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Gauging reflexive historical thinking: An exploratory study of Colombian undergraduates

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Abstract

This study gauges the development of an historical thinking skill we term reflexive historical thinking and its relationship to economic ideology among a group of undergraduate business students in an introductory history course at a Colombian private university. A survey was conducted twice during a semester in which students answered questions regarding historical agency, personal agency, and economic ideology. We measured the relationships and changes in responses regarding these factors. We hypothesized that students with greater awareness of broad social and economic forces as determinants of historical events would also be aware of an array of social and economic forces informing their personal outlooks. Moreover, we expected such awareness – both historical and personal – to increase during the course. Finally, we wondered how economic ideology influences such awareness. We found little support for the expectation that reflexive historical thinking developed over time, but interesting correlations between historical thinking and economic ideology.

Keywords

Reflexive historical thinking; Effective historical consciousness; Historical perspective taking; History education; Economic ideology

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Introduction

The discipline of history undergoes periodic bouts of identity crisis. For the most part, the collective anxiety revolves around the question of the discipline's claim (or lack thereof) to objective knowledge about the past, and/or its purported lack of theoretical grounding (Thompson, 1978, Novick, 1988). So too, a common refrain among non-history undergraduates is that history is nothing but a succession of obscure dates and events irrelevant to their own lives (van Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2018). Increasingly, however, history professors assert the vitality of their discipline not by ascribing transcendent importance to the past *per se* (and certainly not by laying claim to its objective analysis) but by arguing for the importance of the *cognitive process* required for its coherent interpretation (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015; Levisohn, 2015; Stoel, van Drie, & van Boxtel, 2017; Yogev, 2013). Various names have been given to this cognitive process within the burgeoning literature that would seek to describe and measure it: "historical logic" or "logics of history" (Thompson, 1978; Sewell, 1988), "historical consciousness" (Friedrich, 2010; Nordgren, 2016; Rüsen, 2004; Seixas, 2004; Thorp, 2014), "effective historical consciousness" (Gadamer, 2004; Yogev, 2013), "historical thinking" (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015; Levinson, 2017; Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Peck, 2004; Wineburg, 2001), "historical reasoning" (Freedman, 2015; van Boxtel & van Drie, 2013; van Drie & van Boxtel 2008), "historical sense generation" (Rüsen, 2012), "historical perspective taking" (Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008; Huijgen, van Boxtel, van de Grift, & Holthuis, 2017; Nilsen, 2016), "historical problem solving" (Wineburg, 1991), "historical thinking and reasoning" (Gestsdottir, van Boxtel, & van Drie, 2017), "historical understanding" (Seixas, 1993).

Though the precise meanings and usages of the terms vary, these scholars generally share the contention that a refined capacity for making sense of the past is essential to an intelligent society. Thus, Jannet van Drie and Carla van Boxtel (2008) write of historical reasoning instilling "a significant capacity for the participation in a democratic society," one that promotes "reasoned judgment about important human matters." Jörn Rüsen argues that historical consciousness constitutes "a necessary factor in the cultural orientation of human life" (2012) and a vital component of "moral consciousness" (2004). Sam Wineburg (1991) observes that historical thinking "humanizes" people by teaching them to "understand how others are different from themselves." Indeed, he argues that "the study of history is nothing less than the business of producing human beings" (1991).

We agree that the skills required for making sense of the past are essential to a flourishing civil society. Historical thinking helps us better understand complex processes, enhances our appreciation for context and contingency, teaches us how the past influences the present, and encourages a discerning attitude toward information and its uses. Such skills, however, are not truly effective unless combined with another vital capacity instilled through historical study, that of critical self awareness. To interpret the past is to better understand the present, not simply in the oft-repeated sense of learning from past mistakes in order to avoid their repetition, but rather in that understanding the past requires, and in turn helps generate, a clear sense of one's own time, place, and self. In this article we analyze this quality of self and social awareness instilled through historical study. At the risk of further semantic balkanization, we call this quality *reflexive historical thinking*.

This study was motivated by the experience of teaching a required history course to business school undergraduates at a private university in Medellin, Colombia. These students have, by and large, little to no previous experience studying history (nor other critical social sciences) and, as a rule, little sense of the historical and cultural contingency of their own worldviews. They also frequently hold conservative beliefs about the role of government in distributing wealth and in the regulation of capitalism, views which may influence their receptivity to critical approaches to history. Accordingly, our study sought to answer the question: would the novel experience of studying history inform these students' worldviews and self-perceptions? Or, put differently, would this experience increase their capacity for reflexive historical thinking?

This study contributes to the literature on historical consciousness, historical thinking, and teaching history in several ways. First, it measures the development of students' capacities for critical self and social awareness in the context of studying history. Although previous studies have sought to measure the related concept of historical perspective taking (Hartmann & Hasselhorn, 2008; Huijgen, van Boxtel, van de Grift, & Holthuis, 2014; Huijgen, van Boxtel, van de Grift, & Holthuis, 2017) we are unaware of any previous work gauging students' capacities for this particular facet of historical thinking. Second, we are aware of no previous work on the relation between economic ideology and any facet of historical thinking. Third, if historical thinking skills are indeed vital to the constitution of an intelligent society, they should presumably be taught to a wide range of students (Wineburg, 2018). This study accordingly makes the contribution of gauging a particular historical thinking skill among students from a different academic discipline. In so doing, it raises interesting (if sobering) questions for teachers interested in developing historical thinking skills among students with little intrinsic interest in history.

Theoretical framework and hypotheses

Historical consciousness and historical thinking, while related concepts, differ in their general connotation. That said, there is no consensus in the literature on the precise definition of either term. As a recent article observes, historical consciousness is generally conceived within one of two paradigms: as a *collective* sensibility pertaining to questions of historical memory and culture, or as an *individual* sensibility pertaining to how one makes sense of the world based on one's understanding of the past and its bearing upon the present and future (Grever & Adriaansen, 2019). Historical thinking, meanwhile, generally connotes the *skill* associated with historical analysis and the *procedure* whereby that skill is learned and practiced. Here, too, there is no consensus regarding either the skill or the procedure. North American approaches to historical thinking tend to embark from the procedural step of analyzing and contextualizing primary sources, and then advance to steps related to causal reasoning, broader appreciation of historical context, and judgment. European approaches tend to partake of a more "holistic orientation," emphasizing narrative competence (that is, the ability to generate cogent, evidence-based historical narratives) and historical sense-making (that is, the ability to analyze others' historical narratives) (Ercikan & Seixas, 2015). This article takes an ecumenical approach to the terminology of historical cognition. Our concept of reflexive historical thinking connotes a sensibility (that of self and social awareness) that we posit emerges from doing history. Moreover, reflexive historical thinking may be classed as a refinement of historical perspective taking (HPT), a concept that is, as Ercikan and Seixas (2015) observe, "ubiquitous throughout history assessment research."

Historical perspective taking at its most basic level involves the recognition that the past is a foreign country. In one study, Adam Nilsen (2016) defines it as "the effort to use historical material to explore and reconstruct the internal states of the past, with the goal of understanding something about the person's thoughts, feelings and motivations." However, while such endeavors may guard against the sin of "presentism"—the anachronistic notion that historical actors shared our mentalities and socio-cultural contexts—they do not necessarily address the problem of our own inherent biases as observers. For, as Sam Wineburg (2001) evocatively puts it, "trying to shed what we know in order to glimpse the 'real' past is like trying to examine microbes with the naked eye: The instruments we abandon are the ones that enable us to see." We thus follow the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer in viewing our point of reference not only as something that cannot be overcome, but something that is itself better understood by means of historical analysis. In short, HPT, merely understood as recognizing that the past is a foreign country, is not sufficient; what is required is a corresponding awareness of our fundamental influence upon what we observe.

According to Gadamer's (2004) hermeneutic approach, historical thinking requires a dialectical sensibility he calls *effective historical consciousness* [*wirkungsgeschichtliches*

Bewusstsein] wherein a circumscribed encounter with the past (an "historical horizon") interacts with our own sensibilities (our "contemporary horizon"). Thus, understanding a past event or text is not simply a matter of appreciating the particularities of its time, for in fact understanding "is always co-determined also by the historical situation of the interpreter." It is indeed this notion of co-determination instilled by the interpreter's subjectivity that is transmitted by the word "effective" in Gadamer's terminology. As such, Gadamer seeks to distinguish effective historical consciousness from mere historical consciousness, which he equates with the "naïve assumption that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity." We cannot think thoughts other than our own, hence we cannot grasp the spirit of any age but through the prism of our own. Yet this does not mean that historical analysis is futile. On the contrary, to achieve meaningful understanding is to engage in the act of, as it were, rubbing one's own sensibilities against those of another age, for only in so doing can we uncover the contours of our own sensibilities in the first place: "it is impossible to make ourselves aware of a prejudice while it is constantly operating unnoticed, but only when it is, so to speak, provoked," as Gadamer puts it.

We find Gadamer's concept of effective historical consciousness helpful for its insistence on the subjectivity of the observer, and for its suggestion that refined awareness of this subjectivity is achieved via interpretation of the past. We note, furthermore, that other scholars advocate for the integration of hermeneutic approaches in the classroom (Gallagher, 1992; Grever & Adriaansen, 2019; Parkes, R.J., 2009; Retz, 2013, 2019; Yogev, 2013). However, the hermeneutic process associated with effective historical consciousness was not explicitly operationalized within the History of International Relations course curriculum. This is partly because that curriculum developed gradually over time and necessarily included a considerable amount of straight historical content. But it was also frankly because a clearer notion of how Gadamer's ideas might be implemented, along with a clear awareness of the need for an even more explicit focus on developing historical thinking skills in the course, emerged from the process of conducting the study itself. As such, we also did not operationalize effective historical consciousness in our assessment of students' capacity for historical thinking. Instead, we settled on the related term of *reflexive historical thinking* (RHT) to express the particular sensibility we did seek to inculcate and measure. That term was intended to express the increased self and social awareness that we posited occurs through historical analysis, even if the student is not explicitly engaged in the sort of dialectical process suggested by Gadamer's effective historical consciousness.

Our expectation, in other words, was that taking the course, wherein students were asked to grapple with historical contingency in various ways, would make them better able to critically analyze their surroundings and themselves. Specifically, we hoped that the study of historical contingency and various modes of interpreting the same historical event would raise students' awareness of how both historical and contemporary actors (including themselves) are conditioned by their environments. Consequently, we hypothesized that RHT will increase as a result of taking the course (H1a).

Our study also set out to answer several related questions with respect to reflexive historical thinking: do the students identify economic and sociological factors as critical to the shape of history, or do they tend to view history as fundamentally shaped by autonomous individuals? Do students tend to see themselves as autonomous individuals whose beliefs are uniquely their own, or do they see themselves as products of their particular time and place? Furthermore, we wondered if there is a relationship between these questions: do students who believe history is driven by social and economic forces also tend to see themselves as less autonomous individuals, and vice versa? Hence, we posited that RHT is negatively correlated with students' sense of being autonomous individuals (hereafter, Autonomy) (H2).

Finally, and especially in light of the economic profile of the students in this study, who mostly belong to upper and upper-middle classes, we were interested in the relationship between economic ideology and critical/historical thinking skills. Critical thinkers become aware of the fact that their point of view is conditioned by their experiences, including those of ideological

and/or economic import (Paul & Elder, 2007). Critical thinking is said to be important in different dimensions of an individual's life, including education, political orientation and sense of justice (Franco, Butler & Halpern, 2015). Though it is an intellectual and not a moral virtue such as being just, fair or socially tolerant, one could use critical thinking as a method for justifying one's notion of what is just or fair (Mulnix, 2012). Thus, critical thinking could be related to and/or affected by beliefs such as Economic Ideology (EI). EI is defined as beliefs regarding the proper distribution of wealth and the regulation of business and is correlated with different variables such as political identity and income (Longo & Baker, 2014). EI (as well as political ideology) is rooted in non-conscious psychological factors (Graham, Iyer, & Meindl 2013). To our knowledge, however, there are no studies explicitly inquiring if and how EI is related to critical/historical thinking, nor studies assessing whether EI can change as a result of exposure to critical/historical thinking. Such questions are particularly salient with respect to reflexive historical thinking, which expresses the quality of self and social awareness engendered through historical study. Could increased self and social awareness influence economic ideology? Alternatively, does economic ideology constrain the development of RHT? We contend that RHT and EI are positively related over time (H3a and H3b), and that, as with reflexive historical thinking, EI (that is, the existence of clearly defined views regarding economic regulation and redistribution) should increase during the period of the course (H1b).

Course description and study method

The study was gathered among 79 undergraduates in an introductory course called History of International Relations at Universidad EAFIT in Medellin, Colombia. The course professor is a US citizen with a doctorate in History from a US university. History of International Relations is the first of two required courses in the discipline of International Relations taken by students in the International Business program. As such, nearly all of the students in the course (and all of the respondents in the current study) are International Business students, the vast majority of whom are in their third semester at university. Most are drawn from the upper and upper-middle classes, approximately 68% of the study group being members of the two highest economic strata as defined by the Colombian government[1] (see the *participants and procedure* section below for additional demographic data). The course is taught in English, as is approximately 60% of the International Business curriculum. Though nearly all of the course's students are native Spanish speakers (including all but one of those in the study group) the vast majority are sufficiently fluent in English to undertake undergraduate study in this language.

The History of International Relations course was initially conceived as an historical genealogy of terms and concepts fundamental to the discipline of International Relations: balance of power, state sovereignty, "realist" theory, etc. The current course professor, however, re-made it into a global history of capitalism since the High Middle Ages. His reason for doing so was partly to make the subject more appealing to students of International Business. Additionally, he believed that high political concepts cannot be properly understood without coming to grips with their economic foundations. Finally, the professor understood the course as a counterweight to the generally uncritical professional training students receive in the International Business program, especially with regard to understandings of liberal capitalism and globalization processes.

In addition to such changes in the course curriculum, the professor gradually adapted his teaching method. The course, which each semester includes between 80 and 145 students, was initially (from the beginning of the current professor's tenure in the first semester of 2013) held in an auditorium, wherein students listened to weekly lectures and were evaluated via a midterm and final exam. Given the large volume of participants and the non-existence of teaching assistants, exam questions were in multiple-choice format and written assignments were performed entirely in groups. By the time of this research study in the second semester of 2017, the course's structure had changed substantially: classes were now held in a large open room with round tables (a so-called "inverted classroom" built for the course). Additionally, class lectures

were substantially truncated and replaced with a series of online videos created by the professor. More class time was thus dedicated to activities and simulations, as well as to individual writing assessments (this was also facilitated by the introduction of a TA who assisted with grading). Finally, to incentivize active completion of the higher volume of work assigned, the professor created a virtual course currency (called Clios) and an associated class leaderboard. Students accumulated Clios through (among other means) active participation in class activities. Clios could be applied at the end of the semester to marginally improve quiz and paper grades. Although this study is not intended to measure the effects of such "active learning," "flipped classroom," or "gamification" strategies, it is worth noting that other studies support the notion that such methods enhance student engagement, which in turn potentially improves critical thinking skills (Foldnes, 2016). Several of the course's new activities were indeed expressly designed to inculcate a critical historical sensibility (see *measures and survey timing* below). Accordingly, it was hoped that the introduction of these new learning methods designed to enhance motivation and participation would facilitate the improvement of students' critical historical thinking skills. Even so, the professor remained concerned as to whether all of these changes were actually having their desired effect. This study was created in part to address that concern.

Participants and procedure

In this longitudinal study, the data were collected using the convenience sampling technique. Via this research design, the authors wanted to test student perceptions of historical agency and personal autonomy, along with the question of whether RHT and EI were related and/or increased during the semester. The participants were undergraduate students of an International Business program offered by a Colombian private university. The respondents voluntarily participated in the study. An online survey was administered at the beginning and end of the semester (with an approximately four-month gap between the first and last survey). Overall, from a total class enrollment of 84, the survey resulted in 79 usable questionnaires. Five questionnaires were discounted as the participants were underage (without permission of these students' parents their responses could not be used). The participants' mean age was 19.55 years (*SD* = 1.60). Approximately 36% of the respondents were women. The participants were distributed in four out of six economic strata as follows: 3 = 9.1%; 4 = 22.7%; 5 = 37.9%; 6 = 30.3% (see endnote 1 for a brief explanation of economic strata).

Measures and survey timing

All measures were administered in English since most participants demonstrated proficiency in that language before entering the program. The two-items EI measure developed by Longo & Baker (2014) was used in this study. The reliability of the scale was acceptable (Cronbach's α = .69). The initial statement of the instrument read "To what extent do you agree that the government should…." Participants entered their responses using a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 strongly disagree, to 7 strongly agree. Sample items are: "distribute wealth more evenly"; "regulate business practices more closely."

We used an *ad hoc* scale to measure RHT. The scale was developed by the professor of the course. As suggested above, current literature suggests that institutional context and socio-economic background may affect the participants' historical thinking. The content of the scale was presented to two colleagues, and the research team agreed that the items could grasp the RHT construct, providing the course material could counterbalance the uncritical professional training the students receive elsewhere. The initial statement of the scale was: "I feel that historical events are primarily determined by…" Using a seven-points Likert scale, from 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree, the respondents manifested their degree of agreement with the statement regarding five consecutive items: individuals, economics, politics, environment, and geography.

We also introduced a single item measure in the questionnaire to test H2. The participants indicated their degree of agreement with the following statement through a seven-point Likert scale, from 1 strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree: "I feel that I am primarily an autonomous individual whose choices are my own."

In order to measure their thinking prior to their engagement with the course's historical content, students were first asked to answer the survey questions during the second week of the course. The second survey was given in the fifteenth and final week of the course. During the weeks leading up to this second survey, students engaged in a number of activities designed to boost RHT. For example, a three-week-long activity on "The Rise of the West" introduced students to four theoretical positions, all of which sought to explain, in different ways and based on different assumptions, why the modern political, economic, and cultural system substantially emerged from Europe and its former settler colonies. Students had to familiarize themselves with these four positions by various means, including an in-class Kahoot questionnaire in which they identified paragraphs representing each position. Later, they were themselves assigned one of the positions, and had to explain and defend their assigned positions relative to the Rise of the West in paragraph form. Finally, following an online voting process in which students selected the four best paragraphs (one from each position) from among their peers, the four selected finalists participated in an in-class debate, wherein each engaged with the question of the Rise of the West from their assigned perspective. The exercise was intended to expose students to the question of contingent interpretation: how different values, assumptions, backgrounds and epistemological frameworks produce different explanations of the past. In the class discussion following the debate, students were asked about which positions they personally favored (regardless of which ones they had been assigned) and were asked to share the reasons for their opinions. They were then asked to reflect upon the questions of whether, a) their initial views had shifted or otherwise been determined by the position they were assigned, and, b) whether they felt that their preexisting sensibilities about economic and political models influenced their opinions about the past. This exercise was intended to enhance reflexive historical thinking.

Following the activity on the rise of the West, students participated in a two-part simulation of a climate change summit. In this activity, students represented different countries and had to agree upon a collective framework similar to that of the Paris Climate Agreement (2015). Some students, however, individually benefited from a robust agreement (each country had a different amount of the course currency it received in the event of a strong or weak deal) while others personally benefited from a weaker or merely symbolic agreement. This activity was likewise designed to emphasize the importance of context and personal incentive in influencing ethical perception. Moreover, the simulation, along with other thematic content introduced during the final weeks of the semester, focused on the recent past and present period. During these final weeks, certain historical concepts introduced earlier in the semester were re-introduced in the context of the contemporary Colombian civil conflict. For example, students first encountered the concept of *enclosure* during the study of eighteenth-century Britain earlier in the semester. The patterns and processes of rural displacement in contemporary Colombia in some ways mirror the process of enclosure-based displacement in eighteenth-century Britain. The term was thus redeployed to help explain the process in Colombia. Such concepts, unthreatening and thereby accepted by students when first applied to the remote past, may thus help them perceive the deeply politicized and ideologically determined events of their own time and place in more nuanced light. Again, we therefore hoped that as a result of the activities and techniques introduced in the weeks before the second survey, students would demonstrate enhanced levels of RHT.

Analysis

Mplus (v.8; Muthén & Muthén, 2017) statistical package was used for the analyses. Time invariance was tested, as the study inquired if two non-observable variables (i.e. RHT and EI) were

positively related and changed during the semester. The Exploratory Structural Equation Modeling (ESEM) approach was employed to test time invariance of EI and RHT. This technique allowed us to assess the relationships between these constructs in and along the two time points. It also facilitated the inclusion of Autonomy (i.e. students' sense of being autonomous individuals) in the model as a covariate at both time points. First generation statistical techniques like t-tests, ANOVAS and linear regressions imply the use of suboptimal composite scores. Conversely, with ESEM, researchers can include hypothesis testing aspects such as measurement errors (Marsh, Morin, Parker, & Kaur, 2014). Specifically, the researchers tested an Exploratory Factor Analysis at two time points with factor loadings constrained to equality and correlated residuals across time. The exploratory approach was selected instead the confirmatory one since the RHT scale was created for this particular study. We followed the procedure described by Widaman, Ferrer, and Conger (2010) of evaluating a series of models with increasing time invariance. Testing time invariance helps to establish whether the constructs have the same meaning across measurement occasions (Putnick & Berstein, 2016). Since our analytical approach was exploratory rather than confirmatory, we were not able to assess the lowest degree of time invariance as suggested by the above authors. However, we tested and compared two models: weak and strong time invariance models. The weak invariance model with factor loadings constrained to equality through time demonstrates whether the same set of items measure the same constructs the same way across measurement occasions. A strong invariance model where factor loadings and intercepts are fixed to equality across time helps in comparing latent variable means (Widaman, Ferrer, & Conger, 2010). The maximum likelihood estimator and oblique CF-Varimax rotation were selected to this end. The fit of each model was evaluated using Hu & Bentler's (1999) and suggested cut-off values for the following coefficients: Chi square test of model fit (X^2), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), and Comparative Fit Index (CFI). The comparison between the two-time invariance models was done by assessing the change in the CFI and RMSEA indices (ΔCFI and ΔRMSEA). If these values are not higher than .01, the more constrained model or strong time invariance model can be selected (Cheung & Rensvold, 2002). In the case of all models, RHT and EI items' factor loadings were expected to be greater than .40 (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010).

Finally, we included age, sex, and social strata in the model as covariates of RHT and EI at both time points. Since economic ideology has been found to be negatively correlated with variables such as income (Longo & Baker, 2014), we wanted to control for similar and other demographic variables possibly affecting the results of our study.

Results

Both the weak ($X^2(71) = 69.95$, $p > .05$; RMSEA = .03; CFI = .98) and strong invariance ($X^2(71) = 79.48$, $p > .05$; RMSEA = .04; CFI = .97) models obtained satisfactory overall goodness of fit indices. When comparing both models, we found that there were no significant differences between them (ΔCFI = .01; ΔRMSEA = -.01). Hence, the strong invariance model was selected and Autonomy was added as a covariate of EI and RHT (see Figure 1). The model with Autonomy yielded similar fit indices ($X^2(71) = 88.37$, $p > .05$; RMSEA = .04; CFI = .97). In the strong invariance model, the factor loading of the first RHT item did not reach the critical value. Noteworthy, the item was designed to assess perceptions about individuals shaping history. The three retained items referred to environmental forces influencing the course of history.

The EI and RHT scales were invariant over time, meaning that the measures are useful to assess the corresponding constructs across time points. Our results were significant after introducing age, sex, and social strata as covariates of RHT and EI at both time points. However, only social stratum affected EI at time point 1 ($b = -.25$, $p < .05$). In fact, social stratum correlated with EI at that time point. These results are similar to those of Longo and Barker (2014), who found a negative correlation between EI and income ($r = -.24$, $p < .01$). The correlations between RHT, EI, and control variables are shown in Table 1.

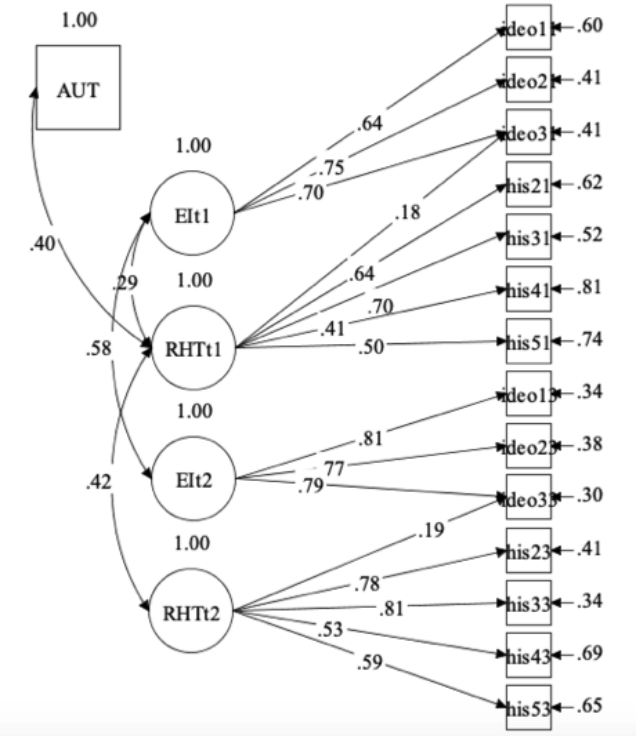

Figure 1. RHT and EI Strong Time Invariance Model.

Note: N = 74; Standardized coefficients significant at the $p < .01$ level; except for RHTt1 -> ei31 and RHTt2 -> ei32, significant at the $p < .05$ level. Non-Standardized factor loadings constrained to equality across time. Non-significant cross loadings and significant correlations between residuals are not shown for the sake of parsimony.

We did not find support for H1a. No significant difference in RHT from t1 to t2 was identified (*MRHT t2* = -.12, $p = .52$, fixing RHT t1 = 0). Similarly, no change was identified for EI (H1b; *MEI t2* = .17, $p = .29$, fixing EI t1 = 0). We found partial support for H3. EI and RHT were positively correlated at time point 1 (H3a), but the relationship was absent in time point 2 (H3b). As for H2, we found partial support indicating that RHT and Autonomy were related, but as shown in Figure 1, the resulting link was positive. After the deletion of the first item of RHT which stated that history is a product of individuals' actions, we would have expected a negative relationship with Autonomy. In other words, we expected to find that students who considered themselves autonomous individuals would also view history as determined by individual personalities.

Conversely, we expected that students who see themselves as being substantially produced by their cultural and economic context would ascribe greater force to such factors in determining historical events. But the opposite happened: students who saw themselves as autonomous individuals were *more* likely to recognize broad socio-cultural and economic forces as determinants of historical events. Conversely, students who thought they were more the product of their social, cultural and historical contexts were less likely to acknowledge those forces in history. This result may indicate that Colombian students' understanding of the terms in question: "I feel that I am primarily:

- An autonomous individual whose choices are my own
- A product of my culture and society"

is different from that of the question's creator (who is from the United States). The creator's hypothesis was that more self-aware students would recognize the degree to which they (and

historical actors) are formed by their surroundings. But he may have underestimated the degree to which Colombian students inclined to attribute historical events to broad social and economic forces also hold negative associations with being themselves produced by their own culture and society. We attempted to test this possibility by asking students of the same course in a subsequent semester what they understood by the sentence, "I feel that I am an autonomous individual whose choices are my own." Specifically, we asked them to choose between the following options as their favored interpretation of the above sentence:

- My choices are my own and not the result of external variables
- I evaluate information around me and then make up my mind

A slight majority (50.6%) chose the latter option as their preferred interpretation (against 47.2% who chose the first option and 2.2% who did not answer). Since those choosing the latter option would not necessarily be unaware of the degree to which individuals tend to be shaped by their surroundings, these results (while hardly definitive) may support the apparently counterintuitive conclusion that Colombian students who are more capable of RHC also tend to view themselves as autonomous individuals whose choices are their own.

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
EItime1	5.17	1.29					
RHTtime1	5.81	.75	.23*				
EItime2	5.19	1.22	.59**	.18			
RHTtime2	5.59	.87	.18	.40*	.17		
Social stratum			-.28*	-.07	-.19	.05	
Age			.07	-.01	.04	-.06	.09
Sex			.17	.16	.24	.20	.18

Table 1. Correlations RHT, EI and control variables.

Note: N = 74; ** $p < .01$ level; * $p < .05$ level.

Discussion

The above findings do not demonstrate appreciable development of the indicators we associated with reflexive historical thinking. In this light, several particularities and pedagogic headwinds ought to be mentioned. The first and most obvious is the language barrier. Although all students of International Business are required to demonstrate proficiency in English before entering the program, the reality is that levels of competence vary from native proficiency to somewhere around advanced intermediate level. A few students have trouble understanding detailed lectures in English, not to mention reading academic literature or composing coherent essays in the language. It is somewhat difficult to disentangle this issue, however, from the reality that many are also deficient in reading and writing skills in their native Spanish as well as in English. The fundamental necessity to teach the historical course material, however, means that the professor cannot devote more than a small amount of time to strengthening such skills, meaning in turn that some students are asked to perform assignments for which they have not been adequately prepared. An additional challenge is the size of the course. Notwithstanding the improvements made thanks to the addition of a TA, it remains difficult and labor-intensive to rigorously teach

80-145 students per semester (such a course would presumably count on four to six TAs at a good US university, all of them doctoral students in history).

The fact that this course is taught almost exclusively to business students may also generate difficulties. Although this study did not explicitly test for this, the professor's observation is that business school students at Universidad EAFIT tend to exhibit low levels of intellectual curiosity (this observation, for what it is worth, is universally shared among the university's foreign professors with whom the professor has discussed the matter, as well as by most Colombian professors). In class, it is often extremely difficult to stimulate robust conversation regarding abstract ideas or theoretical questions, even when an effort is made to tie such questions to relatable issues from students' lives. In the psychology literature, intellectual curiosity is encompassed by the concept of Openness to Experience, one of the so-called "Big Five" personality traits (Lounsbury, Sundstrom, Loveland, & Gibson, 2003). Students with low levels of openness to experience are, *ipso facto*, less receptive to information from outside their sphere of familiarity (Perry & Sibley, 2013). Again, although we did not specifically test for openness to experience among the students in the History of International Relations course, business students have for instance been shown to exhibit lower scores in openness to experience than math students (Vedel, 2013). Such tendencies make for a challenging classroom climate in which to teach historical thinking.

Furthermore, the students' educational background means they are not acculturated to the expectations of the historical discipline. This is of course not a unique problem; other scholars note that non-history students tend to apply exogenous conceptual and epistemological frameworks to the study of history (van Drie & van Boxtel, 2008). Among the many examples of such behavior among the students studied here, we note their frequent difficulty with one assignment in particular requiring them to write a PESTE (Political, Social, Economic, Technological, Environmental) analysis of an historical commodity chain. Rather than embarking on a judicious examination of how their commodity chain functioned along the above lines, their tendency is to simply assert (obliquely and without evidence) the heroic role of their commodity in facilitating prosperity among the nations trading in it. In addition to the above-noted lack of familiarity with the historical discipline and basic procedural skills for writing about the past, such tendencies may be partly attributable to the fact that RHT and EI were positively related. The students' economic ideology tends overwhelmingly toward liberal-capitalism and this is furthermore positively related with their levels of RHT. EI items asked if the respondents believed that the state should regulate the economy and scores were not particularly high (see mean and sd in Table 1). Thus, students' economic ideology likely influences their ability to construct dispassionate narratives of commercial history.

Finally, the ideological and class background of these students likely poses a challenge to the instructor seeking to promote critical historical thinking. Close to 70% of the participants of this study belonged to high social classes, a figure itself indicative of the manner in which Colombian universities are divided along class and political lines: public universities generally cater to poorer, left-leaning populations, while private universities cater to wealthier, more right-leaning populations. The students in the course in question, who also overwhelmingly aspire to enter the business world, have a vested interest in the preservation of the country's current political and economic structure. A correlate of EI, political thought, is deemed to be affected by "system justification." System justification leads people to justify social and economic inequalities (Graham, Iyer, & Meindl, 2013). The students of the History of International Relations course may have a tendency toward system justification and thus less receptivity to critical academic disciplines. Along these lines, we found that the higher the social stratum, the less EI, and vice versa. Put differently, the higher the social stratum, the less defined were beliefs regarding the distribution of wealth and the regulation of business. Students from high social strata thus may be less receptive to critical elements of the course curriculum.

As noted above, the positive relation we found between Autonomy and RHT also suggests that Autonomy may have a different meaning from that which we foresaw/theorized. Differences in

levels of proficiency in English could also explain different interpretations of Autonomy. According to the results of the study, instead of referring to self-awareness, Autonomy seems to be more related to perceptions of being able to make decisions after analyzing variables affecting those decisions.

It is also important to bear in mind that Colombia has experienced the longest-running civil conflict in recent world history. As such, ideological battle lines here are especially entrenched. In this regard, the course generates similar challenges to those observed by scholars studying history education in other conflict and post-conflict societies (McCully, 2012; Ahonen, 2014). While observing the benefits of "multi-perspectival" approaches and "de-mythicalization" of history curricula, scholars also note that the extreme sensitivity surrounding local histories in conflict and post-conflict areas can generate serious push-back from students and administrators (Ahonen, 2014). In the experience of this course professor, students only occasionally react with open hostility toward narratives that cut against the grain of their received cultural wisdom (we speculate that the professor, as a foreigner, is granted a certain amount of leeway in this regard). More often, they appear to simply consign such narratives to the realm of the extraneous or esoteric—an outsider's opinion to be tolerated but ultimately discounted.

In sum, the profile and cultural context of these students raises a paradoxical question: our study embarks from the supposition that we, as historical actors, are substantially produced by our time and place, yet the corresponding observation that these students inhabit a narrow informational sphere and may exhibit low levels of openness to experience begs the question of whether their proclivities and conditioning substantially inhibit their capacity to internalize the course content in the first place.

Conclusions and suggestions for further study

Such concerns also raise the question of the degree to which further reform of the course curriculum would yield better results in generating reflexive historical thinking among future students. Evidence does support the notion that a move toward a curriculum even more explicitly structured around historical thinking skills would yield improvement (Stoel, van Drie, & van Boxtel, 2017). The professor of the History of International Relations course is accordingly considering another major curriculum overhaul, the plan being to jettison much of the course's linear historical content and focus exclusively on skills development. Specifically, the focus will be on utilizing historical cases and analytic techniques to enhance students' capacities in *media literacy*, *ethical decision making,* and *self and social awareness.* Narrowly targeting these skills will surely elicit improved performance in them, at least in the short term. Yet we cannot but wonder how deep or lasting the effects will be. Indeed, to express these doubts in melodramatic terms, the experience of teaching this course is rather akin to that of unrequited love: lobbying the university to build a special classroom and to introduce TAs, the creation of numerous elaborate activities and simulations, the recording and editing of fifty thematic videos and their installment in a dedicated course website, the administration of a course currency—at times such labors feel like so many bouquets of flowers, boxes of chocolate or moonlight serenades proffered longingly beneath the window of some indifferent would-be sweetheart. At what point must one simply accept that she/he just ain't interested?

But in all seriousness, and to state the problem in soberer Wittgensteinian terms, the question evokes the philosopher's famous ruminations over language games. As Wittgenstein observed, "you can only succeed in extricating people who live in an instinctive rebellion against language; you cannot help those whose entire instinct is to live in the herd which has created this language as its own proper mode of expression" (Wittgenstein, 2005, quoted in Cook, 2000). The results of this study suggest that if reflexive historical thinking (or any type of critical thinking) is to make an impression among highly recalcitrant students, a great deal of prior attention must be paid to unlocking social defense mechanisms—to somehow inducing a rebellion with language, as Wittgenstein would have it. Much of our own future work will focus on fomenting such rebellion.

On a more practical level, we note that future studies inquiring into changes in RHT and its relationship with EI should control for English proficiency, literacy, and personality traits, including openness to experience. As previously mentioned, these can be considered confounding variables when it comes to the development of RHT. Ideally, an experimental design would shed light on whether and to what extent such factors hinder the development of RHT in business students (*inter alia*). However, changing contents, methodologies and other factors related to the course for a portion of the participants could diminish learning processes of students within the treatment or control group, and was therefore rejected in the case of this study. Other variables should also be considered by researchers, including political thought and system justification. The former is a correlate of EI and potential covariate of RHT, the latter a predictor of political thought and possible antecedent of RHT and EI. Finally, using a single-item measure to assess Autonomy did not suffice to establish if and to what extent the participants' responses manifested their perceptions regarding the concept of Autonomy we were trying to assess. Hence, more studies using multiple-item measures are needed to confirm if there is a positive relationship between Autonomy and RHT.

This exploratory study has raised interesting questions about the possibilities for inculcating critical historical thinking skills among students with little exposure to or proclivity for historical analysis. Furthermore, our findings regarding the implications of economic class and economic ideology upon historical perception open additional avenues for inquiry. For our part, and notwithstanding the frustration inherent in striving with limited success to get students interested in history and the important questions about social life that its proper study elicits, this research has proved immensely valuable as a means toward re-focusing and strengthening our efforts.

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Endnotes

[1] All formal residential addresses in Colombia are stratified from one to six according to their location and value; those living in strata five and six subsidize those in one, two and three by paying higher utilities rates. The system, conceived as a progressive tax mechanism, has become a shorthand for class. Thus, identifying someone as "estrato seis" (stratum six) is to signal their elite status (see Jessel, 2017).