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# 'HISTORY ON TRIAL' THE ROLE OF MORAL JUDGMENT IN THE EXPLANATION OF CONTROVERSIAL HISTORY

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### **Introduction**

What is at stake in making sense of history? As researchers have found, the answer is first and foremost located within a moral framework (Kello 2016; Kinloch 1998; Llingworth 2000; Salmons 2001; Yeager, Foster, Maley, Anderson & Morris III, 1998). The moral significance of history was acknowledged relatively recently, although by few scholars and not without criticism (Ali, 2011; Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000; White, 1975/2014). This perspective involves three substantial facts about history as a discipline: that the main issues in historical research are functionally moral; that historians' intentions stem from their cultural background and personal morals; and that history, like any other narrative, is a moral account in itself (Koselleck, 1985/2003; Salmons, 2001; White, 2009).

The foregoing has important implications for the teaching of history. Although there is little research in this respect (Llingworth, 2000; Salmons, 2010) there are lively educational debates providing important insights. On one side, scholars such as Llingworth (2000) stress the valuable interdependence between morality and history in education. He claims that morality can help foster the development of historical thinking, as moral development is linked to the process of complex historical understanding. On the other side, some scholars resist recognizing the value of morality in the teaching of history, as it could foster historical misunderstandings, and hinder the development of students' historical thinking (Denos & Case, 2006; Peck & Seixas, 2008). Despite this controversy, there is agreement on the fact that history teachers' practices are permeated by moral values that transcend their own knowledge (Llingworth, 2000). They are part of a society with a specific moral system, and the historical narratives they teach are heavily influenced by societal morals.

In this respect, there is also agreement on the relevance of the narrative association between history and morality in how people understand the world. Both history and morality are experiences of life mediated and interconnected by cultural narratives. Several studies have highlighted the importance of narratives in the representation of past and present experiences, and their role in structuring moral life (Day, 1991; Day & Tappan, 1996; Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Tappan & Brown, 1989). In this sense, as people narrate history they express their morality (Gergen & Straub, 2005); thus, the construction of personal historical narratives results in the recollection of historical facts, and more importantly in the sense-making of the past (Bruner, 2004; Garro & Mattingly, 2000). This sense-making of history involves the construction of narratives that in accounting for past events, provides meanings and understanding that fulfill personal and collective needs regarding emotions, morality, and identity (Haste & Abrahams, 2008; Somers, 1994). The present study seeks to address earlier understudied approaches to history and morality from a narrative perspective, aiming to bridge the gap between the two fields.

### **Historical narratives: past and morality in the construction of collective meaning**

In pursuing collective meaning and understanding, societies make use of the past as a strong psychological and sociocultural glue. It is represented as the common social foundation and mediated by historical narratives. Likewise, in most countries these accounts are integrated into one master narrative intentionally constructed to articulate the events significant to a particular culture (Wertsch, 2000). The master narrative is mainly taught in schools as national history, and provides students an explanation of their nation's origins in addition to guidance for ethically integrating into its society (Billig, 1995; Westheimer, 2007).

Several studies have analyzed the historical narratives available to youth in their educational environments by attempting to draw connections with the students' historical understanding (Barton, 2012; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Carretero & Voss, 2012; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000; Wineburg, Mosborg, & Porat, 2001). This research also provides insight into young learners' beliefs and judgments about history. The findings show the influence of morality on students' historical explanations; among students from a broad range of age groups, historical explanations are notably centered more on intentions and judgments than structural reasoning (Carretero, Jacott, & López-Manjón, 1995). There is also evidence of moral responses in students' explanations of historical figures. For them, historical characters portray particular societal values, such as heroism and patriotism, and their actions are judged from that perspective (Barton & Levstik, 2004).

These findings manifest the value of analyzing the morality underlying student historical explanations. This is relevant for historical education, as the development of historical understanding entails, for example, that students acknowledge that the ideas, beliefs, and values of the people of the past developed from specific historical contexts; however, little research has been conducted in this respect (Foster & Yeager, 1998; Lee & Shemilt, 2011; Yeager, et.al., 1998). Also, few studies have analyzed student historical narratives as a process of engagement and sense-making, rather than repetition of grand historical narratives; such studies examine the personal construction of history as a process that calls not only for knowledge but for meanings, emotions, identity, and morality (Bermudez, 2012; Hammack, 2008). In light of the scarcity of research on the above, the present study aims to discuss how morality functions in students' historical accounts. For this purpose, analysis of the structure of historical narratives can cast light on the interconnections between history and morality.

### **The structural characteristics of historical narratives**

To date, there is a vast literature analyzing the relations between history and narrative, and the implication of these relations for history education (Bruner, 2010; Carretero & Bermudez, 2012; Garro & Mattingly, 2000; Hammack, 2011; Jenkins, 2003; Lorenz, 1998; Peck & Seixas, 2008; Pieters, 2000; Rudrum, 2005; White, 2009). This literature points out that history transcends mere factual knowledge and civic remembrances. It is instead a discipline with its own scientific method, using serious holistic procedures to validate, analyze, and interpret archives and other sources historians have at hand (Iggers, 2005). These studies state that narrative is the most effective vehicle historians use to structure their explanations of the past (Ankersmit & Kellner, 2013; Munslow, 2007). In this sense, history is disseminated through historical narratives which represent validated interpretations of the past, socially contextualized and situated within a particular moral system (Chartier, 2011).

The above statements are part of a vivid debate on the relations between history and narrative (Carrard, 2015). Here the intention is not to engage in an exhaustive discussion of this debate, but rather to use it to frame the study's analysis and findings. In line with the above statements and different history education studies, especially in the field of sociocultural psychology (Carretero & Bermudez, 2012; Barton & Levstik, 2004), it is considered that historical narrative is the most successful cultural tool for transmitting historical disciplinary knowledge to people (Werstch, 2000). It provides historical explanations, collective identity, and conveys normative values (Haste, 2004). Historical narrative is also the most effective artifact students use to make sense of history by understanding the past and its implications in the present. On this basis, the present study posits that there are three main structural characteristics that determine the global functioning of historical narratives: the framework of narrative patterns; the discursive articulation; and the narrative's moral fabric.

The framework of narrative patterns enables insight into how meaning is structured. These patterns are schematic templates that mediate both the representation of historical events and their social significance (Wertsch, 2008); they also structure cultural accounts conveying common historical motifs and values. For instance, studies conducted in different countries show that in students' national historical narratives, there are common narrative patterns such as anti-colonial struggle; the birth of the nation is depicted through the historical motif of the pursuit of freedom, which is guided by values such as bravery, courage, and loyalty (Carretero, 2011; Wertsch & Karumidze, 2009). Likewise, patterns of values are attributed to particular historical characters, and their actions are morally judged (Carretero, Lopez-Manjon & Jacott, 1997).

The second salient characteristic is the discursive articulation of the narrative. Several studies illustrate the array of discourses involved in the explanation of a historical event, and suggest the moral values inherent to each discourse. For instance, the explanation of the nation's origins invokes multiple discourses: firstly, there is a patriotic discourse explaining the significance of battles that were fought for national liberation (Carretero, 2011); and secondly, a threat discourse that creates the figure of a foreign enemy who endangers the country (Wertsch & Karumidze, 2009). Both discourses are often accompanied by a gender discourse that portrays the nation as a caring mother, nurturing her children and expecting the same nurturance in return (Mayer, 2000; Yuval-Davis, 1997). Hence, while people may not be historically accurate, these interconnected discourses provide them with compelling explanations.

The foregoing also shows that there are different moral values associated with historical narratives, such as heroism, respect, defense, and care. Although not all are explicit, every narrative has an implicit moral subtext. Studies have shown that any historical narrative is rooted in the context

and worldview of its construction (Koselleck, 1985/2003; White, 2009). Therefore, the historical facts and characters in a historical narrative, as well as the valuations of these, mirror a specific group's moral system and intentions (Blatz & Ross, 2009; Levstik, 1995). The latter refers to the moral fabric of the historical narratives, the web of implicit and explicit moral values and judgments underlying people's historical accounts. Although this structural characteristic has been acknowledged, there is a lack of research on the function of moral judgments in historical explanations and its relevance for the teaching of history.

### **Study**

The above theoretical discussion raises important reflections on the ways morality and history blend together in understanding of the past. These concern the type of cultural narratives available for interpreting the social world, but most importantly the personal construction of historical understanding and morality. The latter has not been fully explored yet; moreover, some studies even indicate that morality can be an obstacle to the development of historical understanding, while few suggest the opposite (Denos & Case, 2006; Lee & Ashby, 2001; Seixas & Peck, 2004; Von Borries, 1994).

The present paper's focus is not on whether morality hinders or benefits cognition. It also does not aim to find trends or make generalizations about students' morality in the explanations of history. Rather, this study focuses on the possible roles of morality in the sense-making of history. It specifically analyzes the functions of moral judgments in the explanation of common history of students from different countries. To this end, Spanish and Mexican adolescents' historical narratives of the Conquest of Mexico are examined. This historical event was selected due to its relevance for both countries: it is the core topic in their common history and one of the main themes in their school curriculums, with lively and often prejudiced disputes about the consequences of Spanish colonialism in Mexico taking place among the people of both countries.

### **Instrument design and implementation**

The study was conducted through an individual semi-structured interview about the Conquest of Mexico of 1521. Instrument design involved a pilot interview, based on an examination of the most frequently occurring curricula on the topic in both countries. This examination included the contents of these curricula used by the participants of this study. The contents are mainly chronological descriptions of the encounters and battles between cultures, depictions of various historical figures, and a few conclusions regarding the effects of the colonial encounter for both sides (Perez-Manjarrez, in press). A group of four experts in teaching history and educational methodology assessed and validated this pilot interview. Four adolescents, two per country, participated in the pilot interview.

Afterwards, a final semi-structured interview consisting of fifteen questions was designed to address six topics the students showed the most interest in during the pilot interview: general representation of the Conquest, its causes, location, characters, war phase, and consequences (see appendix 1). Implementation consisted of the participants' explanation of the six topics, with each asked to delve into their historical knowledge and moral concerns. The present study analyses the data of two interview questions: *How do you imagine the encounter between indigenous and Spaniards?* and *Why did the Conquest take place?*, both of which yielded significant information on the role of morality in historical explanation.

## Participants

This paper presents an in-depth case study analysis of two sixteen year-old adolescents from Spain and Mexico. Alex is a Spanish male adolescent from Madrid, Spain, and Michelle is a Mexican female adolescent from Mexico City, Mexico. The two participants share similar middle-class backgrounds. They were enrolled in public schools with similar educational methodologies rooted in students' pro-active learning. Both institutions, in Madrid and in Mexico City, were subject to government evaluation of the students' learning outcomes, obtaining outstanding ratings. Michelle's and Alex's narratives are representative of the findings of a larger discourse analysis study on Mexican and Spanish adolescents' explanations of common controversial history. The results in this larger study show how morality functions in forty adolescents' historical narratives. They often use moral judgments to explain history through common discourses that convey the main circumstances of the Conquest. Alex's and Michelle's narratives include the three main common discourses found in the larger study. They also present a wide range of different discursive tools the forty adolescents use to express their moral valuations of the historical event.

## Analysis

This study's methodology is in line with the narrative and sociocultural approach to morality (Day, 1991; Haidt, 2007; Hauser, 2006; Tappan, 1991, 2006a, 2006b) which conceives the self as fundamentally social and dialogical, constructed out of diverse discourses and narratives (Day & Tappan, 1996). In this paradigm, narrativity plays an important role in translating experience into terms easily accessible for others (White, 1980); the analysis of narrative allows for an examination of cultural conventions, social values, and personal concerns and knowledge (Abell, Stokoe & Billing, 2004).

This analysis draws on psychological discourse analysis to examine narratives. Narrative discourse analysis has proven to be very effective in analyzing both the structure of people's accounts, and the discourses through which these are articulated (Edwards & Potter, 1993; Edwards, 2005; Wetherell, 2007). This type of analysis is relevant for this study given that, as several studies show, the social discourses that we engage in provide us with a structure for our personal accounts of the world and ourselves, in addition to moral norms for processing our experiences (Hammack & Pilecki, 2012). The present study proposes a three-stage analysis, using the three structural characteristics of historical narratives, based on three steps of Willig's Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) method (2013: 131-137):

1. *The framework of narrative patterns.* This stage is carried out as step one of the FDA, identifying the direct and indirect references to the discursive object and the ways these intertwine to construct meaning. This involves analysis of historical references, historical motifs, moral values, and judgments the participants use to discursively construct their representations of the Conquest;

2. *The discursive articulation of historical explanations.* This is conducted as step two of FDA, analyzing the central topics of the historical event, discursive resources (such as images, description as attribution, and analogies) and the moral judgments the participants draw on to construct the different discourses linking up their historical explanations;

3. *The moral fabric of narratives.* This is FDA's step three, analysis of the implications of the discourses, namely, what is gained by using these discourses and by what means. This involves examination of the moral actions the participants accomplish by using the discourses, specifically analyzing the functions of moral judgment in the explanation of history.

## Results

### **Narrative patterns: the moral construction of the Conquest**

The students mostly construct the Conquest as a moral event, judging the historical actors' supposed personal traits, actions, and intentions. In their explanations, both Michelle and Alex imply that the Conquest was a beneficial process, both morally good and historically understandable. Michelle begins her account by judging the Spanish and the indigenous for supposed obstinacy and arrogance, but subsequently places negative and positive values on each side:

Initially, I think they were not so different, Indians were kind of stubborn and Spaniards blowhards, haha ... But Spaniards were one step ahead ... They brought positive changes, I mean, 'cause ... Despite being – and not to discriminate – Indians, Indians were very hard working people but wild at times, haha, they had sacrifices and killed each other and someone has to stop that ... It doesn't lead to anything good ... Imagine what our lives would look like if knights and the white elegant nobles hadn't taken control back then ... It would have been a mess, no progress at all! (...)

*And do you think they all agreed on this?*

I think it happened because it had to be, it had to happen.

Michelle explains the Conquest mainly by invoking moral values and the historical motif of peace and progress. In her account, she highlights what she thinks either fosters or hinders her own culture's historical advancement, and by equating progress to pacification she discursively avoids the Conquest's inherent violence. Direct references to violence are either silenced or set aside in order to morally represent the Conquest as a peace-building process. Michelle morally judges the actors, directly attributing violence and chaos to the indigenous, and indirectly attributing peacefulness and order to the Spaniards. These judgments also allow Michelle to construct the event as something positive and necessary for her country's development. She assesses the event by invoking the argument of the "necessary evil", referring to presumed ethnic inferiority and savagery in describing the indigenous while, by contrast, the actions of the medieval knights and nobles are not described as aggression but rather progress for Mexico.

For his part, Alex focuses the encounter on his own rationalization of why negotiation failed. He places the meeting in a context of peaceful dialogue which, however, breaks off fairly quickly and leads to violence:

I think that at the beginning everybody was at peace. The Conquerors arrived and tried to dialogue, just to know where the gold was and continue their journey in peace to other lands ... Indians, they were calm but suspicious ... They didn't want to say where the treasure was, and then they broke the peace and ran to the forest to hide, and then they attacked ... cowards! ... So the Spaniards had to go after them. They insisted in negotiating but then the Indians attacked, so the Spaniards fought back and ... Indians messed up big time ...

Alex explains the Conquest through the historical motif of European pioneer colonialism, described as the quest for gold in unknown lands. He emphasizes the values of fairness, honesty, and peace, as they are the supposed basis for his moral judgments of Spaniards and the indigenous. In referring to the Conquest as a peaceful negotiation that was eventually broken off, he implicitly takes a positive view of Spaniards for being the party fostering honest dialogue, and explicitly condemns the indigenous for misreading the benevolent intention of the conquistadors to peacefully obtain the indigenous' wealth. Finally, it is noteworthy that Alex decides to tell a story of heroic colonization, rather than one of resistance to oppression, especially given that he briefly highlights the indigenous peoples' unwillingness to give up their wealth.

### **The discourses of conquest: power, language, and culture**

As the participants continue elaborating on the Conquest, their accounts take shape in different discourses. Three common discourses were identified, which disclose the three core contexts students place the Conquest's occurrence within.

**The naked wood and the fine steel – discourse 1** In this discourse the Conquest is depicted as an issue of power. Alex and Michelle portray the asymmetrical material conditions of indigenous and Spaniards using a discourse that references two discursive images, one of the characters' appearance and another of war armaments. The first one relies on the description and comparison of the physical characteristics the adolescents attribute to the characters, *nudity versus elegance*, and the second pictures both cultures through a contrast in their weaponry – *the wood versus the steel*. Together, they imply the superiority of the Spaniards over the indigenous:

Well, the Conquest is about the Indians versus the Spaniards ... Indians, I am not saying that they had a physical appearance like homo sapiens, but they had the head like, you know, and were naked back then ... And the weapons, you see that the indigenous have the sticks and arrows, and the Spaniards have swords, and swords against a stick just ... the sword just breaks it in two pieces, man! (Alex)

I think both would be surprised because the indigenous leader (Moctezuma) would say: "Oh God, who is this? He is tall, white, blond hair, blue eyes ..." and the Spaniard leader (Cortés) would say something like: "What the hell is this? This midget, almost naked, and so ... let's smash him!" And of course ... I guess that since the Spaniards were carrying best weapons – not firearms, but more advanced things than spears and wood shields, I mean ... War was quick ... (Michelle)

In the students' narratives the images of weaponry are the most explicit and direct since submission or dominance are correlated with military power. The images of characters' appearance stress dominance and racial stereotypes, as if the indigenous have the appearance of prehistoric humans and thus their submission to people who represent white European ideas of beauty is only natural. These discursive images highly value the Spaniards as superior and more technologically developed, in opposition to the poor value given to the indigenous people. Without directly stating it, Alex and Michelle construct a moral representation of the event by judging the characters based on their appearance and means of war.

**The unspoken rules of language – discourse 2** Over the course of the interview, a second discourse emerges representing the Conquest as a consequence of communication problems, in which the role of language is central. The participants consider that the existence or absence of language, on either side, is determinant of the course of events and their consequences. Alex states this with hesitation, going back and forth in his judgments. He claims that the absence of a common language was the main reason for "things to happen"; but finally he implies that communication problems between the two groups were caused by the indigenous' specific language:

So ... I think that it was very easy for the settlers to conquer because they had more weapons ... and also on top of all the indigenous did not speak their language either. They did not have the same language so there was no communication (...) I think it's the lack of language, because there was not shared language, then things happen because the indigenous spoke an unknown language and people did not know what to do and what to say. ... I believe it



would have been better for the Indians to make a deal, but since they did not speak, there was no way ...

Michelle also considers the superiority of the Spanish language as a decisive factor, alleging that with it came the intelligence to plan attacks. She speaks of the Spaniards as carriers of language, highly valuing them as intellectually superior strategists:-

Also, they have strategies, communication to plan the attacks ... They were more but most importantly, they had brains, language ... The indigenous, although they were a great civilization and built huge pyramids, I think they didn't even speak a language ... I guess they used paintings, like painting on walls to communicate with each other, or something ...

Michelle hesitates to acknowledge that the indigenous can even talk; she judges Indians as prehistoric and backward, only able to communicate through rock drawings.

### **The gift of culture – discourse 3**

This discourse appears at the end of the students' explanations, grounded in what they think the historical actors' beliefs were and how they assess these actors' respective levels of culture. From the adolescents' perspective, lack or insufficiency of culture determined the fate of both sides at the conclusion of the Conquest. Alex describes how by acquiring the Spanish language after their defeat, the Indians could be civilized and gain culture in contrast to their initial state of wildness:

Man ... Mexicans were wild, mindless people like kids with little clothing, babbling, believing in the wind and fire, as if natural forces would solve their problems ... That's why they lost ... So then, Spaniards inculcate their culture in them 'cuz they require Indians to be made Spanish (...) I think it was better because ... dude! It is obvious! The indigenous would have new customs for their own good ... They were turned into people ...

Alex judges Mexicans to be wild, lethargic beings, lacking culture but possessing backward beliefs which ultimately caused their own defeat. He also thinks that the indigenous' cultural assimilation is positive and morally responsible, since it supposedly gave them civility and Spanish values to would enable them to behave better in society.

For her part, Michelle seems to share Alex's judgment. She recalls that the indigenous had an omen that made them trust in the Spaniards with blind faith, which ultimately lead to their defeat:

I guess the indigenous thought they knew the Spaniards were *coming*, their gods ... to mix and teach them new things ... I mean, I heard in school that the indigenous were very religious, that they worshiped the gods of nature and that Indian legends said that their real gods would arrive from the sea or something ... I think their lack of culture, of reasoning, is why they lost and were conquered.

Michelle judges the indigenous for their beliefs which, in her view, make them naïve and compliant; she also conveys that backward religiosity is the reason for their submission. To her understanding, it is the indigenous peoples' lack of culture that determined the course of history and resulted in their own colonization.

### **The moral fabric of the Conquest: The role of moral judgments in historical explanation**

In the students' view, the above common discourses articulate coherent explanations of the event. However, each discourse is immersed in a web of moral values and intentions not explicitly stated at first, which lead to questions about the moral fabric of these discourses and its implications. The analysis shows three main functions of the moral judgments in the students' discourses: justification of the course of history and the actions taken by historical actors; assignment of blame for conflict and war; and normalization of the historical consequences.

### **The Conquest as an inevitable fate**

While both students explain the Conquest, they implicitly unfold the morality behind the history they are telling. Both Michelle and Alex legitimize what they are narrating by means of the historical motifs and moral values in their accounts, which serve to justify the Conquest's course and effects.

Alex appeals to moral judgments in the three discourses to justify the Spaniards' victory and its consequences. As seen in the earlier analysis, he constantly judges the indigenous to be cowardly inferiors, something he sees as evident in their armaments, reasoning, culture, and physical appearance. He also positively values and morally excuses the indigenous' assimilation into Spanish culture by describing what he sees as its advantages. These judgments allow him to explicitly portray significant asymmetries between Spaniards and the indigenous, and thereby implicitly justify the ineluctable end of this war. Alex' final thoughts on the causes of the Conquest summarize his judgments:

Indians had to have brains and think because I think they knew that someday the Spanish were coming, or some people that could be Spanish or American or whatever, but I believe that someday, indigenous knew they were coming, that this would happen, and they had to be prepared. Because I think that when Spaniards conquered America, Mexico, Cuba, and all those territories, it was very easy for the settlers ... When Spaniards saw all the Indians who came, Spaniards were prepared for the unexpected, they knew that this was coming ...

Here he finally introduces a determinant aspect to historical explanation: fate. This allows him to frame his discourses as the telling of something that was inevitably going to happen, thereby morally justifying colonization, as if it were historical fate for any civilized country, *the Spanish or whoever*, to come and civilize any uncivilized culture, *Mexico, Cuba, or any of those territories*.

Michelle uses similar reasoning to morally justify the Conquest. As noted earlier, she rationalizes that the Conquest was a necessary evil. She justifies it as a civilizing process that brought peace and progress to a society which otherwise would have collapsed in its own violence. Michelle ends this rationalization by praising the supposed benefits of colonization, giving it an unavoidable character: *I think it happened because it had to be, it had to happen*. Furthermore, Michelle legitimizes the Spaniards' victory at the expense of indigenous people by depicting the indigenous as inferior in culture, language, and technology. She extensively elaborates her ideas of ethnic superiority in order to negatively judge the indigenous while highly valuing the Spaniards, for instance in her narrative's emphasis on the "better" appearance and clothing of Spaniards. This allows her to morally excuse Spaniards' actions, ascribing to them the agency of a superior civilization.

### **Whose fault is it?**

When Michelle and Alex justify history, it is by directly attributing agency to specific characters. This attribution is used to excuse, as well as to blame. In this regard, as the students judge characters' intentions and actions they are implicitly or explicitly assigning blame. For instance, Michelle places blame on both sides for causing war and violence.

First, in *the gift of culture* discourse, Michelle indirectly blames the indigenous for assuming a passive role, judging them for being religious and lacking in culture. She also blames them for their own tragedy, ascribing negative responsibility to them since they supposedly placed blind trust in the Spaniards. Further on, Michelle argues that because of fear or misunderstanding of indigenous customs, the Spaniards provoked the war, emphasizing that, from her perspective, Spanish religion inherently involves bigotry and punishment:

Maybe they tried to talk, but at seeing the indigenous customs, they probably thought "That's witchcraft!" and got shocked and said, "Ahhh! Wait, this is wrong! Kill'em!" Because Spaniards are supposed to be united in a cause that is good, because God said so, but it would really be a bad cause ... But I think all that for them, everything happened because of God, "There's food, thanks God! God for this, God for that" ... Come on!

In respect of Alex, his view of the indigenous as primitives is the keystone of his judgments in all his discourses; he uses this image to place blame on them, portraying them as unable to speak and reason. His rationalization of the broken negotiations, presented earlier, is exemplary of this. Throughout his narrative, he judges and blames the Indians for the conflict, for resisting the invasion which he sees as being in their own best interests.

### **Taking the Conquest for granted**

It is noteworthy how both students explain the conflict by using normalization and generalization. This is explicit in Alex's narrative, where he takes for granted the events described in his discourse as regular causes and consequences of war. From his perspective, uncivilized people always succumb to powerful civilized ones. Further, as he justifies and normalizes the Conquest he takes for granted its violent consequences; rapes committed by the conquerors are just a normal occurrence in the history of conquests and civilization:

Because even if it's wrong ... When you conquer, you want women ... The Spanish there, they have friends and they laugh ... "I have been with this woman and you with that one, ha ha ..." Because you see that in the movies, how they conquer a place and then, for example ... (...) the cowboys rape the Indian women and such ... But dude, having a child would involve ... would be half and half genes, the regular Mexican that is more Span(ish) ... This generation of kids would evolve for the better ...

For her part, Michelle uses her discourse to normalize the power and supposed ethnic supremacy of the Spanish over the indigenous. Throughout her narrative she takes violence for granted, although when describing the Conquest's causes, she seems distressed by what she considers an unreasonable act:

From what I was told in school, or that I remember, there was a party organized by the indigenous to welcome those who landed ... But then ... I guess it was very shocking, because you see all the dances and such and suddenly they start killing ... Oh, God, that's not fair! (...) But then, you know? ... This always happens, when the new people landed and conquered ...

Michelle rejects as a betrayal the attack perpetrated by the Spaniards during the indigenous' festivities. However, ultimately Michelle comes to the idea that what happened is normal in human history.

### **Conclusions**

The present study highlights the importance of morality in historical explanation. In accordance with previous research (Kinloch, 1998; Lee & Ashby, 2001) the results presented support the pertinence of these studies to historical education; they also demonstrate the relevance of discourse analysis to deepen knowledge of historical narratives' functioning.

The analysis shows that the students' sense-making of history intertwines historical and moral concerns, personal values, and socially significant motifs such as peace and progress. In this process morality plays a significant role, especially moral judgment functioning as a discursive linkage between personal moral stances and historical understanding.

Michelle and Alex explain the Conquest as a civilizing process legitimized in the language of material, cultural, and intellectual progress, while the violent nature of colonialism is overlooked. They achieve this by using an array of moral judgments, within three discourses that pertain to the historical characters' personal traits, reasoning abilities, and beliefs. Moral judgments tend to relate to misconceptions of the past and present-day prejudices, as demonstrate other studies (Lee & Ashby, 2001; Von Borries, 1994). In general, the participants appraise the Conquest through their own moral values, which are rooted in personal historical beliefs of cultural development and civilization.

Overall, moral judgments allow the participants to discursively construct the Conquest as a positive moral event; using a common narrative pattern of Western development, the Conquest is portrayed as a historical process of pacification and development supposedly common to all cultures. These findings are relevant as they allow understanding of how morality and historical knowledge blend in the explanation of history. However, the findings are limited in scope as it is the data collected. More research including a more significant amount of narratives is necessary, in order to fully understand the role of morality in historical explanations through identification of general trends and global categorizations. It is hoped this study encourages further research in that direction.

The study's findings show that the functioning of moral judgments is grounded in the use of historical assumptions, together with discursive practices which articulate the participants' moral appraisals. One such practice is the description-as-attribution, by which, based on misjudgments of certain historical actor's characteristics, the participants attribute negative or positive traits; an example is the participants' depiction of the indigenous as inherently backward cave-dwellers. Another is the discursive interplay of oppositions that the students use to cement their moral judgements and consequent historical beliefs. They repeatedly assess actors and actions using their discursive images within the frameworks of wildness opposing progress, savagery opposing peace, and primitivism opposing civilization. Finally, their rhetorical uses of violence are also worth noting, as they implicitly use notions of "good violence" and "bad violence" to judge historical actor's actions and its consequences.

The foregoing also demonstrates that although the students' historical knowledge is poor and inaccurate, their historical explanations entail complex cognitive and discursive operations of sense-making, especially those related to their moral judgments. This suggests seeing morality not as an obstacle but as a factor enhancing the students' historical understanding and moral

reflection. Some of the participants' comments support that idea, as when Michelle displays moral concern about the attacks against indigenous people, questioning these events' official interpretation and their justifiability. This study's results allow for an awareness of this situation but not its examination, so further research is needed in this regard.

There also remains the issue of debates over what constitutes a legitimate historical education. A great challenge for educators is the promotion of disciplinary skills together with civic and moral goals. For instance, the complex issue of historical causality has been deeply addressed by historians and educators, yet the results of this discussion in classroom practice have not been as expected and student explanations tend to remain simplistic (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Carretero, Jacott & López-Manjón, 1995). In this regard, should we expect students to think like historians, or to use historical causality to understand relevant social issues? I opt for the second choice, but this is an open question that needs further discussion. The findings also suggest the various factors at stake in the students' engagement in the sense-making of history, such as their emotions, social context, identity, and gender. However, the limits of the data do not permit a deep analysis of the above aspects; further research is still needed to advance the findings on history and morality contained in this study.

Finally, of main relevance is the adolescents' type of historical understanding. The way the students address history throughout the three discourses suggests a common belief that progress and civilization, peace and order, must be achieved at any cost. Underlying their historical explanations is a moral assumption that violence is explicable and acceptable, since it contributed culturally and morally to both the colonizers and the colonized. Overall, they appear to agree that everything judged as incorrect or negative belongs the past, and is inherently prehistoric and backward. These findings are worrisome and have important implications for history teaching and moral education, as the students' historical understanding mainly fosters prejudice and the justification of unfair practices. The above findings indicate that further research is necessary to stimulate more complex historical explanations and, most importantly, a more empathetic historical understanding grounded in social justice-oriented moral reflections.

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## **Appendix 1**

### **The Conquest of Mexico. Semi-structured Interview Guide**

1. To start the interview I would like you to comment: What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of the Conquest?
2. Where the Indigenous lived before the arrival of the Spanish? (How do you think was Tenochtitlan (the main Indian city)?)
3. What do you think about the indigenous of those times? (What does they looked like? How they lived, what they believed?)
4. Were they peaceful or violent?
5. We have another great actor of this fact: the European. How do you imagine that they were in those times?
6. Were they peaceful or violent?
7. How do you imagine the encounter between Indigenous and Spaniards?
8. Do you think the leaders had intention for dialogue? (Have you heard of the leaders who were there?)
9. So far, women had been found in the background or absent. What will be their role in those times?
10. Why did the Conquest take place?
11. We know that a great war occurred, how do you imagine it?
12. In addition, in a huge exercise of imagination, where would you be in that war?
13. Do you think this war was necessary? (Did this war make sense?)
14. Finally, we know that the city of Tenochtitlan fell and after all this started a process known as Mestizaje (mix of culture), how would you define it?
15. At the end, what conclusions you drawn from this historical event? (As a Spaniard/ Mexican, how does this topic make you feel?)

Note: The questions in parentheses are the complementary questions that emerged while conducting the semi-structured interviews.