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Afterthoughts on biases in history perception

Contemporary social psychology describes various deformations of processing social information leading to distortions of knowledge about other people. What is more, a person in everyday life refers to lay convictions and ideas common in his/her cultural environment that distort his/her perceptions. Therefore it is difficult to be surprised that authors of narrations in which participants of history are presented use easily available common-sense psychology, deforming images of both the participants of history and their activities, as well as the sequence of events determined by these activities. Which cognitive biases, how often, and in what intensity they will be presented in historical narrations depend on statements of dominating common-sense psychology. The article outlines some biases made by historian-lay psychologists, such as attributional asymmetry or hindsight effects, whose occurrence in their thinking, as formed in the cultural sphere of the West, influences history perception and conducted historical interpretations.

Keywords: *cognitive bias, common-sense psychology, historical interpretation, history perception*

Introduction

It happens that authors of historical narrations, when constructing them, refer to psychological knowledge although they very rarely use the achievements of academic psychology. If they choose between different offers, they usually, through psychohistory, refer to Freudian psychoanalysis which does not have a good reputation among psychologists and historians because of its various weaknesses and limitations (see e.g. Stannard, 1980; Szaluta, 1999). They more often refer to, not necessarily consciously, a widespread naive psychology in their cultural environment. Then they remain lay psychologists, deriving the needed information from easily available common-sense conceptions of human psychological functioning.

At some level of analysis, when it does not concern social or cultural transformations, it seems historians are entitled to accept “weak” assumptions of methodological individualism, recognizing causative role of individuals in history. Thanks to this, they might describe events, phenomena and historical processes in the language of the actions of the people participating in them and the results of these actions.

Authors of historical narrations inevitably deform images of people acting in the past. In particular, they

deform convictions about their thoughts, sensations and experiences, intentions and plans, expectations and aspirations because they remain under the influence of various motivations and because of the inalienable qualities of processing social information. In addition to this, their empathetic competences are limited and the common-sense psychological knowledge used usually has limited relevancy.

Biased perception of people and historical interpretations

Frequently, the historian-lay psychologists use comfortable and useful heuristics (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974; see also Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Fiske & Taylor, 1991) increasing the ease and efficiency of thinking about any (thus also located in the past) social reality and at the same time deforming the results of this thinking. Using heuristics additionally causes integrating information decoded from memory (from historians’ “outside resources knowledge”), and retrieved from archive materials, to bring various deformations of formulated opinions.

The processes of categorization have fundamental meaning, especially operating with categories ‘we’ and

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‘they’ take a very important place in getting to know people. A probably inalienable, universally manifesting tendency described by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) causes that – even when there is a lack of divisions of ethical, religious, economic, cultural, social, or historical basis – people of different categories are included in the divisions, distinguished on the ground of trivial differences between “them” and “us” and, as a result, depreciate “those” and favors “ours” in various ways. It can legitimately be supposed that this tendency, as revealed in participants of history, is a psychological guarantee of the inevitable, done because of situationally alterable criteria of divisions and conflicts brought by them, preventing one-way History (more about it see Dymkowski, 2000).

In historians, this ubiquitous tendency manifests itself in deformations in portraits of the participants of history, included in various categories. In particular, the exaggeratedly positive history of ones’ own nation included in the category “we”, can bear fruit; deformations of national narrations are greater the more intensively ethnocentrism characterizes their authors. The influence of stereotypes on their thinking, distorting (simplifying) images of communities included in the category “they” happens to be very clear, especially when it is supported by appropriate historical politics.

Using introspections and social comparisons, historians identify with the feelings, motivations and thoughts of the described participants of history, most frequently assuming similarity between them and themselves in important dimensions of psychological functioning. Doing so, they reveal the inherent limitations of their empathetic competences.

Broadly understood, empathy includes both emotional and cognitive phenomena. It means the ability to understand the other people – harmonizing with them emotionally, identifying with their thoughts and feelings, getting to know their internal world, taking their perspective, and accurately predicting their behaviors (e.g. Rembowski, 1989; Davis, 1994). However, the empathetic competences of a recognized historians as well as other lay psychologists are limited. They do not have to be very great for their disposer to effectively function interpersonally; only a drastically low level of them fundamentally lowers the quality of his/her everyday relationships with other people and can even place him/her in the area of psychopathology. Results of research on connections between empathy, understood as a disposition, and accuracy of perceiving other people (correct reading of their thoughts and feelings) are ambiguous and barely coherent¹.

¹ See Davis (1994, especially chapters 4 and 5). I do not find support in the results of experiments of social psychologists argumentation - referring to disputes within analytic philosophy of mind (Stueber, 2002, 2008) – for the usefulness of empathy as a fundamental instrument to explain in a narrative fashion in history. Concerning philosophical criticism of K. R. Stueber’s conception (referring to Collingwood) of the reenactment as the general method to study other minds, especially identifying

Attempts at understanding “those people” comprehended in accordance with a tradition, referred to by Dilthey, as a result of using empathetic skills, internal experience and intuition of historians without referring to reasoning, inevitably lead to smaller or bigger deformations of their image. In light of contemporary cognitive psychology, these deformations happen to be not so much accidental, but rather the inevitable results of attempts at understanding them (see Dymkowski, 2006).

These attempts leave their stamp on historical interpretations, contorting the picture of history. Sometimes, they are based on the effects of projections by historians of their own convictions, ideas, or states – especially if the situation of described people is perceived as fundamentally similar to the historians own, and when the perceived persons are included in the same category as the ones perceiving them. The difference between the empathy involved in their attempts at understanding other people and projection is not always entirely clear, sometimes it is blurred by psychologists (see Rembowski, 1989, pp. 52 and 63).

A lot of human sensations, experiences, thoughts and motives happen to be unavailable for the outside observer even when they deal with people whom they can meet directly without the mediation of historical sources. What can be observed consists of unreliable indicators of what it concludes. In light of findings of the still influential cognitive trend of social and personality psychology, access to psychical processes is usually difficult and limited (see e.g. Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Results of experimental research indicate also significant barriers and difficulties in access to one’s own mental processes (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977).

Research results show numerous deformations of information processing about people both motivated by, and being a result of activity of the cognizing mind: their perception is often a result of the interplay of motivation and cognition. Social psychologists emphasize the limitations of the cognitive abilities of individuals who, in everyday life, simplify images of the social world, try – possibly quickly and only satisfactorily, not slowly but rather in detail – to perceive other people. Surprisingly frequently, lay psychologists do not guide themselves by those premises of conclusion which they should take into consideration in light of the recommendations of normative models of rationality. They also irrelevantly estimate changing human attributes, behaviors and situations together. They refers to convictions, widespread in their environment and not necessarily accurate, about the social world comprising available common-sense psychology rather than to actual conducted observations (Nisbett & Ross, 1980; Fiske &

with intentions of historical figures, see D’Oro (2009). Probably Hempel (1949) was right, when he gave empathy only heuristic functions to suggest psychological hypotheses in historical explanation, not considering it to be the equivalent of this explanation.

Taylor, 1991). Exaggerated stiffness, imperviousness to change under the influence of reception of new, inconsistent information, has a particularly destructive influence on the accuracy of convictions about the social world (see Nisbett & Ross, 1980, especially chapter 8).

If historian-lay psychologists describe a historical process using common-sense convictions about the psychological functioning of the individuals involved in it, they are subject to a drastic deformation of information processing. Not only do they refer to very fallible naive psychology, but in addition make conclusions about those people and their behaviors from the content of historical materials on whose source they have no influence. People described are placed in the past, so statements about them not only cannot be checked with experimental research but also cannot be tested, as is usually done in everyday life with very limited control of the influence (yet control) of various by-factors. In the presence of a large number of diverse factors coming from “that epoch” (obviously usually not only, and not mainly psychological) which can influence an event or a phenomenon of the historians’ interest, it is not difficult to question the assumption, implicitly accepted by them, about the lack of influence of all factors except the observed one.

Historical interpretation in particular can be influenced by the susceptibility to attributing an exaggeratedly great meaning in evoking the final effect in a causal chain to spontaneous human behaviors. As it is argued by the discoverers of this bias “(...) The clear preference for voluntary human actions over natural events as explanations in unfolding causal chains can be seen as consistent with a cool, calculating and ‘scientific’ principle of causal attribution - people attribute causality to that factor that is sufficient in the circumstances for the event to happen, especially if it they perceive that it alters the course of events by increasing the likelihood of the outcome” (Hilton, McClure, & Sutton, 2010, p. 396).

Psychologists have known for a long time people’s susceptibility to show attributional asymmetry which can significantly influence historical interpretations. It consists in exaggeratedly noticing the causes of the other people’s behavior in themselves, and exaggerating the role of personal (dispositional) factors in explaining and predicting their actions in comparison with the influence of situational factors on them. In light of the results of an increasing number of cross-cultural comparisons, this asymmetry is shown in the individualist West. European and American psychological research participants overestimate the role of attitudes and dispositions of other people as reasons for their behaviors in comparison to the influence on them of situational factors. In the collectivist East, in the sphere of the influence of Chinese culture, where holistic orientation dominates and great meaning in social perception is given to the context, there is disappearance or even a

reverse of attributional asymmetry (Oyserman, Coon, & Kimmelmeier, 2002; Nisbett, 2003).

Its manifestation in the thinking of historians is the personalizing of narration – exaggerating the role of attitudes and dispositions of the participants of history as causes of their behaviors determining described events and at the same time diminishing the influence of situational factors on these behaviors. It can legitimately be expected that historians coming from the cultural environment where this bias does not occur or even its opposite appears (looking for sources of behavior more in changeability of the situations or broadly understood factors of the context than in the acting person) will not be willing to exaggeratedly personalize their narrations.

Regardless of the cultural anchoring, formulating their judgments about people acting in the past, sometimes in an epoch very unlike the one in which they live and act, historians cannot give them the same imperfect empirical checks which they commonly use in everyday life as lay psychologists. As researchers of history, they are usually not limited to only registering events, but also try to interpret and include them in the prepared narration. If they try to understand the people acting in the past, they inevitably deform their image (which was mentioned above). If they try to explain a given event or phenomenon, they can refer to various traditions – from scientist, probably best represented by Carl Hempel (1949, 1991), to the opposite end of the spectrum some extreme kinds of narrativism. Justified distrust towards naturalistic scientism leads to equating the status of the rules of historical cognition to those which govern literary creativity when considering as legitimate outside-epistemological criteria of the evaluation of statements referring to the past².

Rejecting excesses of postmodernist narrativism is sometimes connected with the acceptance of both the narrativist explanation and, as postulated by Hempel, the deductive-nomological (or, remaining possibly closer to the practice of historians, the probabilistic) one (Hempel, 1991). Using such various ways of explanation, adjusted to the diverse and changeable needs of historiography, recognizing causality as an important explanatory category does not have to mean relativistic, considering them as definitely equal. In given conditions, while realizing specified aims, some kinds of explanation appear as more appropriate than others (Bouwel & Weber, 2008; see also Topolski, 1996, chapter 9).

Historians generally do not reveal an exaggerated interest in the arguments of philosophers and methodologists - in their narrations explanation happens to be included as

2 Especially if there are bigger pieces of narrations, epistemological criteria of evaluation are substituted by other ones, e.g. aesthetic: see Ankersmit (2004). A convincing criticism of the influential narrativism viewpoints of H. White and F. Ankersmit is presented by Ch. Lorenz. In particular he stresses that history, as opposed to literary fiction is always about a real past, existing beyond the text (Lorenz, 2009, pp. 91-131).

if automatically. Each time it is adjusted (not necessarily as a result of a conscious choice) to circumstances. Historians want to explain - although generally they do not realize how and when they do it (Topolski, 1996). If doing it they refer to statements of common-sense psychology, their interpretations deform images of recalled participants of history and their actions. They contribute also to deformations of pictures of sequences of events connected with one another placed in history and described (reductionally) in the language of those actions and their results.

Biased thinking on the sequences of historical events

People are willing to structuralize knowledge about the social world and organize it in the form of simplified schemas. What is more, rather often they also notice regularities where there is a lack of them; they arbitrarily ascribe order and give sense to particular fragments of social reality. The people notice connections between events even when they are independent of one another, they also overestimate the strength of connections between them. Such biases most certainly take place universally but only in the West does overestimation of their co-changeability happens to be the effect of a rushed conclusion from the first observations indicating the possibility of its occurrence (Nisbett, 2003; see also Nisbett & Ross, 1980).

Also, events from the past can be perceived by historians as more mutually connected than really took place. As it is known, they happen to be explained by them sometimes by referring to mass subscribed ideologies which deliver instruments for simplified, monocausal pseudo-explanations of a very complex sequences of events. Their course can adequately be shown by referring to various rules or by indicating that it is locally changeable and specifically dependent on the context.

If a historical trend took place, the statement describing it is, obviously, only a limited generalization, a detailed sentence stating a specific sequence of events, isolated in a given context, localized in time and space, but not by a universally abiding law. The results of psychological research indicate that if events comprising a given sequence are evaluated negatively or – for example because they are unusual or atypical – they are salient, with a high probability that they are included in explanandum. Also, the final part of the sequence of events most frequently happens to be the subject of spontaneous causal explanation while chronologically the first event has the biggest chance to become the instant standard against which the remaining ones will be compared and evaluated (Teigen, 2004).

The last cognitive inclination corresponds with the characteristic tendency of historians' to search for the

genesis of described events, phenomena, or processes. In these searches, first of all in attempts at a causal explanation of what happened in the past, counterfactual thinking can be useful. Analysis of alternative histories ("What if...") most certainly often fulfills important heuristic functions and allows conducting mental simulations or 'thinking experiments' in which a historian makes up alternative courses of events constituting imperfect equivalents of control conditions in an actually conducted experiment (Mey & Weber, 2003; Voss & Wiley, 2006).

It so happens that such endeavors are used to achieve various aims, in particular they make it easier to create the image of the whole range of causes of what is explained. Then the various constructed scripts of the past depend among others on the historian's perception of the present and on attempts of its specified presentation. Images of a 'non-existing' past, presented in an adequately favorable or unfavorable light, can be used, thanks to comparisons, for depreciating the present (as being worse than the past) or its embellishing (as being better than the past: see Rosenfeld, 2002).

Not rarely, counterfactual thinking is activated unintentionally, or even despite the researcher's attempts not to refer to it. Open or hidden in narration decisive questions ("Would this happen..." "if this wasn't...") making it easier to formulate hypotheses about the cause-result connections taking place, demonstrate also the historical importance of certain events happening. As if, instead of an experiment, analysis of alternative histories makes it easier to identify causes and estimate their weight, present them as more (or less) important than others in evoking results of a historian's interest (Mey & Weber, 2003; Kaye, 2010).

If counterfactual thinking takes place, although it happens to be a source of cognitive deformations, it becomes also a specific exercise of historical imagination, not a shunning from considering dissimilar worlds. However, first of all it prevents perceiving the historical process as devoid of elasticity, describing it in the language of deterministic certainty as realizing necessary and inevitable changes (Kaye, 2010; Voss & Wiley, 2006). Counterfactual thinking seems also to make it difficult for hindsight bias to occur, very strongly deforming the image of the past.

This bias consists in overestimating the probability of a result happening in a sequence of events which had taken place and was known. At the same time probabilities of alternative results happening which did not happen, are ex post lowered. Historians, experiencing this cognitive deformation of events which did not take place, ascribe exaggeratedly little chance of their existence. Because an allegedly historical process had to proceed the way it actually took place, although this result was "installed" by it in causal schemas well known to them (or such ones about which knowledge is relatively easily available).

This way historians ascribe to a perceived order of events an inevitability believing that the powers which triumphed had to win. Thinking about history in the language of determined processes is partly a result of the occurrence of hindsight effects and at the same time favors their occurrence. The discoverer of this bias, Baruch Fischhoff, talks about creeping determinism as its cognitive basis (Fischhoff, 1975). Fischhoff's creeping determinism interpretation of hindsight effects is supported in research studying historical phenomena (Wasserman, Lempert, & Hastie, 1991; see also Hawkins & Hastie, 1990).

If the final effect of a sequence of events is perceived as unexpected, hindsight bias will, rather, not take place and even its opposite can appear ('this was not supposed to be expected': Pezzo, 2003). However, giving sense to surprising historical events by including them in a coherent narration and treating them, at the time they happened, as possible to predict or even expected, seems to be a thinking endeavor commonly used by historians, favoring the occurrence of hindsight effects. Story telling most certainly favors overstating the ex post subjective likelihood of an occurrence of a sequence of events which really took place and lowering the evaluation of the chances of alternative histories occurring.

Although there are a lot of questions and ambiguities, research results show that historical narration in which usually causal schemas are 'installed' can make it easier – in comparison with narrations from other domains – for this bias to take place (Dymkowski, Domin, Marszałek, & Pałasiński, 2007). At the same time intensified thinking about 'non-existing' histories favors an increase of their cognitive accessibility, and also at the same time makes it difficult to perceive an explained event as an inevitable after-effect of their predecessors. Yet the generating, comparing with one another, and cognitive processing of a lot of alternative courses of events does not always reduce hindsight effects. It can even intensify them if the task is perceived by its executor as very difficult. For the difficulty attributed to it justifies the presumption that it is not easy to imagine alternative options and their possible consideration requires making a very big cognitive effort. If so, the occurrence of 'non-existing' histories appears to be rather unlikely and thus can be ignored. However, if cognitive processing is qualified as a relatively easy task, which in the case of the most skillful, experienced historians certainly happens often, hindsight effects should be reduced or not occur at all (Sanna, Schwarz, & Stocker, 2002; Sanna & Schwarz, 2003).

Closer recognizing of the role of this bias of perception and thinking in historical interpretations is not an easy task is still waiting to be done. In light of research so far, experts from various domains do not indicate, in comparison with laymen, clearly lowered susceptibility to its appearance. Some reduction in the occurrence of hindsight effects can

be observed, at most, in those who are characterized with moderate competence in their domain. Paradoxically, its best experts do not differ in this respect from ignoramuses (Christensen-Szalanski & Willham, 1991; Guilbault, Bryant, Brockway, & Posavac, 2004).

It is most certain that this bias occurs universally although in different cultural environments it can reveal itself with various frequency and intensity. For example, it is observed in the people of far-east Asia, characterized as having a mentality different from the western ones, and its certainly greater intensity is even noticed (Nisbett, 2003).

Easterners differ from the people of the West by attributing to the social reality a greater complexity and changeability, and in the perception of the past and thinking about it. Having different common-sense psychology they perceive participants of history differently, they locate important sources of their activities more in changing situations and contexts. The past is particularly important for them; it constitutes the point of reference for interpreting the present. More willingly than people of the West, they allow changeability in the rules of transformations of the social world in time. They take into account more that a given tendency (for example an increase or a decrease in a given dimension) is only local, clearly limited in time. If so, in the future it can reveal a slightly different course, disappear or even reverse (Ji, Guo, Zhang, & Messervey, 2009; see also Nisbett, 2003). If historians are formed in an environment sharing this kind of common-sense conceptions of the changes taking place in time, it can legitimately be expected that they will reveal historical interpretations squaring with them³ (on peculiarities of Chinese historiography referring to thinking fascinated with the past see Huang, 2007).

Obviously, not having any conception of historical process, its researchers can have a problem with the gradation of the importance of the causes, taken into consideration, of what is explained. However, in a given cultural environment there function ready schemas of thinking, giving a criteria of selection and putting causes in a hierarchy; for example, events distant in time can be, as casual antecedents, underestimated or omitted entirely (Voss & Wiley, 2006, p. 580). As a result, the meaning of immediate causes or even the ones directly preceding the explained event is exaggerated at the expense of the ones which act on it long-term and indirectly. The former as particularly salient, draws attention and that is why it can play an exaggeratedly large role in the schema of explanation used.

However, recently published research results indicate (Hilton et al., 2010) that if we, in explaining the final link, willingly call an unfolding causal chain a proximal natural

³ Research results on children (Chinese and Canadian of European descent) indicate that cross-cultural differences regarding naive conception of history grow with age (Ji, 2008).

(physical) event, distal cause is preferred over immediate causes as an explanation when it is (i.e. the cause) a voluntary human (especially deliberate) action.

Conclusions

The occurrence of different cognitive biases in thinking about human history influences the conducting of historical interpretations. These biases are revealed in the perception of participants of a historical process, their actions, conditions and results of these actions as well as in the perception of the sequence of connected events located in the past. If historians use common-sense psychology – widespread in their environment and thus easily available – on its findings depend which of these biases, how often, and in what intensity, will be revealed in their narrations. Knowledge about them, even though it does not protect against their destructive influence on historical interpretations, still can sensitize historians to them. It should deepen their self-consciousness as researchers, and help them articulate important limitations of their cognitive activity.

Obviously, peculiarities of perceiving history and thinking about it are looked at from various sides, described from different perspectives, and analyzed from diverse points of view. The psychological perspective signaled here that is complementary towards others (for example anthropological, or sociological), is only one of the possibilities. So far it has been rarely (too rarely!) taken into consideration on a bigger scale by theorists and philosophers of history.

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