaching methods, experiences, and results. Concurrently, educators were encouraged to reflect and expand on moments that came to mind during discussion, and share student reactions to various framing methods. I also inquired about essential themes in the classroom and what each educator most valued in their lessons, and how development throughout the year reflected those tenets. Engagement and wider scale uses of historical lessons, such as essential questions and connection to the present context was also explored. After conducting interviews, thematic coding was applied to transcripts in order to hone in on similarities and differences across main themes. The process of thematic coding included transcript analysis from each interview for major themes across discussions, then a sorting of various quotes and interview sections into each main theme. Another researcher reviewed the coding for accuracy and clarity, and was followed by a cross-examination with literary analysis to look for contradicting or affirming findings of other research articles. Ethical and consent procedures included informing each participant of the planned uses of their contribution and protecting the confidentiality of each participant's identity. All identifying information of contributors were protected, and their names were not revealed for this publication. To preserve confidentiality all information shared about their experience and relevant backgrounds was consensual and kept minimal to what was necessary.

Results

Across interviews, the importance of establishing context with historical situations was extremely prominent. One educator shared, "you know, you're not really being an historian [without focusing on context], right? Because you're not factoring in how it felt so different to be in 2026 versus 1826... you are trying to understand and discover another place, country, way of being...even what you dress, how you dress, would make your body move differently, like it's different. So there is that kind of objective need [for context] so that you're just not, you know, naively assuming that you can understand someone's difference as the same as your own?" Furthermore, multiple participants highlighted primary sourcing as a useful tool in

establishing context. For example, one teacher offered,"I deliberately don't use a textbook because (...) for most people like that's a pretty quick way to kill any interest that you might have in history, and (...) [s]o I think primary sources are indispensable for giving students a sense of just the texture and color of life in a particular moment." As this teacher suggests, first-person primary sources can humanize a time frame that feels disconnected from the present through personal accounts, opinionated writing, and nuance. Furthermore, they can introduce a more personal, realistic source of evidence that is historically situated within context; thus reflecting the social influences, limitations, power dynamics, and perspectives of historical actors, often from their own perspective or witness accounts.

Prompting is a method by which teachers ask specific questions in order to guide students thinking towards a specific conclusion, and was often referenced as a tool to guide students toward productive conversation and thought when establishing context. A teacher should look to go beyond the given, "You're not just asking when something happened...you're asking all (...) questions of the experience so that you get a more layered and textured understanding of a given historical moment." Concurrently, one educator shared that "the questions we ask are the doorways to these kinds of empathetic or emotional experiences." Consequently, prompting guides students towards the contextual understanding necessary to begin experiencing the independent discoveries and inquiry that empower students.

When prompted about individual discovery versus group engagement, each interviewee emphasized discussion's vitality to establishing learnings, "how do we get students to learn from each other? ...it's how learning will happen, you know, so that we can have cognitive empathy, have high levels of deep reading and critical thinking, [we] do it in community with others, challenge our ideas so that we can get to the better ideas, right? Like you come in with your idea, I come in with my idea, together, we're going to create a better idea." Similarly, teachers commonly touched on discourse as a way for students to develop tolerance for alternative opinions, viewpoints, and conclusions. One teacher shared, "There's a kind of empathy and emotional stake that goes into discourse (...) to take a stand about your idea about something, or to allow it to be a possibility that someone else's perspective might meld with yours, or confront yours, and there might be some kind of synthesis from that confrontation, (...) to acknowledge that is the first step towards being able to be free in that environment, (...), to be open to it, or to be comfortable with that." Thus, discussion and discourse both deepen every student's knowledge of context, and build vital skills necessary for productively working with others that disagree with you.

Participants included repetition and skill building as essential to forming critical thinking patterns necessary to transcend historical empathy to making cross-context connections. One participant added, "patterns and anomalies, like, what's against the pattern and...what is an inference I'm making versus, like, a real, a real... pattern of how humans tend to behave given a certain

situation, and that's what the history repeats itself. It doesn't mean it has to repeat itself, but when we start putting people in a situation, these are the things that tend to be from that situation, ... And we can see that from the past, and now we can choose differently, if we can get meta... maybe we could choose differently and not just repeat the same [oppression or injustice]." As this participant explains, pattern recognition enables students to identify past figures, factors, or movements that may mirror those of the present and future.

One of the most commonly debated aspects of historical empathy is emotion. Almost all interviewees (5 of 6), however, stressed emotion as a key component of student discovery. As one interviewee shared,"We authors, writers, artists are trying to elicit an emotional reaction from you. And so, to be true to that as a reader or as a listener or a viewer of art, you want to have your emotions open. I think you have a stronger and deeper experience with the work. I think if you have an emotional reaction, you are, I think, more engaged as well." Emotion is the individual reaction we all have to the events and situations we experience, and each of those reactions are specific to their experience, which can deepen their involvement and interaction with material.

Interviewees referenced empathy in various ways, whether it be when grounding students in history, dealing with traumatic course subjects, or relating to other students. However, interviews bore a rather unexpected finding, with multiple educators having witnessed empathy bridge students' connections not only with other's viewpoints, but with understanding their own. One interviewee shared, "It's not just drawing you closer to that text and helping you think about it more, but there's a kind of return with empathy (...) you start to understand yourself more absolutely as you empathize with somebody, as you feel emotions, as you think about others' emotions." A different educator explained, "If you're able to see your patterns, self reflect, have time to think through it, then you're able to name what your biases are (...) everybody is walking around with bias. Now the question is, are you aware of what yours is? Yes. Do you have a chance to explore what that is and why it is? Where is it coming from?" In short, empathy offers a stepping stone to self-discovery and guides our understanding of the world and how we experience it.

Discussion

Much of existing literature aligned with educator contributions, and was utilized to translate educator experiences to realistic curriculum. Together, the interviews and literary analysis informed my theoretical argument on how historical empathy could facilitate the sociological imagination. Specifically, the mechanism I propose is as follows: historical contextualization → perspective recognition → awareness of contextual forces → social empathy → recognition of structural influences → sociological imagination. I am not arguing this as a concrete order within this mechanism, as it is possible that specific steps could work concurrently or in alternate succession.

To realize these skills, I recommend a three-phase framework, grounded in my research findings and existing literature, that cultivates historical empathy, social empathy, and the sociological imagination.

First, existing literature and educator interviews stressed the need for context, discussion, prompting, and analytical understanding of a past event for historical empathy to form. Next is transferring the application of empathy from historical to social contexts, thus forming social empathy. This would hypothetically allow students to use extremely similar processes to that which they used in historical situations to understand people living today, and begin to see power, social institutions, dynamics, and influences of current society. Third, I hypothesize those contemporary dynamics seen in the social empathy building explorations can be expanded on towards fostering the sociological imagination. Central to this is the understanding that social dynamics of the past have similar patterns to that of the present, and current events are products of larger dynamics, recurring systems, and social influences that have recurred across history. Various social identities, racial and ethnic populations, economic classes, and other social groups of the present, are each situated as byproducts of millions of years of human nature and processes. Finally, recognition of these dynamics can inform a student's perception of their own place within society, as well as the historical and social forces that led to it, thus forming the sociological imagination. Therefore, my research proposes a three-phase framework that aims to facilitate the development of these historical and social analysis tools in history and social studies classrooms alike.

The first step to fostering historical empathy is introducing context. Based on interview findings, I recommend educators share primary sources that cover multiple perspectives, as they can introduce students to source bias and prevent presentism. Furthermore, primary sources must be sourced, contextualized, interpreted, and corroborated in ways contemporary analysis does not require - which could be extremely beneficial for student analysis and inquiry. Students will be unburdened by analysis and conclusions other than their own, and are offered the space to form understandings entirely on their own. Additionally, with primary sourcing, students have the opportunity to identify source bias, which involves questioning the source's author, purpose, intended audience, and context to better understand a historical situation. The framework also recommends that this step in the process be individualized to ensure each student has the space to form their own ideas and use that specific perspective to deepen future group connections.

Another essential piece to this phase is using prompts to encourage comprehensive contextual understanding. While still in the context phase, literary and interview results reaffirm that questions should be designed to bring students to a baseline understanding of a point in time. Some examples of contextual and evidence understanding questions are: "Based on pages one through five of the reading, why were colonists feeling angered towards

Britain?", "Based on pages one through five, why did the British government want to govern the colonies?", and "What specific interactions between colonists and the British do you think most caused these feelings?"

Next, discussion and sharing of major takeaways after individual context forming was extremely popular amongst educators. Specifically, teachers and researchers often pointed to thoughtful discussion as one of the best ways a student can deepen their understanding. I also recommend teachers specifically monitor the discussion to ensure there's no 'I' perspective or opinionated language. These sentence formats usually lend themselves to a student inserting their own present perspective onto the experiences of another person. Researchers emphasize the importance of evidence grounding here, as lack of evidentiary support could lead to an improper understanding of the time or a present superior view of context or culture.

I recommend that a teacher assess their students' understanding of base-level context before continuing to the next phase of the framework. Usually this can be partially gauged in the discussions, but individual assessments could reveal weak points in understanding while allowing some students who may be quieter to demonstrate their knowledge. In concluding this stage, students have read and hypothetically understood various sources that allowed them a glimpse into the perspectives of various historical actors, received context on the time frame, and developed their comprehension in a group setting.

Once students have proven they understand the context of a historical event, I propose they can begin to bridge the gap between this analysis and opinion. First, students will hopefully be able to recognize and explain the social and power dynamics that informed the event. Second, they could understand the motivations behind why historical actors acted the way they did. This is known as perspective taking. Through examining the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a historical actor, we can piece together their viewpoint, and make an informed hypothesis of their rationale. If complete, this research hypothesizes that each student would properly understand the how, when, who, where, and why of a historical event.

Next, this framework offers that one of historical empathy's main goals is to encourage thoughtful critical thinkers willing to tolerate, understand, and respect the viewpoints and ideologies of others, each of which involves the sharing of individual opinion, understanding, and emotion. This is an inherently human process that involves emotional regulation and training - which can be sharpened in the classroom.

Students are meant to use their knowledgeable stance and understanding of evidence to craft their own informed opinions and judgements of a historical actor or event, which could lead to deeper connections. While they may not agree with each other's views, sharing each conclusion will mutually deepen understanding of both the history, and the different ways people can approach it.

Of course, understanding another person's view on a topic is not the same as validating it, but understanding another's viewpoint can potentially aid in understanding that person. When analyzing situations akin to genocides, colonialism, racism, sexism, intolerance, authoritarianism, and other oppressive themes, it is vital to understand the contexts and mindset that lead to each situation. However, in no way does that justify, endorse, or validate that viewpoint. Teachers can also use this point to prompt students on how their learnings have changed their perspectives (if so). Reflective questions could be: 'What is one specific thing that you learned about during this unit you didn't know before?' and 'What is one person or event that this unit has changed your perspective on?'

One of the most intriguing aspects of historical empathy is ultimate receptiveness to the "ideas, opinions, and practices of others" (S. Brooks, 2008). This framework proposes one of the best parts about learning history is the unique perspectives of each student, and many teachers found that students became more clear on their perspectives and values when learning of the alternate conclusions their classmates came to.

This point marks the shift to phase two: social empathy and cross-context bridging. Effectively, social empathy is the ability to understand different viewpoints, being able to reconstruct the events, experiences, emotions, and situations that influence a different persons' perspective and understanding of the world around them within their context (S. B. Brooks, 2008). After thorough literary analysis and interviews, I propose that the only difference between social and historical empathy is the context; with social empathy, the context is no longer based on the dynamics of a specific time period, but on the social, economic, political, intellectual situations of the present. I hypothesize that historical events offer us the simplest, most well researched situations to practice on, and students could apply those practiced skills on current situations involving more complicated dynamics. In sum, empathy for historical figures of the past could help foster social empathy for those in the present.

When examining historical events from 200 years ago, we have the privilege of hindsight as well as a plethora of historical viewpoints and analyses to understand an event and present it to students. Teachers have the unique opportunity to give students a bird's eye view of a situation, every actor at play, its prior conditions, and aftermath. In this way, the classroom acts as a controlled environment for students to learn to understand the who, what, why, when, and how of an event, and potentially inform an educated, context-aware opinion on it. The evidence-base supporting this framework suggests that this process has the potential to lead students towards becoming more historically empathetic and heightened in their ability to reconstruct the events, experiences, emotions, and situations that influence a historical actors' understanding of the world around them.

This bridge to the contemporary is where essential questions can be helpful. Example essential questions include: "What other historical events/time periods reflect similar elements? What are those elements? And what are the differences? Why are they different?", as well as "What current events or situations reflect similar elements? What are those elements?, and what are the differences? Why are they different?" These questions may encourage students to make connections between various elements of different historical or current events while still weighing their differences. Historical empathy, through analyzing context and perspectives' influence on historical events, has the potential to manifest in more nuanced opinions that connect distant moments in time, fostering new connections, and preparing student analysis for contemporary situations.

For example, if one student comes from a heavily religious Christian family living in a predominantly white neighborhood, the lens through which they see the world might largely differ from that of a student who was raised in an extremely diverse area with non-religious parents. Both students' perceptions are different and worth exploring as a basis for their interaction with the world. Furthermore, these examinations bring empathy beyond the classroom, and could better our mutual understanding of each other and the structural influences that inform us.

Now, the framework hopes to have influenced the creation and recognition of social empathy in students, and the shift to the sociological imagination can begin. To remind, sociological imagination is defined as the ability to understand one's place in social structures, and see the convergence of personal situations with wider social systems (Mills, 1959). To bridge the gaps between students' historical and social empathy, teachers could pose 'meta' level questions. Example questions include: "After seeing the different ways media and sourcing can portray actors and events, what arguments can you make about the role narrative plays in our perception of others and the world? What examples can you pull as evidence?", "How does this influence us, the way we think, and the way we can situate ourselves in society?", and "What other historical events/time periods reflect similar elements?". Concurrently, however, the framework recommends students remain aware of the differences between specific events and contexts. This way, I propose students could think more deeply about avoiding situations in which they could be invalidating, oversimplifying, or equalizing two unique historical moments. Combatting this oversimplification could take form in checking questions, like: "What are the differences between these two events?", "Why are they different?", and "What effects did these differences and similarities have on outcome?". Therefore, students could practice pattern recognition and connection without generalizing varying moments.

Social empathy could help students understand those around them, and the sociological imagination helps us think beyond context to broader themes. To expand, power dynamics, social interactions, and recurring themes repeat throughout catalogued history, and patterns can be tracked.

The hope is that students can use their social and historical empathy to recognize these transcending patterns, and use them to understand the world today as a combination of these countless interactions and histories. Beyond that, students could hopefully use these patterns to recognize themselves, their place in society, and the implicit biases, values, understandings, and ideas they hold as a result of their specific place in the world.

Conclusion

This research, with the correct future empirical testing, has potential implications for educators, policy, and wider society. For educators, there is limited consensus about how, when, and where to teach historical empathy, and how to keep students engaged. This framework acts as another resource to support teachers in educating students, and expanding their goals of historical empathy to social levels relevant to life outside of the classroom. For wider society, polarization and harmful biases are omnipresent. Politics or opinions aside, basic understanding and empathy for others can be developed in the history classroom. Specifically, it proposes teachers use history as a tool to combat presentism and promote understanding; once people learn to think with empathy and curiosity about the past, they can apply it to the present. As for policy implications, this framework can hopefully be utilized by teachers, further optimized based on experience and practice, and leveraged when developing educational policy.

Others can build on this research through testing the framework on student groups in order to gain insights on the results of real-world applications, as it is currently a hypothesis. Student receptiveness has yet to be tested and could reveal necessary revisions for optimal success. My data only included a small interview group based in two locations, so more information is needed to assess the specific educational needs of different locations. Similarly, further research is needed to assess this framework's viability for younger age groups. Next steps to continuing this research include applying this framework in a classroom setting, and using that experimental data to inform and develop improvements.

To conclude, past studies have found historical empathy to be vital for sparking historical connection, curiosity, and understanding within students. Now, I propose these same skills can be built upon for translation to social contexts. Not only can we influence learning to best support historical pursuits, but also to best prepare students for cross-culture, age, and context interactions. I theorize that through both continued use of this framework and research into the connection between historical empathy and the sociological imagination, we can inform a more aware, empathetic, conscientious, and tolerant society for all.

Conflicts of Interest statement

I declare that I have no known conflicts of interest, whether it may be financial, occupational, technical, or in any other way.

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