Social Studies Teachers’ Conceptions of History: Calling on Historiography

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ABSTRACT In this qualitative research study, the author investigated social studies teachers’ conceptions of history by conducting in-depth, semistructured interviews with 12 in-service teachers. Results indicated that participants tended to look at the outcome of historical knowledge construction without considering its process or mentioning forces that shape historical writing. Rather than considering the whole relationship or interplay between the past, the recorded past, and the historian, participants observed a part of the relationship among distinctive yet interrelated components of history. A realistic view of the world and a naive epistemological view of history seemed to characterize the conceptions of most participants who viewed history as objective knowledge. Most participants did not perceive the relevancy of intellectual foundations of history to their profession and professional development.

Keywords: conceptions of history, historiography, history education, nature of history, social studies

With the advent of the cognitive revolution in education in the late 1960s, research emphasis has shifted from observable and quantifiable behaviors to nonobservable mental activities or the act of meaning making (Bruner, 1990; Gardner, 1985). As a result, researchers have directed more attention in teacher education to investigating topics related to teacher cognition, such as teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, perspectives, and conceptions.

Conceptions that teachers have about their subject matter affect their curricular and pedagogical judgments and decisions. In several conceptual and empirical studies, researchers indicated that teachers’ conceptions are instrumental in framing how they plan, implement, and evaluate curricula (e.g., Andrews & Hatch, 1999, 2000; Brown & Cooney, 1982; Clark & Peterson, 1986; Clark & Yinger, 1987; Ernest, 1989a; Fang, 1996; Hancock & Gallard, 2004; Richardson, 1996). Teacher conceptions “play a significant role in shaping teachers’ characteristic patterns of instructional behavior” (Thompson, 1992, pp. 130–131). Not only classroom teaching but also quality of student learning are influenced significantly by teacher conceptions (Evans, 1988; Thompson, 1992). Therefore, educators should study teachers’ conceptions to better understand the way teachers teach and to enhance student learning (Kember, 1997; Shavelson & Stern, 1981).

The importance of teachers’ beliefs and conceptions about the nature of a particular discipline in teaching is well documented in the literature. Research in mathematics education reveals that teachers’ conceptions of the nature of mathematics and mathematical knowledge not only closely relate to but also influence their pedagogical orientations and instructional practices in the classroom (Ernest, 1989a, pp. 22–23, 1989b; Grossman, Wilson, & Shulman, 1989; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; McDiarmid, Ball, & Anderson, 1989). Norton, Richardson, Hartley, Newstead, and Mayes (2005) argued, “The teachers’ beliefs about the nature of the discipline that they were teaching . . . have a direct influence on their teaching intentions” (p. 554). Lyons (1990) stated, “The teacher’s assessment of how to present subject matter is mediated by . . . his or her own stance toward a discipline” (p. 175). Leinhardt (1988) made a similar comment by claiming that teachers’ conceptions of the subject matter have a powerful influence on the development of their thoughts about how to plan and implement curriculum and instruction.

According to Hativa (2000), “Improvement in teaching is not so much mastering . . . teaching techniques and reconsidering teachers’ approaches to teaching, but to a large part the reassessment of teachers’ conception of the nature of what they wish their students to learn” (p. 332). Angell (1998) stated that because social studies curriculum is characterized by “competing value claims and conflicting strategies for fostering democratic values and beliefs among students,” teacher-education researchers need to pay attention to social studies teachers’ domain-specific beliefs (p. 510), the focus of the present study.
Discussion of Terminology

Inconsistent use of terminology characterizes earlier research into such constructs as teacher beliefs and conceptions partly because of their abstract nature and because they had not been empirically investigated by process–product research guided by behaviorism. As an example, Clark (1988) called teacher beliefs preconceptions or implicit theories (p. 5). When referring to teacher beliefs and conceptions, researchers used such terms as perspectives, views, conceptual systems, perceptions, internal mental processes, personal theories, personal epistemologies, explicit theories, practical knowledge, principles of practice, rules of practice, orientations, action strategies, repertoires of understanding, and so forth (Kagan, 1992, p. 66; Pajares, 1992, p. 309). Pajares suggested that “most of the constructs were simply different words meaning the same thing” (p. 309), as is the case for beliefs and conceptions used synonymously in many studies (Kember, 1997, p. 257).

Much of the confusion over these terms stems from the blurry boundary between belief and knowledge. Although a controversy exists among researchers over the question of whether knowledge subsumes belief as a type of knowledge or belief subsumes knowledge as a component of belief, researchers generally agree that belief can be distinguished from knowledge in terms of its evaluative and judgmental nature; that is, knowledge stems from the cognitive outcome of thought and belief in the affective outcome (Pajares, 1992).

Rokeach (1968) defined beliefs as “any simple proposition, conscious or unconscious, inferred from what a person says or does” (p. 113). Sigel (1985) defined beliefs as “mental constructions of experience—often condensed and integrated into schemata or concepts” (p. 351). Beliefs are also defined as a person’s representation of reality that guides thought and behavior (Harvey, 1986) and as explicit propositions concerning the characteristics of objects, events, people, and situations (Nisbett & Ross, 1980). Delving deeply into beliefs, Nespor (1987) detected four characteristic features of beliefs. These are (a) existential presumption (incontrovertible personal beliefs immune to persuasion), (b) alterativity (beliefs about ideal situations in contrast to reality), (c) affective and evaluative loading (beliefs incorporating feelings about an object or a domain and their value-loaded judgments), and (d) episodic structure (beliefs existing in memory containing previous life experiences).

Defined as a person’s countless psychologically organized beliefs about physical and social reality (Rokeach, 1968), a person’s belief system is composed of beliefs, attitudes, and values (Pajares, 1992). As such, they differ not only in terms of intensity and power but also along the central-peripheral dimension; that is, central beliefs are more resistant to change than are peripheral beliefs (Rokeach). Because belief systems are idiosyncratic and do not require group consensus or internal consistency, a person’s belief system might include beliefs that are inconsistent or in conflict with one another (Nespor, 1987). Green (1971) identified the following three dimensions of belief systems:

First there is the quasi-logical relation between beliefs. They are primary or derivative. Secondly, there are relations between beliefs having to do with their spatial order or their psychological strength. They are central or peripheral. But there is a third dimension. Beliefs are held in clusters, as it were, more or less in isolation from other clusters and protected from any relationship with other sets of beliefs. Each of these characteristics of belief systems has to do not with the content of our beliefs, but with the way we hold them. (pp. 47–48)

In general, researchers characterize beliefs as essentially subjective, affective, and socioculturally determined through a process of enculturation and social construction (Nespor, 1987; Pajares 1992; Rokeach, 1968). As mental constructs that are imbued with meaning, beliefs “cannot be directly observed or measured but must be inferred from what people say, intend, and do” (Pajares, p. 314). Beliefs have cognitive and affective functions. They play a fundamental role not only in structuring individuals’ frame of reference, theory of action, and purposes of behaviors but also in shaping the ways they construct an interpretation of others’ intentions and actions in a given social and environmental context (Ekeblad & Bond, 1994; Pratt, 1992; Ross, 1987; Tobin, 1990).

In her review of research on teacher beliefs, Kagan (1992) stated that findings about teachers’ beliefs can be summarized into two major generalizations: Teachers’ beliefs tend to be (a) stable and resistant to change and (b) “associated with a congruent style of teaching that is often evident across different classes and grade levels” (p. 66). Noting that teachers are not consciously aware of their own beliefs and “do not always possess language with which to describe and label their beliefs,” Kagan concluded:

Teacher belief . . . may be the clearest measure of a teacher’s professional growth, and it appears to be instrumental in determining the quality of interaction one finds among the teachers in a given school. As we learn more about the forms and functions of teacher belief, we are likely to come a great deal closer to understanding how good teachers are made. (p. 85)

Another theme common across studies on teacher beliefs is that contextual factors over which teachers have little control such as complexities of classroom life, school climate, social organization of school, and attitudes of principals and colleagues may constrain “teachers’ abilities to attend to their beliefs and provide instruction which aligns with their theoretical beliefs” (Fang, 1996, p. 55). For this reason, even if teachers articulate their beliefs, they may fail to put them into practice (Schraw & Olafson, 2002).

Perspectives and conceptions are defined in the literature more broadly than are beliefs and knowledge. Composed of intentions, interpretations, and behavior that interact continually, teacher perspectives can be defined as “a reflective, socially defined interpretation of experience that serves
as a basis for subsequent action” (Clark & Peterson, 1986, p. 287). Defining perspectives as a set of interrelated beliefs and intentions that guide and influence behaviors, Pratt (1998) identified three kinds of beliefs as characteristic features of teacher perspectives. These are epistemic beliefs (knowledge, knowledge acquisition, and knowing), normative beliefs (roles and responsibilities of the teacher and relationships between teacher and students), and procedural beliefs (intentions regarding teaching tactics and strategies).

Thompson (1992) defined conceptions as a “general mental structure, encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images, preferences, and the like” (p. 130). As socially and culturally shared cognitive configurations, conceptions are not uniform but multidimensional in nature (Van den Berg, 2002). According to Pratt (1992), conceptions represent categories of ideas that inform the descriptions of how a given phenomenon or event is experienced by people from different walks of life:

Conceptions are specific meanings attached to phenomena which then mediate our response to situations involving those phenomena. We form conceptions of virtually every aspect of our perceived world, and in so doing, use those abstract representations to delimit something from, and relate it to, other aspects of our world. In effect, we view the world through the lenses of our conceptions, interpreting and acting in accordance with our understanding of the world. (p. 204)

I preferred conception to belief to explain participants’ conceptualizations of history for the following three reasons. First, conception is a term used in the literature more frequently than belief. Second, its meaning is largely synonymous with the definition of belief (Kember, 1997, p. 257). Third, conception subsumes belief as a more overarching and comprehensive term (Thompson, 1992, p. 132).

Literature on Teachers’ Conceptions of History and the Significance of the Study

Researchers concerned with social studies teachers’ conceptions of history investigated aspects of the topic such as the (a) relationship between teacher conceptions and teaching methods, (b) background factors influencing development of the conceptions of history, (c) effects of disciplinary backgrounds on teachers’ conceptions and practices, (d) impact of teacher conceptions on students’ beliefs about history, and (e) conceptions of history embodied by different types of teachers, for example, secondary school teachers’ and teacher candidates’ historical thinking related to historical texts (Evans, 1988, 1989, 1990; Nichol & Guiver, 2004; Virta, 2001; Wilson & Wineburg, 1988; Wineburg, 1991a, 1991b; Yeager & Davis, 1995). Researchers studied social studies teachers’ conceptions in comparison with those of other teachers such as science teachers (Donnelly, 1999), or comparatively examined teacher conceptions within different cultural contexts (Hicks, 2005).

This study is different than the studies mentioned in the previous paragraphs because it emphasizes the unique blend of epistemological and historiographical questions designed to elicit teachers’ conceptions of history. Researchers have reported that epistemological beliefs do affect one’s approach to reading and understanding historical texts (Wineburg, 1991a). For this reason, in a review of research on history education, Wineburg (1996) called for investigations into teachers’ conceptions of the nature of historical knowledge, as follows:

What is being advocated here is a research strategy that can best be termed applied epistemology. Taking it seriously would mean a dramatic reorientation in our discipline, not only in how we design our research but in the very way we socialize our young. … Further, before we can function well in this new role, we will have to attend to issues of epistemology and subject matter. (p. 434)

Few researchers heeded this empirically informed suggestion about studying teachers’ conceptions of the nature of history (Hartzler-Miller, 2001; Leinhardt, Beck, & Stainton, 1994). The investigation into the nature of historical knowledge has been of limited interest among U.S. education researchers involved in history education (Ahonen, 2001, p. 740). No studies have ever been conducted specifically on social studies teachers’ conceptions of the nature of history or on teachers’ conceptions about the philosophy of history. However, recognizing the importance of teacher conceptions in the teaching and learning process, science and mathematics educators began to conduct studies on teacher conceptions of their subject areas as early as the 1970s. These educators have conducted many studies on teachers’ conceptions of the nature of science involving teachers of different ages, teaching experiences, and grade levels and published articles on teachers’ conceptions about the philosophy of science. (e.g., Abd-El-Khalick, 2000; Abell & Smith, 1994; Andrews & Hatch, 1999; Billeh & Hasan, 1975; Blanco & Niaz, 1997; Brickhouse, 1990; Crawford, Gordon, Nicholas, & Prosser, 1994; Gallagher, 1991; Lederman, 1992; Lederman & Zeidler, 1987; Lerman, 1990; Murcia & Schibeci, 1999; Thompson, 1984).

Once science educators found that science teachers did not have well-developed conceptions of the nature of science or have conceptions inconsistent with modern scientific ideas and practices (e.g., Brickhouse, 1990; King, 1991; Lederman, 1992; Lederman & Zeidler, 1987), they tried to help the teachers develop a desired conception of the nature of science advocated by science education organizations and reform documents. As a result, science teachers’ conceptions of the nature of science have become increasingly more complex and sophisticated (e.g., Bell, Lederman, & Abd-El-Khalick, 2000; Craven, Hand, & Prain, 2002; Lederman, 1999).

One of the major shortcomings of the research studies on teachers’ conceptions of history has been the failure of researchers to recognize the importance of historiography when conducting research on history education (Yilmaz,
Historiography can be defined briefly as the study of different modes of historical writing over time (Breisach, 1994; Iggers, 1997). In these investigations, researchers did not draw sufficiently on the implications of historiography for the study of school history. That is, researchers did not adequately benefit from historiography to understand and present teachers’ conceptions of history.

The neglect of historiography manifests itself in the topics investigated, questions framed, concepts explained, arguments made, and conclusions drawn. For instance, whether history is an art or a science has been debated vigorously among historians as a central epistemological issue since history was recognized as an academic discipline. Yet, no researchers have constructed research questions to understand teachers’ conceptions of the nature of history in conjunction with central epistemological questions in historiography. To fill the gap in the literature, I investigated teachers’ conceptions of the nature of history by drawing on major epistemological debates in historiography. To summarize, the strength and significance of this study lies in its combination of epistemological and historiographical considerations.

Because no social studies educators have offered a comprehensive definition of the nature of history, a need exists to clarify and conceptualize the meaning of the nature of history. On the basis of a review of research measurement on epistemological beliefs (Duell & Schommer-Aikins, 2001), an articulation of the nature of science by Lederman (1992, 1999), and debates in historiography about the nature of history (Breisach, 1994; Cohen, 1999; Iggers, 1997; Lemon, 2003; Marwick, 2001; White, 1997), I proposed a conceptualization of the nature of history as beliefs about the nature of knowledge in history (beliefs about the certainty, source, justification, acquisition, and structure of historical knowledge). In other words, the nature of history refers to the epistemology of history or a means of perceiving history and the values, beliefs, and assumptions inherent in the development of historical knowledge. Considering the literature cited in this paragraph, I defined the nature of history more specifically, as follows:

- First and foremost, interpretative (inevitably reflects a point of view and is based on evidential interpretations by means of inference, historical empathy, and creativity);
- Tentative or subject to change (historical knowledge is not absolute or fixed in that new evidence and novel ways of looking at the past or innovative conceptual frameworks keep it changing);
- Subjective (historical knowledge is not value free but theory laden; i.e., historian’s frame of reference, gender, race, ethnicity, philosophical and disciplinary orientations, life motto, and so forth affect construction of knowledge in history);
- Empirically based (process of constructing historical knowledge involves marshalling evidence about the past through primary and secondary sources);
- Literary based (categories of language and historical poet-ics, narrative plot structures, literary tropes, and verbal structures affect historian’s thoughts and perceptions and thus ultimately shape his or her attempt to construct historical knowledge, i.e., role and function of language in history); and
- Socially and culturally embedded (social and cultural climate of the era in which the historian lives affects his or her explanations of past events, people, processes, and institutions).

These components of historical knowledge are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they overlap with one another. A historically literate person with a keen understanding of the nature of history knows these core features of history as a discipline. In addition, he or she knows that history is the subject and object of its own discipline; that is, the discipline of history refers not only to the past but also to the act of writing about the past.

To summarize, the literature on social studies teachers’ conceptions of history is barren. Research efforts of social studies educators lag far behind those of science educators in terms of research involving teachers’ conceptions of the nature of their field. One can safely conclude that in comparison with the number of studies on science teachers’ conceptions of science, the body of research literature on social studies teachers’ conceptions of history is very small, still in its infancy, and in need of growth. Considering shortcomings of earlier studies and the gap in the research literature, I sought to broaden understanding of teachers’ conceptions of history, under the guidance of historiography, by seeking answers to the following questions:

1. How do teachers conceptualize history?
2. What beliefs do teachers have about the nature and structure of history as an academic discipline or a domain of knowledge?
3. Do teachers view history as an art or science?

These questions become increasingly more complex and specific. Fang (1996) stated, “While research continues to question teachers’ beliefs about certain subject areas, little attention has been paid to their beliefs about particular components of a subject area” (p. 59). That is especially the case for social studies research. The last research question, which draws on epistemology in general and historiography in particular, has never been investigated, so the most significant contribution of this study to the literature is its depictions of social studies teachers’ views on whether history is an art or science.

**Method**

**Procedure and Participants**

I based the methodological framework of this study on the methods and procedures used for qualitative research. I used a purposeful sampling procedure to recruit
participants; the first, and primary, criterion was a range of teaching experience. To reflect a spectrum of social studies teachers at various stages in their careers (i.e., novice, experienced, veteran), I selected teachers whose teaching experiences ranged from several years to 25 years or more. The second criterion was level of education. Because I incorporated epistemological questions to elicit teachers’ conceptions of the nature of historical knowledge and because teachers with solid teaching experience are in the best position to articulate their conceptions (Cuban, 1991; Entwistle, Skinner, Entwistle, & Orr, 2000), I recruited teachers who had advanced degrees and had taught social studies for many years. Therefore, seasoned teachers (16 years average teaching) with advanced education constituted the majority of the participants. The third criterion was the gender of the participants. To balance their genders, I selected an equal number of male (n = 6) and female (n = 6) teachers.

I selected participants unknown to me before I conducted the study from five public middle and high schools in three cities in a southeastern U.S. state. I initially contacted the head of the Department of Social Science Education at State University (pseudonym) and received a list of social studies teachers and their e-mail addresses. I then contacted potential participants through e-mails in which I briefly explained the purposes of the study and invited them to participate on a voluntary basis. After I received positive responses from the participants, I selected 12 social studies teachers and scheduled interviews for a time and place convenient for them. Teachers 4 and 12 preferred to be interviewed in a restaurant and cafeteria respectively, but the majority of teachers opted to be interviewed in their classrooms. The Appendix provides descriptions of each participant; some teachers, such as Teacher 1, did not give specific information about their backgrounds.

Teacher 1 was a White male teacher in his mid-40s with 16 years of experience. He was teaching military history as an elective high school course when he participated in the study. Teacher 2 was a 50-year-old White male teacher with 18 years of experience and a master's degree in social studies. He was teaching Grades 10 through 12; he had taught history “in some form for approximately 25 years.” He identified his political and religious affiliations as Republican and Protestant, respectively. Teacher 3 was a 35-year-old Black male teacher with 11 years of experience and a master’s degree in social studies. He was teaching a high school government course. He identified his political and religious affiliations as Democrat and Protestant, respectively.

Teacher 4 was a 57-year-old White male teacher with 18 years of teaching experience and a master's degree in social studies. He was teaching Grade 8 U.S. history. Her political affiliation was Independent; she had no religious affiliation. Teacher 5 was a 35-year-old Black male with 11 years of teaching experience, a degree in history, and a master's degree in social studies. He was teaching Grade 10 U.S. history; he identified his political affiliation as Independent. Teacher 6 was a 52-year-old White male teacher with 19 years of experience, a degree in history, and Doctorate of Education degree in social studies. He was teaching primarily high school economics. He identified his political and religious affiliations as Independent and Protestant, respectively.

Teacher 7 was a 28-year-old White female teacher with 4 years of experience. She was teaching high school world history and government. Her political affiliation was Democrat; she had no religious affiliation. Teacher 8 was a White female teacher. She had 2 years of teaching experience and a Master of Education degree in social studies; she was teaching high school economics. Teacher 9 was a 54-year-old White female teacher with 15 years of experience, a degree in history, and a master’s degree in social studies. She was teaching Grade 7 social studies. She identified her political and religious affiliations as Independent and Roman Catholic, respectively.

Teacher 10 was a 40-year-old White female teacher with 18 years of teaching experience, a degree in history, and a master's degree in social studies. She was teaching a Grade 8 U.S. history course. Her political and religious affiliations were Republican and Protestant, respectively. Teacher 11 was a Black female teacher in her late 50s with 29 years of teaching experience and a master's degree in social studies. She was teaching Grade 10 U.S. history and Grade 12 sociology. Teacher 12 was a 30-year-old White female teacher with 7 years of teaching experience and a Master of Education degree in social studies. She was teaching Grade 10 U.S. history. Her political affiliation was Independent; she had no religious affiliation.

Interviewing is the best data-gathering method to (a) enter the conceptions of others, (b) enable participants to elucidate their own personal perspectives, and (c) allow the researcher to capture the complexities of participants’ conceptions along with qualitatively distinct variations among conceptions (Patton, 2002, pp. 341–348). Therefore, I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews of 60–150 min individually with the participants. To ensure comparability across answers, I asked all participants the same questions, but depending on each participant's responses I used different probes to help them deepen their explanations and provide more relevant answers. The kinds of probes I used in the interviews were detail oriented (where, when, what, and how questions), elaboration (to encourage participants to keep talking about the topic of the study by gently nodding my head or by asking follow-up questions such as, “Would you elaborate on that?” “Could you say some more about that?”), and clarification (Patton, p. 374). To provide participants with an opportunity to have the final say, I ended the interview with the following question: “Is there anything we haven’t talked about that you would like to add?” I interviewed each teacher once except Teacher 6, who was interviewed twice on different days. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.
Data Analysis

I used the techniques and strategies of inductive qualitative data analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman 1994). I initially read each interview transcript in detail to get a general sense of the whole interview and then reread each interview transcript to begin formal coding in a systematic way. Because the analyst should first determine what the unit of analysis would be for the data before coding (Patton, 2002), I selected sentences and phrases as my units of analysis, called line-by-line analysis. Coding in-depth interview transcripts line by line is one way to remain open to the data and to identify participants’ implicit and explicit concerns and statements (Charmaz, 2006).

Having selected the unit of analysis for the data, I examined each interview transcript by using open- or low-level codes with little abstraction. My main purpose was to understand the data from the perspective of the participants, so I stayed close to participants’ words, phrases, and sentences or indigenous concepts, making comments about the possible relationship among the codes (Patton, 2002, p. 454). During this process of initial coding, I used emic analysis by means of invivo codes, that is, coding data on the basis of participants’ own words as a bottom-up approach to systematic data analysis. If the informant’s words were not sufficient to code what was emerging from the data, I used sensitizing codes (Patton, p. 456). Whenever I found a meaningful segment of text in the transcript, I assigned either an invivo or a sensitizing code to signify that particular segment.

I continued this process until I segmented all my data and completed the initial coding. Once all the interview transcripts were coded, I began to make cross-case comparisons, usually called the constant comparison method of analysis. Observing indigenous and sensitizing concepts, I compared participants’ responses to the same question, then began to identify similarities, differences, patterns, and themes across the data.

A university professor read the research findings and offered minor changes for the constructions of categories. I also conducted member checking to increase the credibility of the study (Lincoln, 2001, pp. 34–35). I sent the findings to the participants via e-mails, asking them to make comments or suggestions on my descriptions and interpretations of their responses. None of the teachers disagreed with the presentation of their conceptions. Participants’ responses to my e-mails included the following: “It looks good . . . and really interesting to see the differences in history teachers” (Teacher 12); “Thank you so much for sending me a copy . . . I really appreciate you keeping me posted with all your research, most researchers do not do that. Thank you.” (Teacher 10); “I found your research very interesting and appreciate your sharing this with the teachers who were interviewed. The only suggestion that I have is to make sure that all comments have been transcribed in standardized English.” (Teacher 9, after seeing the verbatim transcription of her responses).

Results

This section presents the analysis of the teachers’ answers to questions designed to obtain their conceptions of history and their epistemic understanding of the nature of historical knowledge.

Teachers’ Conceptualizations of History

Five categories of the conceptualization of history emerged from the analysis of teachers’ responses to the question of what history means. These hierarchically ordered conceptions were (a) history as a nation’s memory, (b) history as a story of humankind, (c) history as an enactment in one’s mind of the past, (d) history as a study of change and struggle over time, and (e) history as an interpretation of the past. Because conceptualizations of Teachers 1 and 5 did not fit other categories, I constructed separate categories for each rather than discard their responses. Explanations of each category together with quotations from teachers’ responses follow.

History as a Nation’s Memory

In the category of history as a nation’s memory, history is conceptualized in the form of recorded events of the past. The concept of citizenship underpins this conception of history. In his conceptualization of history, Teacher 1 said,

I tell my students that history is pretty much a nation’s memory. People determine what they will do, how they will conduct themselves, what is right, what is wrong about their experiences. So, a nation has to have a memory and a nation’s history is its memory. It learns from its mistakes hopefully, it records things that are done, that have been . . . good . . . for its citizens.

What comes to the fore in this conception is the focus on the nation and its past. The teacher conceptualized history in relation to a nation’s past experiences more than to the experiences of the people of the world, so a national element strongly manifests itself in this conception. A clue in the teacher’s response to the question might explain why the teacher viewed history more in national terms than in global terms, without taking into account the experiences of the world’s people. The teacher said,

In my situation I teach more American history than I do world history. I cannot teach everything that has happened from the time of the European settlement in North America to 2005, in the time I am allotted. So, what I have to do is to try to teach important facts, teach the places they must know.

The implication of this response is that the institutional context in which the teacher taught restricted, rather than enlarged or expanded, his conception of history. The coverage-oriented, state-mandated social studies curricu-
to the (a) focus on meeting external demands imposed on him and (b) help students learn the basic facts and places while he taught many historical topics within a limited time period.

**History as a Story of Humankind**

The conception of history as a story of humankind is more comprehensive and global than a conception of history as a nation’s memory because it defines history more globally as the total experiences of the world’s people or humankind. According to Teacher 2, “History is humankind’s recorded past in written form, from the beginning of time when writing was invented.” Similarly, Teacher 4 referred to the intention of writing, perceiving it as a starting point for history. In addition, he touched on the historical remnants used to understand the past. Teacher 4 stated,

History is a story. Man’s journey from the earliest ages, after writing was invented. We can learn from artifacts and archeologists, and recorded history gives us a greater insight to what mankind has done through the ages, and how we get to where we are right now.

The basic feature of this perception is that it views history as a story of people in the past and emphasizes the trajectory of past events and human development. The conception of Teacher 9 was more comprehensive than that of the other 2 teachers. She said,

To me, it is a story of people, their lives in the context of chronology and important events, what’s going on environmentally, socially, the day-to-day life of the people and the historical events such as wars and certain events. . . . I am more interested in the flow of events and why and how people played into that and how that affected people.

The perception of Teacher 9 encompasses important terms of the discipline of history. Her conception of history focused more on the themes and procedures of history than its form. She differentiated among components of the object of history, emphasizing the cause–effect relationship and the roles of the historical agents in the development of historical events.

**History as an Enactment of the Past in One’s Mind**

The conception of history as an enactment of the past in one’s mind emphasizes the reenactment of the past in the historian’s mind. Historians of idealist orientation, such as Robin G. Collingwood and Geoffrey R. Elton, focused their attention on the minds of historical figures or on the activities of the human mind to discern thoughts behind the actions of the mind (Breisach, 1994). This teacher’s conceptualization of history does not necessarily reflect a purely idealist conception of history.

**History as a Study of Change and Struggle Over Time**

Change in the past, impact of the past on the present, and interaction among people and with the environment are prominent themes in the conception of history as a study of change and struggle over time. This conception of history is culture oriented and characterized by a multicultural perspective. In this conception, emphases are on (a) the experiences and cultures of the world’s people, (b) interaction among different cultures in the world, and (c) subsequent changes in society. Teacher 3 conceptualized history as “events that have taken place in the past in our areas of life. . . . How the world has changed, and how cultures have changed and how people have interacted with each other, and how that affects the society today.”

Teacher 3’s race and ethnicity or his past experiences as an African American may have affected his view of the past. Discrimination against people of color and minorities is a well-known phenomenon in the United States. Because the majority of Black people in this country experience discrimination in various forms in their lives and struggle to overcome it, this African American teacher may have viewed history as a study of change over time. Teachers 7 and 8 also emphasized the interaction of different sorts and the change in various aspects of the past, but their responses were less comprehensive than was the response of Teacher 3. Teacher 7 stated, “[History is] the study of human events from the time that we consider humans [appeared on the earth]. The focus is on the change of events. I think it is cultural, it is political. There are all types of different ways to bring it down.” Teacher 8 briefly defined history as, “The passage of humans and their interaction with one another and their environment.”

The conception of history given by Teacher 11 was broader and more elaborate than that given by the other 3 teachers. In addition to change in the past and the impact of the past on the present, Teacher 11 stressed people’s struggles over time to overcome difficulties to ameliorate life conditions. She said,

I think I look at it from a chronological point of view, maybe the chronological study of the past events and how those events impacted not only the past societies but how those same events impacted today’s generation. . . . I also look at history as being the study of change over time, no longer are things the way they used be, and to see how that change, how change evolves, even today the way we are presently. . . . And also I look at history as a study in the lives of people. And to see how, when you look at history, studying in the
lives of people and seeing how individuals have overcome, I mean, regardless of what ethnic or racial group it is, how they just, that particular group overcomes so many, many challenges, and obstacles and events.

As was the case for Teacher 3, the race and ethnicity of Teacher 11 as an African American may have shaped her conception of history as a struggle against hostile conditions, given that African Americans confronted so many formidable challenges, such as slavery, and had to struggle to surmount them.

History as an Interpretation of the Past

As the most sophisticated conception of history defined in broad terms and characterized by a holistic approach and a multidimensional perspective, the view of history as an interpretation of the past takes into account the way that historical accounts or explanations are constructed by historians; that is, it considers the process and the outcome of historical endeavor. This view recognizes two components of historical accounts, objective and subjective elements, in the construction of historical explanations. In other words, in this view of history, one perceives the whole rather than only one part of the meaning of history.

Teacher 12 explained briefly what history meant to her: "History is the events of the past, just what really took place, not necessarily one interpretation of the past." The conception of history reported by Teacher 10 also reflected an understanding of history as an interpretative endeavor. She said,

History is something that is not necessarily concrete. Perceptions of history are going to be different. How I view history may be very different from the way you view history. Even though the facts are the same, how we interpret it is going to be different.

Teacher 6 provided the most sophisticated conception of history, as follows:

The simplest way to define history is to say history is the interpretation of the past. . . . History is more argument, an argument about what impact the past has on the present and what impact it may have on the future. . . . It is argument about patterns. It is argument about meaning. . . . I think that it seeks to be objective. It seeks for that. But, it is very difficult to achieve . . . I don't agree that it is completely subjective. But, I do believe that it is possible to determine that certain things happened in an objective sense. I don't think that people want to argue over whether someone like John Kennedy was killed. I think people can place that in objective history. But, what happens when we move away from that . . . to the meaning of his death, that's where you get into interpretation.

This conceptualization reflects an understanding of history as a dynamic discipline. In this view, history is defined basically as interpretation or argument about the meaning of past events, with an emphasis on the impact of the past on the present and the future.
Other categorizations of epistemological beliefs range from dualistic or right–wrong thinking to multiplist and evaluativist views of knowledge (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002; Perry, 1968). Whatever labels or terms one uses to describe epistemological beliefs, they share analogous characteristics or their meanings are similar. The significance of this similarity was that most of the defining attributes of a sophisticated understanding of the nature of history explained in the literature section of this article were missing in teachers’ conceptions of history. Teachers in the category history as the past did not express a conception of history that recognizes the interpretative, tentative, subjective, literary, and socially and culturally embedded nature of history. Teachers with a realist view of history also did not seem to realize that history is the subject and the object of its own discipline. That is, history refers to the past and to activities inherent in the discipline—a fact missing in most teachers’ conceptions of history.

Pedagogical implications of a realist or naive view of history are detrimental to history education. Because “teachers with a realist worldview teach actively to students who are viewed as passive recipients of a preestablished knowledge base” (Olafson & Schraw, 2006, p. 72), teachers with a realist view of history likely teach history with teacher-
centered instruction methods such as lectures, recitation, and reading textbooks, thereby failing to help students understand the tentative nature of historical knowledge. The more one believes, like a realist, that knowledge is simple, certain, absolute, and handed down by authority (Duell & Schommer-Aikins, 2001; Schommer, 1990), the more likely he or she is to take a reductionist stance toward complex historical texts, misinterpret tentative historical explanations, and seek a single story of past events and people when multiple stories about the past are available and appropriate.

Like some science teachers (Bruffee, 1992; Laplante, 1997; Murcia & Schibeci, 1999), the teachers who had a realist view of history perceived themselves as consumers or teachers of history rather than critical inquirers or producers of historical knowledge, an important distinction between school history teachers and historians. Because historiography deals critically with historical accounts of the past or modes of historical writing over time through philosophical, methodological, and epistemological questions, it can help teachers develop a sophisticated conception of history.

Teachers in the overarching category history as an interpretative of the past, whose perceptions of history pinpointed the interpretative nature of history, held sophisticated conceptions of the nature of history. However, the language that all teachers except Teacher 6 used to articulate their conceptions of history did not incorporate richer and more sophisticated concepts, terms, and terminology than that used by historians to express their ideas and thoughts. Although the teachers demonstrated an awareness of the interpretative, subjective, and tentative nature of history, they did not seem to recognize that historical knowledge is literary based and socially and culturally embedded.

Marwick (2001) observed that language plays a key role in constructing historical knowledge as one of the three pillars of studying history or “doing history.” It is the linguistic turn in historiography that places a doubled emphasis not only on interpretative and explanatory strategies such as the roles of rhetoric, narrative-plot structures, and the poetics of history but also on the semiotics of text production, ways that meaning is made in text and that readers grasp meaning from text (Cohen, 1999; Fay, Pomper, & Vann, 1998). Thus, historical articles written by linguistically oriented historians such as Hayden White can help teachers develop a heightened awareness of the literary aspect of history.

**Teachers’ Views on the Characteristic Features of History: What Distinguishes History From Other Disciplines?**

The most commonly found pattern in teachers’ responses to the question about characteristic features of history as a discipline was their tendency to answer an epistemological question from a practical and pedagogical point of view. That is, rather than examine history as a discipline or domain of knowledge, the majority of teachers perceived history as a subject to teach and drew on their experiences in teaching history. As a result, except for Teachers 6 and 10 (and Teachers 2, 9, and 12 to some extent), the majority of teachers had difficulty perceiving the distinctive features of history as a discipline. Some teachers even confessed that the question was difficult and rationalized their difficulty in articulating their thoughts about history as a discipline. They said that reality was governing their day-to-day teaching rather than theory and that they were dealing with the practical world. Teachers’ rationale implied that they did not see the value of dealing with conceptual and theoretical questions or issues in their teaching. Their responses clearly indicated that they did not perceive the relevancy of intellectual and conceptual foundations of history as a discipline for their profession and professional development.

Another common pattern in teachers’ responses was the lack of attention to the process through which historical knowledge is produced. More than half of the teachers looked at the outcome of the historical knowledge construction process without taking its process into consideration or mentioning the forces that shape historical writing. The majority of teachers did not talk about the interpretive nature of the discipline. Some teachers who talked about change in history did not view history as absolute. However, they did not look at historical knowledge itself or the way it originates but only considered the changing nature of its object of study—human experiences, actions, beliefs, values, and institutions. For instance, Teacher 3 said, “History is something that I think changes over time. Unlike a subject such as chemistry, history keeps changing, so it is always different, and new things can be added to it.” Teachers basically looked at the changes in historical events and did not see the effects of those changes on human perceptions, intentions, thoughts, actions, and historical knowledge production.

Clues in teachers’ responses explain some of the reasons for their neglect of the conceptual foundations of history. Their overt comments on epistemological questions implied that because they were not researchers but teachers dealing with the practical world rather than the theoretical world, there is not much value in coping with theoretical questions. Hence, some teachers did not seem to know even well-known theories in social sciences. For instance, when I asked Teacher 1 to state his perspective on the role of theory in historical explanation, he said, “Give me an example of a theory that you are talking about.” To his request, I replied, “For example, Marx’s theory.” Interrupting me, he said, “Survival of the fittest!” I responded, “No, it is Darwin’s theory or some social Darwinists’ theory. Marx’s is historical materialism. He says, the motor of change in history is the role of production or relations of production.”

Another clue in Teacher 1’s response suggested one of the reasons why a clearly discernable indifferent attitude characterized his view of theories in history. When I finished interviewing Teacher 1, I asked him, “Is there anything we
havent’t talked about that you would like to add?” Having stated that I covered the subject, he said, “Okay. Do me a favor” and then made the following comments:

Keep it practical. Keep it realistic. Don’t, don’t create a new term or something that is done every day and everybody knows what it is. Don’t make a model for somebody to understand the cognitive function of this thing that happens in the classroom. I [think] that’s crap. It does no good. They have us read this stuff all the time and then, you know what I do? I purposely forget it because it makes no change. It does not help me. If you want to help history teachers, keep it practical. Keep it real. I am yet to have a researcher to tell me for this type of kid, here is a method that works, and as a result this kid is going to love history. Show me a researcher that can do that, I will buy his book and read it.

As was clear from his response, Teacher 1 was frustrated and even seemed to be offended by my conceptual and epistemological questions. One of the consequences of the teacher’s overt hostile attitude toward theory was his failure to familiarize himself with the most renowned theories that even a high school student is supposed to know. Although this teacher’s perspective cannot be generalized, it might shed some light on the failure of almost every innovative reform effort designed to enhance the quality of teaching and learning in secondary schools. The teacher’s mentality or preconceived ideas and beliefs facilitated or impeded efforts to put education reforms into practice. Teacher 1 purposely forgetting what reformers had asked him to do may be the case for many teachers. Therefore, the previous quotation supports earlier research findings that teachers’ beliefs, conceptions, or mental maps should be considered in any curricular or instructional reform initiatives if teachers are to make a difference in the ways that school subjects are taught and learned (McNeil, 1988; Thornton, 1991).

Serving as tools of resistance, theories provide teachers with perspectives to resist “institutional constraints on their teaching” and “anti-intellectual climate of school staffrooms” (Wong, Yung, Cheng, Lam, & Hodson, 2006, p. 2). Theory is a means to help one “mediate among different ways of seeing” and to avoid taking “the naturalness of seeing for granted” (White, 2004, p. 113). In addition, because knowledge keeps growing in the information age, “teachers need to be able to evaluate new theories and explanations on the basis of the evidence” (Grossman et al., 1989, p. 30). As Teacher 1 argued that history is everywhere and alive, one needs to learn how to see it; theoretical frameworks are relevant to teaching and learning if one knows how to see their relevance. Teacher 1 did not see the relevancy of theory for teaching not only because of his own biases, including pedagogical bias, but also because of the way these education theories and models are presented. Jargons and abstract terms make it difficult for teachers to understand a given model in its entirety and to perceive its relevance to teaching. Therefore, some of the statements that Teacher 1 made were logical and need attention.

Unfortunately, although theories or conceptual frameworks in education are supposedly aimed at enhancing teachers’ and students’ understanding of different dimensions of teaching and learning, they are not easily comprehensible to practicing classroom teachers because of their abstract nature. To make a positive change in teachers’ views of theoretical models, researchers should not coin new terms or abstract concepts to explain their proposed frameworks. This does not mean that theoretical models should be presented in simple forms; rather, jargons and unnecessarily abstract terms should not be used to explain the meaning of a model.

The foremost purpose of the models is to help people visualize information that cannot be seen or experienced directly and to provide them with a means of facilitating their understanding of the world, rather than making it difficult for people to comprehend their world (Dorin, Demmin, & Gabel, 1990; Ryder, 2005). I speculated that some researchers coin new terms to make their models appear original or different from others so that scholars, not teachers, exhibit interest. Not surprisingly, the majority of teaching and learning models do not penetrate into real classroom settings, remaining mainly in academia. Not only experienced in-service teachers but also student teachers view teacher-education programs as highly theoretical, abstract, and disconnected from real classroom settings (Barone, Berliner, Blanchard, Casanova, & McGowan, 1996; Bryan & Abell, 1999). Fang (1996, p. 59) reported that “rather than feeding them with a plethora of theories, teacher educators should perhaps make more conscious efforts to help them realize what theory, or combination of theories, is most effective in enhancing student learning.”

Teacher Views on the Art Versus Science Dichotomy in History

Of 12 social studies teachers, the majority (9 teachers, 75%) viewed history as art and science, 2 teachers (17%) viewed history as science, and 1 teacher (8%) viewed it as art. Many teachers referred to the history courses they were teaching when explaining their views on the art versus science dichotomy in history. Teachers’ rationale for why they believed history leans more toward art was more articulate, more elaborately reasoned, and more detailed than their rationale for why they thought history is science as well. When teachers expressed their opinions about the place of historical empathy (art) and theory (science) in historical knowledge construction, they offered a multidimensional rationale for the use of empathy but had difficulty articulating their views of theory. Whereas teachers tended to look positively at historical empathy and recognized its role in developing students’ historical thinking skills, all except Teacher 6 tended to display an indifferent attitude toward theory and could not identify a specific historian or historical theory. Teachers’ explanations regarding the place of theory in history were fragmented at best; some teachers also seemed confused about the difference between a theory and a perspective.
Why Is History Art?

Teachers stated that history is art because it (a) is a study of people’s experiences, thinking, ideas, and subjective beliefs; (b) deals with human nature and creativity; and (c) requires creative thinking and empathetic understanding of earlier people’s thoughts. History communicates research findings in the form of (a) imaginative writing involving creativity on the part of the historian and (b) storytelling. History involves argument and interpretation; there are various methods of making arguments about the past. Therefore, historical knowledge is tentative, subject to revision and modification or a complete change. Because history is not repeatable, it is difficult to prove and validate one’s historical understanding. Historical sources are fragmented, so those data bits need to be tied and connected through imagination to fill in the gaps in history.

Teacher 11 identified history as art and science without giving a rationale for her answer. She said, “I really can’t answer that question as to whether I see it more as one than the other. I just know art and science both play into it. And I have never really thought about it, which of one do you see more of than the other.”

Seeing the presentation of history as storytelling, Teacher 1 said that he tends to view history more as art than science. Teacher 4’s understanding of human nature shaped his view of history as more art than science. He said that because history “deals with the human nature, human creativity, human thought, and ideas” and “those are creative things, not scientific,” history falls more into the humanities than the sciences. Teacher 5 drew attention to the role of creativity and imagination in historical endeavor. Seeing history as cross-sectional, both art and science, he said, “The art part of that is just a sort of creativity, imagining the thought process that people [in the past engaged in]. . . . The writing aspect of it is the creative aspect of it because you are actually using what you found in your research.”

Teacher 9 stated that she probably leans more toward perceiving history as art because imagination is necessary “to be able to tie the pieces of historical facts and people together that might not fit otherwise.” She also viewed the delivery part of history as art because “sharing information with the audience” entails an artistic approach. Likewise, Teacher 10 emphasized creativity when she explained why history is art and science. She said, “Art is, to me, very free, very open ended, and very creative, and very unstructured. And I think history can be a lot of that as well, I think it can be very free in thought and creative in nature and reflective.” Emphasizing that historians “can’t necessarily go back and prove it,” Teacher 7 said history is more art than science “because people are looking at the past, and making their own understanding of it.” Teacher 12’s view of history as an interpretation of past events had an impact on her view of history as more art than science:

I still think it is an art because it is still based on a person’s interpretation. And interpretation, to me, is definitely an art. . . . And, one person that enters an historical event and another person that, I mean different perspective, when you study that, you know, you are going to study both sides of it, but you are still left to interpret. Which side you think, you know, appeals to you more, which leads more open to art to me.

By making use of the dance metaphor to make his thinking concrete and comprehensible, Teacher 6 gave the most elaborate explanation as to why history is art and science, but leans more toward art:

I would say it is both. . . . When I say it is an art, it is because when something is an art, to me, it means you can do something over and over again each time to do it. You can make something new out of it. . . . History is tentative because it involves argument. And, we can argue the importance of Abraham Lincoln. And we can argue at once and come up with why this is important. You can argue it again and you come up with, yeah, he is important for that reason. He is also important for this other reason. And they may be both equally important. You can go to the same argument and come up with a slightly different conclusion. Much like an art for someone, the dancer. . . . The supreme dancer is usually able to, I would say, is able to bring something new to the same dance every time they do it just as a musician, a violinist. . . . Everything they do may not be new. But, there is an openness to what I would call creation in what they are doing. And I think the best history has that.

Why Is History Science?

Participants in this study perceived the research process associated with history (e.g., gathering and analyzing data, marshalling evidence) as the scientific part of history. According to teachers’ responses, history is science because (a) historical data needs reasoning about and analysis of earlier people’s intentions, thoughts, beliefs, and actions (i.e., the mind has to act on historical data) and (b) historical research involves basic methods and steps of the scientific method to answer a historical question and to prove a historical claim through evidence. Other related factors that teachers thought make history science are as follows:

- History involves identification of patterns in the past through application of in-depth, systematic, ongoing research and data gathering.
- History explains the mechanism behind historical events or causal relationship among historical events and processes.
- Explanations of long-term historical processes and changes require the application of theory or doctrine and a search for patterns among events to make generalizations. History also produces theory and establishes facts. It is possible to make generalizations when enough historical data are available to the historian.
- History involves critical thinking and critical questions.

Teacher 4 stated that history has a scientific aspect but could not delve into why history is science. From Teacher 1’s perspective, the analysis of historical data, along with reasoning, makes history science. Giving a specific example
from his own teaching to indicate why history has a scientific component, Teacher 1 said,

When I read, I have my students read the speeches of Abraham Lincoln from basically the 1837 all the way to 1865 selections of speeches all during that period. That is more than art to try to analyze what this man is about and what he believes and therefore what he does and how he acts. I think it is more than art.

Teacher 7 stated that the scientific aspect of history springs from basic historical research verifying information and theory building on the basis of historical facts. She said when “people go about finding out history or going back and researching, they use a lot of scientific methods to do that, just the basic reasoning and steps when you go through the science, you do the same to answer a historical question.” She thought that because history deals with the past, which is not directly accessible, it is more difficult to prove historical findings and claims. Teacher 7 believed that historical explanations are based on theory that originated from facts. Teacher 10 made similar comments, seeing an iterative relationship among facts, evidence, and interpretation. She said, “I see science as being more concrete and factual study, you know, this is the evidence. This is what you are going to interpret.” She thought that critical thinking is needed to interpret evidence. Teacher 9 observed what she called the establishment of facts through ongoing research as the scientific part of history. She articulated her thoughts as follows:

You have to have more the scientific approach for information so that it is valid and based upon facts. . . . I think history has to be based on established facts. And that’s the criteria. . . . It has to follow [a] certain approach. You can’t just be chaotic, you know, pulling together, totally based on your feeling.

Teacher 5 also perceived the research process or methodology of history as its scientific part. He said, “The scientific part is kind of research because it requires that you go, you seek knowledge, and you go more in depth . . . find resources . . . get your ground work first before you can test anything.” Teacher 12’s view of the scientific aspect of history focused on the use of generalization or simplification of historical processes. She said,

There is science behind it because you have to study, you know, there are facts and elements to go through. It is a science when it comes down to [brief pause], trying to simplify it. I think at times you are left to conclude and judge and try to fit everything into a nice little box like we do in science.

Teacher 6 again gave the most elaborate, articulate, and comprehensive answer by looking at various components of history. He said that because of certain historical methods and identification of patterns and trends in history used for making generalizations or predictions, history takes on a scientific character. Reemploying the art metaphor, he explained why history also has a scientific element:

I think it is both because a technician, when I was describing artistry and this means technically adept, there is a technical aspect of what they do. A technician is much more scientific in their approach. If you are learning to dance, you can have the long foot step and put them out on the floor. It needs to go there. And so, you have those technical or scientific aspects. . . . The scientific component has to do with the attempt to gather data and to identify patterns in the past. When I say it is scientific, you have to search for patterns. . . . We might say that science is a search for theory or you know, conceptual networks that allow to predictive power where you can say knowing this, this will happen and I think there is that element in history of what people want to do with history.

Teachers 2 and 3 perceived history only as science. According to their responses, history is basically science because history involves (a) research methods rather than creativity and (b) reasoning processes to explain what, why, and how things happen. Similar to other teachers who perceived history as science, Teacher 2 considered the methodology of history to identify history as a science. He said, “I think there are fairly standard rules of research and the principles of research that are applied to history, historiography as its methodology. As a result of this research process, history acquires a more scientific character.” He also stated that the primary source the historian examines to find answers to a historical question “pretty well speaks for itself.” From Teacher 3’s perspective, it is the mechanism behind historical events and processes that characterizes history as a science. He said, “I see it as a science because science is more of how things happened, why they happened, and science . . . is able to prove things happening, I don’t see art in that respect. I see art more as themes and dance.”

To summarize, teachers attempted to explain the epistemological question of whether history is art or science in terms of its nature by drawing on their experiences in teaching school history. Although they were articulate when elucidating their views of history as art, they had difficulty providing a cogent rationale for their views of history as science. The majority of teachers in the study tended to overlook the relevancy of historical theory to their profession and professional development. From their perspectives, history is more art than science in that historical knowledge construction involves creativity, imagination, and empathetic understanding of earlier people’s thoughts, beliefs, and experiences. According to their answers, research processes and skills such as locating and analyzing historical data, using critical thinking, and collecting evidence through primary sources are functions that make history take on a scientific characteristic.

Participants’ inadequate understanding of the place of theory in history is alarming. One of the most important reasons for participants’ lack of attention to the theoretical dimension of history involves the way in which historiography in general and historical theories in particular are dealt with by education researchers, curriculum developers, and whoever devises national history standards in the United States. Although these groups of people emphasize
the importance of historical empathy in history education (through national history standards and a large body of research), they overlook schools of historical thought and concomitant historical theories (Ahonen, 2001; Yilmaz, 2007a). As a corollary, preservice and in-service social studies teachers are more exposed to historical empathy than historical theory and thus are more knowledgeable about how to use the former in classroom settings. However, social studies teachers should be familiar with historical theories if they are to help students develop the ability to observe historical events and processes from different angles. Theories are useful tools that can help facilitate efforts of teachers and students to interpret the past from various perspectives (White, 2004).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Participating teachers' conceptions of history were included in two overarching categories, “history as the past” and “history as an interpretation of the past.” The former category was characterized by a naive understanding of history; the latter category was characterized by a disciplinary understanding of history. The majority of teachers in this study perceived history as art and science. The most commonly found weakness in teachers' responses was their naive conceptions of history, which were partial, incomplete, and fragmentary. Not only novice teachers but also experienced teachers had difficulty looking at history as a discipline in terms of its underlying epistemological and conceptual underpinnings. When explaining characteristic features of history as a discipline, more than half of the teachers did not touch on the interpretative nature of historical knowledge. Instead of seeing the whole relationship between various components of historical knowledge construction, the attention of most teachers focused on the outcome of historical enterprise. A disciplinary understanding of history is evidently missing in teachers’ conceptions of history.

Participants' conceptions of history also did not reflect an understanding of the syntactic structure of history. The majority of teachers did not perceive the relevancy of intellectual and conceptual foundations of history as a discipline for their profession and professional development. To teach history effectively, social studies teachers must have a satisfactory understanding of history, including its theoretical and conceptual foundations. Grossman et al. (1989) contended that teachers need to understand the syntactic structures of the subject if they are to teach effectively; if they do not, they may misrepresent content by simplifying it (Wineburg & Wilson, 1991, p. 333).

Therefore, teachers need to have a satisfactory understanding of the nature of history to effectively plan, implement, and assess their instructional activities. Matthews (1994, 1998) argued that curricular decisions that teachers make help enhance a deeper student engagement with the subject if teachers adequately understand the nature of the knowledge domain. Teachers' clear and sophisticated understanding of the nature of science is necessary for their students to develop the sort of knowledge that scientific literacy requires (Matthews, 1994, 1998). The same argument applies to history and every school subject. Teachers' complex understanding of the nature of the discipline is needed if students are to develop high levels of literacy and deep interest in any school subjects (King, 1991; Lederman, 1992). That is why understanding "the NOS [Nature of Science] is a major, if not the major, goal in science education" (Alters, 1997, p. 48) and is deemed a central component of scientific literacy by science education organizations and science educators (American Association for the Advancement of Science, 1993; Bell et al., 2000; National Research Council, 1996). That understanding should also be a goal of social studies education. If students are to be protected from political manipulations by interest groups, they need to develop a satisfactory understanding of the nature of history. I suggest that an adequate understanding of the nature of history is stated as (a) an important education objective for students to achieve and (b) one of the indicators of historical literacy in national and state history standards.

Because history makes up the largest part of secondary social studies curriculum, an understanding of how different schools of historical thought construct historical explanations should constitute an important component of social studies teachers' pedagogical content knowledge. Familiarity with historical orientations or the multiplicity of perspectives on the past is a precondition for history teachers to understand the complexity of the past and to help students develop an increasingly complex and fine-grained understanding of the past. If social studies teachers become familiar with the nature of history and multiplicity of historical explanations, they can help students not only avoid accepting any claim at face value but also construct a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the past on their own (Yilmaz, 2007b).

To that end, a course on historiography needs to be incorporated in social studies education departments so that preservice social studies teachers can read, discuss, reflect on, modify, and change their understanding of history on the basis of their encounters with diverse approaches to the past. Lee (1983) argued that historical frameworks can help educators develop a rational way of teaching history and address fundamental issues in history education. Researchers need to identify and use models of history to conduct rigorous studies that explore students’ thoughts about history (Seixas, 2001, p. 546). Therefore, teachers need to understand how various methods of history have affected history education (Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994). Putting these suggestions into practice can be best realized by introducing a historiography course to social studies education departments.

To accomplish that goal, unfavorable attitudes of social studies educators toward a disciplinary approach to
teaching history need to be addressed. Stearns (1998, p. 238) stated, "Social studies professionals vary, but many are quite hostile to any of the major history goals, which compounds real learning dilemmas for students and teachers alike." This negative disposition is not informed by reasoned judgments. Nationally and internationally recognized scholars have articulated the value of a disciplinary approach with well-grounded arguments that have not been refuted or challenged by social studies educators. For example, as opposed to many social studies educators’ hostile attitudes toward disciplinary approaches to history teaching, Gardner and Mansilla (1994) stressed that providing students with disciplinary tools is key to quality education; they urged educators not to throw away the "disciplinary baby" with the "subject matter" bathwater. Disagreeing with critics whose views lead educators to perceive scholarly disciplines as a significant part of the problem in schools, they further argued:

We maintain that the scholarly disciplines represent the formidable achievements of talented human beings, toiling over the centuries, to approach and explain issues of enduring importance. Shorn of disciplinary knowledge, human beings are quickly reduced to the level of ignorant children, indeed, to the ranks of barbarians. (p. 199)

In addition, Mansilla and Gardner (1997) asserted that teaching for comprehension requires an "understanding of the disciplinary modes of thinking embodied in the methods by which knowledge is constructed, the forms in which knowledge is made public, and the purposes that drive inquiry in the domain" (p. 382).

In addition to the argument presented by Mansilla and Gardner (1997), empirical evidence also is available to demonstrate the potential of a disciplinary approach to foster students’ historical literacy. This evidence was reported by Evans (1990), who was averse to using a disciplinary approach to teaching history. Evans categorized and described one of the teachers in the study as a scientific historian in terms of his pedagogical approach to history, which reflects the disciplinary practice of history. The following quotes from Evans's descriptions of the scientific historian's approach to teaching illustrate this point:

"All eight lessons observed [in the scientific historian's classroom] involved students thinking about history and either asked students to make historical judgments or generalizations based on evidence. (p. 110) . . . Students were encouraged to engage in the process of writing history, exploring a topic, and writing about it. (p. 112)"

Recognizing the strong effects of the scientific historian's teaching method on students' learning, Evans noted that his students "had the clearest notions about history" (p. 105), and "had very positive feelings about the course" (p. 112). Students of the scientific historian in Evans's study reported that they became more critical and analytical by asking questions about their world. They also acknowledged the empowering impact of the history course on their thinking about history and on their beliefs about society. To characterize the overall course of the scientific historian, Evans said, "The course seems a liberating experience, especially when contrasted with the other teachers described in this study (p. 113). . . . It would be wonderful if more teachers could emulate such teaching" (p. 125). The empirical evidence from Evans's study should demonstrate that a disciplinary approach to teaching history is indispensable to helping students develop a sophisticated understanding of the subject. Any claim against teaching history in a disciplinary way in schools will remain a rhetorical argument unless history is taught as such to students of different socioeconomic backgrounds and ability levels in a variety of settings and unless research findings are obtained on its status.

Because results of qualitative research studies cannot be generalized but may apply to similar cases, situations, and people, researchers need to conduct studies on this important but neglected research topic to provide a better and deeper understanding of teachers' conceptions of the nature of history. Teachers had difficulty articulating their conceptions of history. To overcome this difficulty and facilitate teachers’ thinking about the nature of history, researchers can present teachers with historical articles that reflect different epistemological beliefs about the past and ask them to think aloud as they read. Teachers’ perspectives on history also can be studied quantitatively because of a dearth of research on this topic. Researchers can construct a questionnaire combining statements of polar perspectives on the nature of history to identify the conceptions of a large number of social studies teachers. Then teachers’ responses to the questionnaire can be analyzed through statistical methods of data analysis such as regression to determine whether independent variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, teaching experience, academic training, and political and religious affiliations affect their perspectives on history.

Teachers with a degree in history had more sophisticated conceptions of history than did teachers who did not have training in history, except for Teachers 5 and 12. Although Teacher 12 did not have a degree in history, she articulated a more coherent and sophisticated conception of history than did Teacher 5, who did have a degree in history but did not touch on the interpretive nature of history. Their situations present a dilemma worthy of investigation. Teachers who have training in history but do not express an adequate disciplinary understanding of history should be investigated through case studies or life histories to detect factors that seem to prevent them from developing a sophisticated conception of history. Researchers should also conduct longitudinal studies to document how teachers’ conceptions of history develop over time and to identify factors that facilitate or impede development of desired or sophisticated conceptions of history.

I emphasized the need to incorporate historiography into social studies education departments by arguing that participants’ lack of familiarity with historiography is one of the
reasons for their naive conceptions of history. Social studies educators may object to this observation; but rather than offer rhetorical arguments, they should conduct research studies to refute this perception. Researchers in teacher-education programs can empirically test educational values of historiography and historical theories by conducting an experimental or mixed study in which preservice or in-service teachers are assigned to control and treatment groups. Once teachers in the treatment group have taken a course on historiography incorporating historical theories, their conceptions of history can be compared with those of a control group to determine which group develops more complex conceptions of history. In addition to statistical methods, researchers can use qualitative methods such as interviewing to make a comparison among groups. The results of such study can provide empirical evidence as to whether training in historiography makes a positive change in teachers’ conceptions of history. Education researchers in social studies education departments can cooperate and collaborate with historians to design and implement such a research project with social studies teachers.

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**APPENDIX**

Demographic Information for Participating Teachers

| Teacher | Age    | Gender | Education level       | Degree in history | Teaching experience (in years) | Race/ethnicity |
|---------|--------|--------|-----------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|---------------|
| 1       | Mid 40s| Male   | Not applicable        | No                | 16                            | White         |
| 2       | 50     | Male   | Master’s degree       | No                | 28                            | White         |
| 3       | 35     | Male   | Master’s degree       | No                | 11                            | Black         |
| 4       | 57     | Male   | Master’s degree       | No                | 18                            | White         |
| 5       | 35     | Male   | Master’s degree       | Yes               | 11                            | Black         |
| 6       | 52     | Male   | Doctor of Education   | Yes               | 19                            | White         |
| 7       | 28     | Female | Baccalaureate degree  | No                | 4                             | White         |
| 8       | Not applicable | Female | Master of Education | No | 2 | White |
| 9       | 54     | Female | Master’s degree       | Yes               | 15                            | White         |
| 10      | 40     | Female | Master’s degree       | Yes               | 18                            | White         |
| 11      | Late 50s | Female | Master’s degree       | No                | 29                            | Black         |
| 12      | 30     | Female | Master of Education   | No                | 7                             | White         |
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