THE SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF HISTORY
Defining the most important events of the last 10, 100, and 1000 years

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RESUMEN	ABSTRACT
En un primer estudio se les pidió a 1300 estudiantes de 7 universidades en Europa, Estados Unidos y Japón que señalaran los tres hechos históricos más importantes de los últimos 10, 100 y 1000 años. En el segundo estudio 800 estudiantes de dos países americanos y tres europeos señalaron y evaluaron los siete hechos históricos más importantes en la historia del mundo. Este artículo presenta los resultados de estos trabajos para cada período temporal y en cada nación. Aunque existen algunas semejanzas importantes que señalan hacia la existencia de representaciones sociales compartidas del pasado centradas en las guerras, política y hechos eurocéntricos, también se muestra como la historia está influida por la cultura, de manera moderada por el sexo, y algo por la edad de los encuestados.	Over 1300 students from 7 universities in Europe, the United States, and Japan were asked to list the three most important historical events for the last 10, 100, and 1000 years in the first study. In the second study over 800 students from two American and three European nations listed the seven most important historical events of world history and were asked to evaluate them. This paper reports the analyses of their responses for each time period and across countries. Although there are some striking similarities, suggesting the existence of shared social representations of past, focused on wars, politics and Eurocentric events, it is clear that history is strongly influenced by culture, moderately by the sex of the respondent, and to some degree by the age of the respondent.

Key words: historical events, eurocentric collective memory, national events, sex, age

Introduction

How we define historically important events is ultimately a social psychological process. Work in autobiographical and collective memory suggests that historical events are mutually discussed and decided by individuals within their families, educational and governmental institutions, and within their cultures. Ultimately, then, what is considered to be a historical

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turning point for one culture or age cohort may be different for other groups (cf., Pennebaker, Paez, Rime, 1997). Furthermore, the fact of rendering importance to a significant historical moment for a given group is partially dependent on the group's current needs and motives (e.g., Halbwachs, 1950/1992).

Historically, as we move into new decades and centuries, various groups have looked back in an effort to catalog the best books, movies, news stories, etc that have been produced during a relevant period. At the threshold of a new decade, century, and millennium, it was appropriate that a survey be conducted to assess how individuals in various parts of the world currently look back and label those historical events of greatest importance.

The purpose of the current study, then, was to survey college students in 7 countries to get a sense of their views of the most important historical events over the last 10, 100, and 1000 years. This project is not intended to be a historical analysis or critique of history; rather, we sought to learn what, and how, students with no formal training in history intuitively felt were the world's most significant historical experiences. In other terms, this study will tap shared images and beliefs about the relevant historical events or lay semantic memory of world history, as an instance of collective memory.

Results showed considerable cross-national consensus, with European history and Western cultural events being dominant. Specifically, events related to warfare were listed above all other categories as being the most important events. Politics and war accounted for 70% of the total events listed and 60% of leaders or individuals named as those most important. Finally, most of the events considered to be important took place during the 19th and 20th centuries.

In the current project, we expect to find evidence for:

a) A Eurocentric bias: the dominant social representations of history are the history of the dominant western culture;

b) a "narrative template stressing violence as the main factor in history" bias: even if wars accounted for only 2% of the 20th century death toll (Layard, 2005). Due to the higher impact of extreme and negative events such as wars, participants should stress the role of political violence in world history;

c) A recency century bias: participants should emphasize recent events because cohorts usually feel that "they are living during the most important and innovative period of world history";

d) A socio-centric bias: participants should regard national events as world events; socio-centric bias should be strong in high status and "big countries" as compared to "minor countries" (Liu et al, 2005; Deschamps, Paez & Pennebaker, 2001).

We will also explore gender differences, because usually men and women gave different answers in ideological surveys.

Study 1

Students enrolled in college Psychology classes in the United States, Japan, England, Germany, Spain, Switzerland, and Italy were asked, "If you were writing a book about the history of the world for the last 1,000 years, which three events would you choose as the most important ones?" They were also asked the same question for the last 100 and last 10 years. Half of the students completed the 1000 year question first; the remainder was asked the 10 year question first. In addition to the college samples, adult samples were also collected in the U.S. and Spain.

Methods

Participants. Of the entire sample of 1,365 respondents, 1,152 (84%) were students enrolled in Psychology courses. The college samples were comprised of students from the University of Texas at Austin in the U.S. (N=351, 49.9% female, mean age = 18.5), Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan (N=167, 44.9% female, mean age = 19.4), University of Manchester in England (N=86, 89.5% female, mean age = 19.5), Universities of Ulm and Erlangen, in Germany (N=248, 50.9 % female, mean age = 21.9), The Basque Country University in San Sebastian, Spain (N=129, 61.5% female, mean age = 21.1), Lausanne University (N=80, 55% female, mean age = 20.9) and the University of Bari in Italy (N=91, 52.8% female, mean age = 22.3).

In addition to the college samples, telephone interview responses from a random digit dialing (RDD) sample from the city of Austin (N=85, 49.4% female, mean age = 42.2) and questionnaires from family members of the students in the Spanish sample (N=69, 56.4% female, mean age = 47.6) and the Swiss sample (N=59, 55% female, mean age =46.7) were collected.

Procedures. For the college student samples, questionnaires were handed out and completed in classes between mid-September and early November, 1998. During the same time period, telephone interviews and family questionnaires (for the U.S. Switzerland and Spanish samples) were collected.

For each questionnaire, participants wrote 9 different responses – three historically important events each for the last 10, 100, and 1000 years. These responses were translated into English by researchers fluent in English at the university's home institution.

One of the most complex tasks of the present project was categorizing the many responses given by participants. After correcting for spelling and wording, 646 event categories were compiled across the 3 time periods. Many of the original categories were used by only 1 or 2 people and could be included in a broader dimension. For example, a small group of people listed sporting events, such as the domination of Manchester United (British soccer), the Dallas Cowboys (American football), or the New York Yankees (American baseball), among the most important historical events of the decade. These were put into the broader category of sports. Similarly, concepts such as the American Revolution, the Boston Tea Party, the Declaration of Independence, and American Independence, were all included in the same American Independence category. Through this process, the original list of events was reduced to 80 categories, excluding three categories that were not used—responses that were unclassifiable, irrelevant, or blank.

Each event was also dated by researchers in the University of Texas lab by drawing on standard reference sources. In many cases, the dates of events were vague or subject to multiple interpretations. For example, responses such as "the Vietnam War" could be dated by the year the French became engaged (1953), at the peak of American involvement (1968), or its ending (1974). Similarly, the dating of the response, "the internet," could refer to when it was first conceived (the 1970s) or when it became a common feature of daily life (1995). To resolve these issues, a group of three judges estimated dates based on perceptions of the time frame used by the subjects. Many responses, such as "medical technology" or "change in the role of religion," simply could not be coded by date.

Each event was also coded for location, relative to the institution that completed the questionnaire, where 1= same town, 2= same region or state, 3= same country or within 1000 miles, 4= different country and at least 1000 miles away.

Finally, to simplify the general categorization scheme, the 80 categories were further reduced to 9 general categories, including: wars, economic changes and events, historical eras, scientific and medical advances, social movements, regional conflicts, popular culture, health concerns and natural disasters, and philosophical movements or changes.

Results and Discussion

For each year, each respondent's three answers were given equal weight and coded as if they were independent observations. Of the 12,231 responses from the full sample, 46 (0.4%) were unclassifiable, 85 (0.8%) were irrelevant (e.g., my birthday, building of the pyramids, invention of the wheel), and 636 (5.8%) were blank. Of the remaining responses, 81% were from the student samples. For the student samples, then, the number of answers within each of the 80 coding dimensions was tallied by country and year. These numbers were converted into percentage of responses representing each category.

For ease of presentation, the top 10 events within each time-period category were rank ordered for each of the primary tables. Each country's percentage for the 80 categories was averaged, thus the responses of each participating country were weighted equally. As can be seen in Table 1, there is a wide variety of events and experiences that were listed as highly important. No single event was represented in all three time frames. Confirming the Euro-centric bias all the events were related to European history. Confirming the dominance of the violence as a narrative template of history, 57% of events were related to war and politics, 17% to science and technology, 10% to socio-economic and 10% to exploration and discovery. Results also confirm the recency bias: 60% of events belong to the most recent periods: the last three centuries for the 1000 year scenario, or the second half of the XXth century in the case of the last 100 years.

Table 1
Top 10 Rated Historical Events across Six Countries
For the last 1000, 100, and 10 Years

Rank	1,000 Years	100 Years	10 Years
1	New World discovery	WWII	USSR Collapse
2	French revolution	WWI	Gulf War
3	Industrial revolution	Space exploration	Balkan Wars
4	WWII	USSR Collapse	Princess Diana's death
5	WWI	Wars in general	EU and Euro
6	Religion, reformation	Cold war	Internet
7	Wars in general	Vietnam	IRA
8	US Revolution	Spanish Civil war	Clinton scandal
9	Science theory	Great Depression	Nuclear proliferation
10	Space exploration	Computers	Medical advances

Note: Rankings are based on student samples from England, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, and the United States. USSR collapse refers to both the break-up of the USSR as well as the reunification of Germany.

Table 2 presents the breakdown of historical events by year and country. This series of tables is intriguing in demonstrating both the degree of agreement between countries along with some fascinating differences. As is apparent, for example, the definition of historical importance is highly egocentric. That is, each country tends to include national-relevant historical events as more important than events that have not touched the country. However, in the case of Switzerland, this egocentric or socio-centric bias did not appear – probably because minor countries as low status groups are aware of their relative weakness in terms of historical capital.

Table 2

Top 10 Rated Historical Events for the Last 1,000 Years by Country

England	Germany	Italy	Japan	Switzerland	Spain	United States
New World discovery	New World	French rev.	WWII	New World	New World	New World
Industrial rev.	French rev.	New World	French rev.	French rev.	Industrial rev.	US rev.
WWII	Industrial rev.	WWII	Industrial rev.	Printing Invention	French rev.	WWII
WWI	WWII	Misc Italy	New World	Wars in general	Wars in general	Industrial rev.
Battle of Hastings	Religion	Industrial rev.	US rev.	WWII	WWI	US Civil war
Racial conflict	Communication	Religion	WWII	WWI	WWII	Renaissance
Electricity	30 years war	WWI	Atomic bomb	Russian rev	Medical advances	Colonization
French rev.	Wars in general	Wars in general	Religion	Colonization	Space	Space
Science theory	Science theory	Science theory	Renaissance	Space	Communication	WWI
Religion	Crusades, rel wars	Arts & Literature	Racial conflict	Protestant reform	Crusades, rel wars	Wars in general

Note: Table is based on student samples only. Most religion category entries refer to the reformation or changes in the Roman Catholic Church.

Top 10 Rated Historical Events for the Last 100 Years by Country

England	Germany	Italy	Japan	Switzerland	Spain	United States
WWII	WWII	WWII	WWII	WWII	Spanish Civil War	WWII
WWI	WWI	WWI	WWI	WWI	WWII	WWI
Space exploration	Wars in general	USSR Collapse	USSR Collap.	May 68	WWI	Space
Cold war	Space	Wars in general	Space	Wars	Wars in general	Vietnam
Wars in general	Cold war	Space technology	Great Depress	Vietnam War	Space	Great Depress
Women's movement	USSR Collapse	Misc Italy	Gulf War	USSR collapse	USSR Collapse	computers
Computers	Industrial rev.	Fascism	Vietnam	AIDS	Democracy	Racial conflict
Man-made disasters	Transportation	Gulf War	Atomic bomb	Technology	communication	Wars in general
Technology, misc	Atomic bomb	Religion	JFK death	Women's movem	AIDS	JFK death
Racial conflict	Medical advances	Vietnam	Korean war	Space	Women's movem	Holocaust

Top 10 Rated Historical Events for the Last 10 Years by Country

England	Germany	Italy	Japan	Switzerland	Spain	United States
USSR Collapse	USSR Collapse	USSR Collapse	USSR Collapse	USSR collapse	Gulf War	Gulf War
Gulf War	Gulf War	Balkan wars	Gulf War	Balkan wars	USSR Collapse	USSR Collapse
IRA	Balkan wars	Gulf War	Hong Kong	Gulf War	ETA	Clinton scandal
Princess Diana's death	EU and Euro	EU and Euro	Nuclear proliferation	Fall of the Berlin Wall	Balkan wars	Princess Diana's death
Internet	Misc Germany	Misc Italy	Princess Diana's death	Middle East	EU and Euro	Internet
Racial conflict	Middle East	Political corruption	Natural disasters	Internet	IRA	Terrorism
Ecological probs	Internet	Mother Theresa's death	Terrorism	Ecological probs	Misc Spain	Computers
Balkan wars	Ecological probs	Religion	Economic problems	Religion integrism	Internet	Medical advanc.

| Science theory | Science theory | Natural disasters | EU and Euro | Medical advances | Science theory | AIDS |
| Nuclear proliferation | Computers | Diana's death | Chinese upheavals | Science theory | Medical advanc. | Space |

Note: Questionnaires were completed in October, 1998 and referred to the "last 10 years." Misc Germany, Misc, Italy, and Misc Spain refer to specific political controversies in that particular country. Natural disasters in the Italian sample refer to earthquakes in Italy and in the Japanese sample to the Kobe Earthquake in Japan. The terrorism category includes the Sarin gas attacks in Tokyo (for the Japan sample) and the Oklahoma City Bombing (in the U.S. Sample). Chinese upheavals refer to the return of Hong Kong to China, Tiananmen Square uprising, and unrest in Tibet. ETA refers to the Basque separatist movement in Spain. For the Japan sample, economic problems refer to the Asian economic crisis.

The history of a culture is passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth and by more official sources – such as history books and educational institutions. Today's college students will be writing and reconstructing official history over the next 40 years. It is interesting, then, to compare the popular views of history of today's college students with people of their parents' generation. Indeed, earlier studies have demonstrated that history is strongly influenced by one's age and cohort (cf., Schuman & Scott, 1989). Table 3 compares the responses given by college students with older, more representative samples in San Sebastian, Spain and Austin, Texas. On one level, these data are striking in showing the remarkable similarity of individuals' responses across ages and within cultures. Interestingly, the events rated among the top 10 tend to correspond more for the 10 and 100 year periods than the 1000 year period.

Table 3
Last 1000 Years: Adult and College Student Samples in the U.S. and Spain

Spain Students	Spain Adults	USA Students	USA Adults
New World discovery	New World	New World	WWII
Industrial revolution	Medical advances	US revolution	New World
French revolution	French revolution	WWII	Space
Wars in general	WWII	Industrial revolution	US Revolution
WWI	Industrial rev	US Civil War	Vietnam
WWII	Communication	Renaissance	US Civil War
Medical advances	Electricity	Colonization	Racial conflict
Communication	Racial conflict	Space	Religion
Space	Space	WWI	Transportation
Crusades, rel wars	Reconquest Spain	Wars in general	WWI

Last 100 Years: Adult and College Student Samples in the U.S. and Spain

Spain Students	Spain Adults	USA Students	USA Adults
Spanish Civil war	Spanish Civil war	WWII	WWII
WWII	Space	WWI	Space
WWI	WWII	Space	Transportation
Wars in general	Medical advances	Vietnam	Vietnam
Space	Democracy	Great Depression	WWI
USSR Collapse	Wars in general	Computers	Industrial revolution
Democracy	WWI	Racial conflict	Computers
Communication	Misc Spain	Wars in general	Racial conflict
AIDS	Tech, misc	JFK assassination	JFK assassination
Women's movem	Communication	Holocaust	USSR Collapse

Last 10 Years: Adult and College Student Samples in the U.S. and Spain

Spain Students	Spain Adults	USA Students	USA Adults
Gulf War	USSR Collapse	Gulf War	USSR Collapse
USSR Collapse	ETA	USSR Collapse	Gulf War
ETA	Balkan wars	Clinton scandal	Clinton scandal
Balkan wars	EU and Euro	Princess Diana's death	Space
EU and Euro	Gulf War	Internet	Computers
IRA	Medical advances	Terrorism	Medical advances
Misc Spain	IRA	Computers	Internet
Internet	Misc Spain	Medical advances	Economic problems
Science theory	Economic problems	AIDS	Racial conflict
Medical advances	Science theory	Space	Political corruption

One problem in interpreting Table 3 is assessing the degree to which the adults and students agreed upon which historical events were the most important. One way to determine this statistically is to correlate the percentage of total responses for each of the 80 categories between the adults and students within each country as well as across countries. Averaging across the three time periods (which were comparable), the mean correlations between Spanish students and adults was .89 and for American students and adults it was .86. These numbers indicate that students and adults within the same country share very similar views of historical events.

Interestingly, Spanish and American students also share similar views of history, with an average correlation of .71. Nevertheless, Spanish and American adults have relatively lower ratings of historical events, with a mean r = .55. On the other hand, the image of history even though it is shared due to socialization in national culture, depends also on shared experiences of each generation during the years of identity formation. For example, in the Swiss sample, adults mentioned the Women's Liberation Movement more often than young people did, probably because the rise of the feminist movement occurred during the formative years of these adults. Furthermore, compared to adults, college students mentioned the Gulf War more often. Thus, even though the physical proximity of this event was similar for both generations, the war occurred during the formative years of the young sample and is therefore regarded as a significant historical event by this cohort (Deschamps, Paez & Pennebaker, 2002).

Table 4
Sex Differences in Listing Historical Events by Category

General Category	% Female Responses
Economic swings	48a
Science & Medical advances	50a
Philosophical "isms" (communism, fascism, capitalism)	51a
Historical eras (Middle ages, Industrial Revolution	51a
Wars	*54a*
Health & trauma (diseases and disasters)	59ab
Regional conflict (ETA, IRA)	61ab
Popular culture (Diana, OJ Simpson)	63b
Social movements (slavery, feminism)	68b

Note: Percentage responses differ by category overall, F (9, 8620) = 7.95, p < .001, and between categories with different subscripts. Note that 54% of the college sample is women; hence differences can be interpreted as deviating from this 54 percent.

Table 4 focuses on how men and women differ in their listing of historical events. This analysis was performed by using general categories. The way to read the table is to first appreciate that 54% of the entire college sample is female. Of all the people who listed one of the economic changes as an important historical concern, 48% were women -- in other words, men disproportionately referred to issues related to economy, Industrial Revolutions and the like. Similarly, 68% of the respondents who mentioned Human Rights Violations and social movements (e.g., Native People's genocide in the USA, slavery, equal rights, feminism) as historically important were women. As is apparent, women and men use different strategies to define events as historically important -- with women relying more on

social dynamics, physical health, and regional strife, whereas men focus more on economics, technology, and philosophical trends.

Study 2

Results from Study 1 confirm the Eurocentric bias of world history social representations, the centrality of warfare and politics, and illustrates some instances of socio-centrism. Results also indicated that participants overemphasized mixed or positive long term events, such as the Discovery of the New World, the French and Industrial Revolutions, and overlooked less positive events, as the 30 Years War, which may suggest a long term positivistic bias in the collective memory or social representations of history. To examine these ideas, Study 2 was designed to compare the most important events before the 20th century with similar events that occurred during the 20th century.

Methods

American and European college Psychology students were asked to list the most important events of world history and to rate them in terms of their positivity. Following Liu et al's (2005) procedure, participants were asked to "Imagine that you were giving a seminar on world history. What 7 events would you teach as the most important in world history? How positively or negatively do you regard each event" (on a 7-point bipolar scale, where 1=very negative and 7=very positive).

Participants. The college samples were comprised of students from the following locations: University of Buenos Aires, Argentina (N=100, 49.9% female, mean age = 18.5), University of Paraiba, University of Sergipe, University of Joinville and University of Goias, Brazil (N= 367; 81% female, mean age 24.0), University of Warsaw, Poland (N=102, 70% female, mean age = 20.4), University of Tula, Russia (N=60, 80% female, mean age = 18.4), and The Basque Country University, Spain (N=142, 67% females, mean age= 26.4).

Results

As can be seen in Tables 5a and 5b, the most important events occurring before the 20th century (Birth of Christ, Christianization of Russia, Discovery of America, Industrial Revolution, French Revolution, and the Abolition of Serfdom in Russia) are generally regarded in a relatively positive light, whereas the most important events occurring during the 20th century are generally regarded as being more negative.

Table 5 a
*Top 10 Rated Historical Events by Country: Europe*

Russia	Freq.	Eval.	Poland	Freq.	Eval.
WWII	56	2.1	WWII	73	1.3
WWI	46	2.5	WWI	44	1.4
Great Patriotic war	44	3.9	September 11	28,5	1.3
Christianization of Russia Xth Cent.	32	6,2	Fall of communism	26	6.3
Chechenia war	32	1,2	Discovery of America	21	5.8
USSR Collapse	27	3.5	Polish Pope	14	7
Kulikovo Battle XIVth century	25,4	4.8	Creation of European Union	13,5	5.5
Afghanistan War	23,7	1.3	The Death of John Paul II	12,5	4
Russian Revolution	22	3.5	Beginning of Communism	12	2
Abolition of serfdom in Russia XIXth century	18,6	6.8	Birth of Christ	12	6.5

Table 5 b
Top 10 Rated Historical Events by Country: Latin-America and Spain

Brazil	Freq.	Eval.	Argentine	Freq.	Eval.	Spain	Freq.	Eval.
WWII	40	2	WW II	48	2	WWII	46,4	1.5
WWI	32,4	2	Industrial Revolution	45	6	WWI	33.8	1.5
German reunification	21,5	6	WWI	45	2.2	September 11	30.3	2
Industrial Revolution	19,6	5.5	French Revolution	31	6	Discovery of America	25.3	5.3
September 11	18,5	2	Iraq war	22	1,5	Spanish Civil war	22.5	1.3
French Revolution	16,6	5	Both wars	23	2	March 11	22.5	1.3
Both wars	14,4	2.5	Discovery of America	22	5,3	Iraq war	20.4	1.3
Abolish slavery	11,4	6.7	German reunific.	21	6	Both World Wars	18.3	1.7
Iraq war	11,2	1.3	Malvinas /Falkland War	19	1,5	Democracy	17.6	6
Atomic bomb	10,9	1.5	Cold war	15	2,5	Vaccinations	16.9	7

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the period in which an event occurred and participants' perceptions of the positivity of the event.

Figure 1
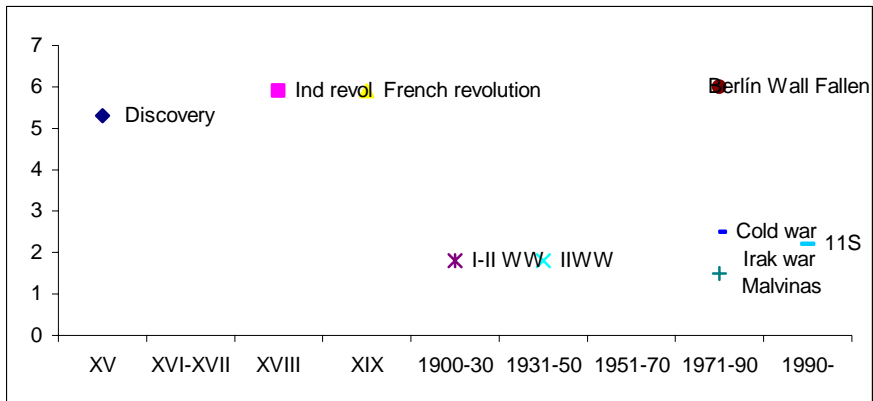
The results clearly show a trend in which more recent historical events are viewed less positively than events that took place further back in history. Moreover, evaluations are very similar between nations. For instance, Discovery of America was rated 5.8 by Poles, 5.3 by Spaniards, 5.3 by Argentineans, and 4,25 by Brazilians, who nevertheless evaluate with a 5,6 the Discovery of Brazil. This implies forgetting the high death toll related to European settlement, conquest wars, exposition to new illnesses, and the horrors of colonization and slavery. For instance, the Mexican population decreased from around 20 million in 1500 to 2 million in 1650, mainly due to the epidemics that conquerors brought with them (Ferro, 1994). Sa and de Oliveira (2002) have also found that the most frequent and firstly mentioned ideas associated with the Discovery of Brazil were positive both in Portugal and Brazil, suggesting that a positive social representation is dominant. The Industrial Revolution was also evaluated positively (around 5-6 on a seven point scale), people *forgetting* social problems, exploitation, the decrease in life expectancy. Indeed, relatively similar events, such as the French Revolution and the World Wars show opposite profiles. Even though both conflicts resulted in thousands of deaths, the French Revolution was evaluated relatively positively. Specifically, when we compared the evaluations of the positivity of the French Revolution with more recent historical events, the French Revolution was rated as being significantly

more positive than World War I and II, the Iraq war; Malvinas/Falklands, the Cold War, and September 11th (Ms=3.6, 1.8, 1.8, 1.5, 2.5, and 2.2, respectively; all t-student tests p<.001). Thus, it would appear as though people *forgot* about the widespread terror, the Napoleonic Wars, and massacres.

Results also show the importance of meaning attributed to an event. In the case of WWII, its evaluation was absolutely negative for the Poles, for whom the war was a social catastrophe (M=1.3). In contrast, two different meanings were given to this event in the Russian sample. Namely, 44% of Russians used the label Great Patriotic War, emphasizing Hitler's defeat and the triumph of the Soviet Army over the invading forces. Their evaluation of WWII was neutral-positive (M=3.9), whereas another part of the sample (56%) used the label WWII and evaluated it as a negative historical experience (M=2.1). Summing up both events we could conclude that 93% of the participants recalled unanimously WWII and evaluated it quite neutrally (M=2.95), but in fact it seems clear that there are two different discourses and representations of this historical experience. Moreover, 6% of the sample mentioned both events.

General Discussion

In many ways, this project is meant to serve as an archival record of people's popular conceptions of history as they approached the year 2000. On a deeper level, this study will serve as the basis for a deeper consideration of how history is defined, created, and reconstructed. For the time being, however, some of the relevant aspects of this project include:

a) Cross-cultural consensus suggesting the existence of a collective memory or dominant and hegemonic shared beliefs about the world history. As Liu et al. (2005) argue, "Across cultures, social representations of history were overwhelmingly about politics and Wars...the overall pattern was more Eurocentric than ethnocentric..." (p.185). Revolutions and Wars are represented as the most important events in the last millennium, whereas science and technology, including the industrial revolution, are secondary in their importance. Most of World History events recalled are related to Europe (New World "Discovery") or to Europe and North-America (World Wars, Euro-Asian Wars) or simply are European events (French Revolution, Lutheran reform).

b) The results confirmed a recency or "last years/century" bias: participants tend to view recent events as more historically significant than events that occurred long ago. For example, in rating the last 1000 years, 3 of the ten occurred in this century. Apparently, nothing of historical significance

occurred until about 1500. Similarly, in the last 100 years, 3 of the ten occurred in the last decade. And, in the last 10 years, at least 4 occurred within a year prior to the participants' completing the questionnaire.

A possible explanation for the recency or century bias is the Marañón hypothesis: this author proposed that it takes three generations to overcome the effects of a Civil War – approximately a century.

Similarly, Assman (1992, quoted in Laszlo, 2003) distinguishes between semantic and cultural memory, related to distant events, from communicative memory. Communicative memory embraces memories from the proximate past. A characteristic example of communicative memory is generational memory, which is shared with contemporaries and usually includes important events experienced in late adolescence-early adulthood. The span of communicative memory is about 80-100 years, three or four generations, and this explains why WWII is an important event – there are living grand parents talking about it. This could also explain why the Balkan Wars were fueled by memory about historical traumas—this distant memory was anchored on the WWII and Civil War experiences between Croatian and Serbia's Oustachies, Tchetniks and other forces (Rosoux, 2001). Collective memory is the oral transmission of vivid "first-hand" information about an event. Studies confirm the trigenerational transmission of information about important historical events. A trigenerational random sample survey in France found that 60% were members of a three-adult-generation family. 73% of the grandparents generation reported speaking about historical events with their children and 53% with their grand children. Among the parents generation, 84% speak about their own marking events with their children and 57% with their parents. The greatest level of communication is between two generations "...stories are more often told from one generation to the next...direct transmission also exist between the two extreme generations, though to a lesser extent than between successive generations" (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2003). Depth of genealogical memory (Candau, 2005) and of oral and vivid relative's memories is three generations old. When asked about memories of traumatic and vivid events related to a relative, subjects usually recollect events going only as far back as their grand parents (Pennebaker, Paez & Rimé, 1997). Finally, in the same vein, Wertsch (2002) found that the heroic WWII narrative of the "Great Patriotic War" continues to play the role of a positive myth or social representation of the past in current Russia, and this is associated to the fact that WWII is still part of the people's autobiographical memory, who share this experience with their sons and grandsons, while this is not the case for WW1 and the Russian Revolution. In other words, the

century bias occurs because collective memory is related to "fresh events" lived by the cohort, parents or grand parents.

c) Results supported a socio-centric bias: participants emphasize national events as important world events. There are striking cultural differences in participants' definitions of historically significant events. The French Revolution is an interesting case in point. For all countries except the U.S., over 10% of all responses in the 1000 year category listed the French Revolution as a major event. In the U.S., it ranked 29th (0.8% of the total responses) among the student sample and 25th among adults (1.20% of the total responses). Similarly, in England for the last 1000 years, 4.9% of the responses listed the Battle of Hastings—ranking it 4th. Not one student in any other European country listed the Battle of Hastings as a significant historical event. In Spain, participants rated the Spanish Civil War as the most important event of the century while the U.S. participants listed the American Civil War as one of the most important events of the last millennium. History, by its very nature, is egocentric or socio-centric: "our" events are relevant for the world history. However, in the case of Switzerland, with the partial exception of Lutheran reform, no national event is mentioned as relevant for the world history.

d) Results related to cohort differences: Just as different cultures define history differently, different cohorts within the same culture do so as well. More adults, compared to younger people, mentioned the Women's Liberation Movement, and the latter mentioned the Gulf War more often than adults did. This difference is probably because these events occurred during the formative years of the adult and college student generations, respectively (Deschamps, Paez & Pennebaker, 2002). The previously mentioned French survey found that the most important event for the grandparents' generation was WWII, for the parents' generation their own marking events were the 1968 movement, the Algerian War, and the advancement of equal rights for women (similar to Deschamps et al, 2002) and for the children's generation, the events were Aids and economic crisis/problems finding a job – all events which occurred in their respective formative years (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2003). Although the degree of agreement between adults and students within Spain and the U.S. were generally similar, subtle differences were apparent. More striking, however, is that definitions of history can serve as a marker of cultural congruence. For example, we now know that adults and students within both Spain and the U.S. agreed with each other's ratings in a very high degree (mean correlation of over .87). Spanish and U.S. adults, however, had rather different historical ratings. Interestingly, Spanish and U.S. students had remarkably similar views of

history across all time periods. This may reflect a converging approach to education in the two countries, common exposure to media, and an overall narrowing of differences between the cultures.

e) Gender differences: Men and women rely on different information in defining history, probably because of differences in gender roles, with men being more agentic, and women being more expressive and communal. Although both listed the significance of Wars at comparable rates, women focused more on the social, emotional, and health effects of events than did men. Men, on the other hand, tended to place more weight on the economic, philosophical, and technological changes in defining history. However, differences were not extreme and other studies also found few differences in the frequency of historical events between genders (Liu et al, 2005; Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2003). Even if both genders list WWII similarly in a French representative sample (WWII was slightly more cited by men), interviews reveal that the experience of this event was different: "women relate to life during war while men more often focus on the political and military aspects of the war in a quite traditional division of gender territories" (Attias-Donfut & Wolff, 2003, page 6)

f) Most of the long-term historical events that people listed reflected growth and positive change. Studies which compare young with elder autobiographical memories, or within subject's comparisons between recent and more distant events, confirm a nostalgic bias: increased age or longer periods of recalling are associated to more positive appraisals of events (Laurens, 2002). These and other studies suggest a tendency for people to remember a higher proportion of positive events than negative events in the long term and to reinterpret negative events to be at least neutral or even positive (Taylor, 1991). A similar positivistic bias appears in the collective memory or social representations of history. For instance, the French Revolution was evaluated positively, suggesting that either people "forgot" about the terror, Napoleonic Wars and massacres, or that ample time has passed allowing individuals to reinterpret the events of that war.

We can conclude that our construction of history is heavily influenced by our current needs, values, and recent experiences. By studying a culture's definition of its own history, we can learn more about the culture's present situation and psychological state. By looking at the top-rated historical events for the last 10, 100, and 1000 years, one detects a sense of optimism and general stability. In sum, an effort towards positive meaning and the social minimization of negative events seems to characterize social representations of history.

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