

Race, Discrimination, and the Passive Voice: Hardship Narratives in U.S. Social Studies Textbooks: 1860 to the Present

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Abstract

While United States historians' inclination to write in affect-inducing ways has waxed and waned throughout the past 150 years, racial biases concerning such writing have persisted through today. Adapting Mark Phillips' (2013) concept of historical distance coupled with a form of linguistic analysis known as stylistics, I examine 50 U.S. social studies textbooks from 1860 to 2016 chosen by variation sampling and analyze which individuals and groups are discussed as experiencing suffering and whether or not these hardship narratives are apt to elicit compassion from their readers. I find that textbooks published after the U.S. Civil War consistently contain discourses that at first encouraged readers to be primarily concerned with the welfare of white elites and, over time, extended their compassionate writing styles to eventually all white people. At the same time, these texts consistently neglected to acknowledge the hardship experiences of domestic marginalized groups and, when their hardships were discussed, their narrative styles were likely to limit readers' inclination to be concerned about their oppression. Specifically, I find that the most enduring writing characteristic for U.S. textbook authors from the mid-19th century through today was to discuss acts of violence by non-white groups towards white people using the active voice while describing violence by white North Americans (first British and then U.S. nationals) towards non-whites in the passive voice, which previous studies had found differentially impacts readers' capacity not only to recall but also to empathize with such hardship narratives. Identifying how textbook authors may selectively use these stylistic discourses in biased ways has significant implications for understanding and addressing not only history instruction, but for contemporary civil rights struggles as well.

Key words: *social studies textbooks, racism, language, empathy, historical distance*

Introduction

When people hear of racism in textbooks today, it is often because a particularly egregious example surfaces, such as when a student's mother raised awareness that her son's 2015 world geography textbook minimized the horrors of slavery by referring to kidnapped Africans as "immigrant workers".² However, such examples should not be understood as mere

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² <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/us/publisher-promises-revisions-after-textbook-refers-to-african-slaves-as-workers.html>

outliers, but rather emerging from a long, historical legacy where U.S. social studies textbook authors routinely marginalized non-white people in their historical narratives (Yacovone, 2018). This study analyzes how social studies textbook authors crafted their historical writing in ways that emphasized the suffering of white people of all regional, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds while they downplayed the hardships of non-white people, most notably through their selective use of passive voice sentence constructions.

Literature Review

The use of emotion in historical writing has varied over time (Phillips, 2013). Elson (1964) discussed how 19th century U.S. textbook accounts frequently penned affect-inducing tales concerning elite white males:

The King refused to furnish Columbus the ships he wanted. Who can describe his disappointment, after waiting so many years? There was yet once chance. Perhaps Queen Isabella would listen to him with more favor...Alas! She too refused him. Almost in despair, Columbus almost quit Spain forever. (Quackenbos, 1869, p.9)

This melodramatic style expressing someone's inner turmoil would likely appear unfamiliar to readers of considerably more dry contemporary textbooks. Such sympathetic textbook discussions concerning white elite males' hardships continued throughout the early 20th century (Elson, 1964). Over time, however, textbook writers gradually shifted from this exclusive concern with elites' suffering to include compassionate discourses concerning all white people, regardless of their social class (Yacovone, 2018).

Peter Novick (1989) argued that these historical writing shifts emerged, in part, from the traumatic legacy of 'whites fighting whites' during the U.S. civil war. That is, in order to help unify the previously divided white populations of the Union and the Confederacy, Novick (1989) asserted that Northern and Southern historians sought to reconcile their historical narratives by first concurring that prior northern narratives regarding the evils of slavery were generally exaggerated, and then constructing new accounts emphasizing how both northern and southern whites suffered during the civil war and its aftermath.

In this vein, I similarly find that U.S. social studies textbook authors increasingly emphasized similar hardship narratives by expanding their frontier of concern beyond white elites to be inclusive of all white people, often by using affect-inducing language in discussing their hardships. Signaling non-white hardships weren't worthy of their (ostensibly) white readers' concern, these authors would often express immense compassion for southern whites' suffering during the Civil War and Reconstruction era while simultaneously downplaying or ignoring the worsening plight of contemporary people of color; instead, they focused on hardship narratives that would help unite their northern and southern readers' in common cause – that is, white supremacy (Novick 1989).

At first glance, contemporary textbooks may seem to buck this trend. While a plethora of textbook studies have documented the sparse or negative coverage of various non-white persons in social studies textbooks throughout the 20th century (Carpenter, 1941; Henry, 1970; Foster, 1999), textbooks from the 1970s onwards were more likely to at least acknowledge their experiences (Jimenez & Lerch, 2019). Nevertheless, even as many U.S. textbooks have extolled the societal contributions of non-white people, these discussions were often still biased; for instance, in Crawford and Foster's (2006) study of immigrant discussions in U.S. textbooks over the past 200 years, they noted that when textbooks discuss immigrants as experiencing discrimination, they seldom assigned any blame to dominant societal groups in society that oppressed them. Expanding on this, I examine the relatively neglected aspect of textbook sentence construction—specifically, what scholars of linguistics refer to as linguistic valence—that describe whites' hardships vis-à-vis non-whites, particularly black and indigenous people.

Linguistic valence: Active vs. Passive Voice

Passive voice writing can have unintended consequences. Previous research has noted that readers are less likely to remember content using passive voice constructions (Turner & Rommetveit, 1968). Previous studies had also found that when participants read passive voice constructions, they were both less likely to blame perpetrators for their violent acts and to be emotionally impacted by the accounts (Waller, 2002; Henley et al., 2005). This has been particularly notable in accounts of sexual assault or domestic violence (Frazer & Miller, 2009; Attenborough, 2014). Researchers had also documented considerable racial biases in media accounts, noting journalists were more likely to write passively when describing crimes against people of color (Smitherman-Donaldson & van Dijk, 1988). Overall, these studies

demonstrated that a text's linguistic valence can significantly influence how readers both emotionally engage and accurately recall its content. In my next section, I share my theoretical framework for examining how differential historical writing styles can thus shape readers' emotive experience.

Theoretical Framework

Mark Phillips' (2013) concept of historical distance provides a useful theoretical framework for evaluating how readers' affect may be impacted by differing historical writing styles. Historical distance refers to how historical narratives draw in or distance a reader from identifying with historical persons' experiences; Phillips explained that historical narratives can be experienced as approximative (facilitating "warm encouragement") or distancing (facilitating "deliberate estrangement") based on variables such as tone, time, and writers' "normative calls for action" (Phillips, 2013, p.18). In doing so, writers can manipulate readers' emotional responses in ways that can subtly inculcate readers to unknowingly adopt these writers' ideological values (Phillips, 2013). As such, the terms approximative and distancing refer to the impact that various textbook passages are likely to have on their readers.

For examining writing style, I utilize a type of discourse analysis known as stylistics, which is an applied linguistic subfield that focuses on how readers are likely to derive meaning from texts (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010). As stylistics typically draws upon concepts from other disciplines rather than generating its own theories, it is a useful supplementary framework for understanding the relationship between texts, their writers and readers (Jeffries & McIntyre, 2010). By thus combining stylistics with Phillips' (2013) concept of historical distance, I primarily analyzed textbook authors' linguistic valence, that is, when—and with what racial or ethnic groups—authors wrote using the active or passive voice constructions in describing historical persons' hardships. To supplement this examination with a broader view of historical distance, I also examined additional related variables such as whether the textbook authors' tone is dry or sentimental, when authors used clear and direct language as opposed to vague wording or euphemisms, and whether authors explicitly identified perpetrators when describing violent events.

My study analyzes how U.S. textbook authors may have routinely presented historical

accounts in ways that draw in readers to empathize with the experiences of suffering whites while they may have similarly distanced their readers from the hardships experienced by non-white people through potentially discriminating use of linguistic valence, among other techniques that mediate historical distance. With this in mind, the following broad research question guides my analysis: To what extent have U.S. social studies textbook narratives mediated historical distance differently when discussing hardships of whites and elites compared to non-white people?

Method

Research Design

In this study, I analyze 50 U.S. social studies textbooks dating from 1860 to 2016. I used variation sampling to select textbooks (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006); this method involves choosing texts with a variety of publication years, subjects, geographic regions, and grade level in order to maximize heterogeneity in my sample (see Table 1). I categorized books as being elementary level (grades 1-5), middle (grades 6-8) and high school (grades 9-12); I usually based this categorization on an explicit description somewhere in the text such as the title, preface, or introduction; at times when there was no explicit information available, I made a judgment based on factors such as language complexity or types and numbers of images included. My study did not, though, examine grade level differences; as such, I was not aiming to ensure any given text undoubtedly belongs to a particular grade level category, especially given the possibly variable reading proficiency expectations over the sample's 150-year range. I used these categorizations merely as a guide to augment the diversity and chronological range of my sample U.S. textbooks.

I prioritized choosing textbooks that Novick (1989) identified as having high distribution rates in their respective eras in order to minimize the likelihood of including outliers with minimal school penetration into my sample. I also excluded multiple editions of the same textbook, used no textbook author more than twice, and aimed to have at least two textbooks per decade (the only decade with less than 2 textbooks is the 1880s).

Table 1*Textbook sample distribution (ES=Elementary, MS=Middle School, HS=High School)*

Title	Subject	Year
American History Volume 2: Discovery of America	HS History	1860
American History Volume 5: Wars of the Colonies	ES History	1863
Elementary History of the United States	ES History	1869
A Junior Class History of the United States	ES History	1878
Young Folks' History of the United States	MS History	1879
A Popular School History of the United States.	MS History	1880
Bill Nye's History of the United States	MS History	1894
A History of the United States of America	MS History	1897
A Formation of the Union	ES History	1897
A history of the United States for Schools	HS History	1899
The Story of American History for Elementary Schools	ES History	1901
First Lessons in United States History	ES History	1903
United States History for Schools	MS History	1912
American History	MS History	1913
Progress of a United People	MS History	1918
History of the United States	HS History	1922
The History of the American people	HS History	1928
The Making of our Country:	HS History	1929
A History of the United States for Schools Exploring American History	MS History	1931
A History of the United States	HS History	1931
Socialized History of the United States	HS Social Studies	1931
America our Country	MS History	1934
The Growth of a Nation: The United States of America	MS History	1934
The Birth and Growth of our Nation	HS History	1936
A History of American Civilization:	HS History	1937
Economic and Social American Today and Yesterday.	ES History	1937
A History of our Country: A Textbook for High-school	ES History	1937
America, its History and People	HS History	1944
American History: 1492 to the Present Day	MS History	1946
Story of America	MS History	1957
The United States: Story of a Free People	MS History	1958
Rise of the American Nation	HS History	1961
United States History for High Schools	HS History	1966
Exploring American History	MS History	1968
Exploring our Nation's History	MS History	1969
Perspectives in United States History	HS History	1971

The American Dream	HS History	1977
The Free and the Brave: Story of the American People	MS History	1980
The United States: A History of the Republic	HS History	1988
United States and its Neighbors: The World around Us	MS History	1990
History of the United States	HS History	1992
World history: Continuity & Change	HS History	1999
World history: The Human Experience	HS History	2001
United States History	HS History	2001
History alive! The United States	MS History	2001
American odyssey: The United States in the 20 th Century	HS History	2002
Texas and Texans	MS History	2003
World History: Modern Era	HS History	2005
Florida World History and Geography	HS Social Studies	2015
Texas World Cultures and Geography	MS Social Studies	2016

Sample

Given the century and a half range of publication years, I primarily relied on a convenience sample, choosing social studies (primarily history) textbooks from among the extensive collection at the Stanford Graduate School of Education library. Because world history school textbooks (with U.S. content coverage) were considerably less common in the library than U.S. history textbooks, my sample is skewed towards the latter; however, as such world history textbooks became more available within the Stanford collection in recent years, my 21st century textbooks are an even mix of U.S. and world history textbooks. Some additional limitations of this data set are that the collection generally skewed towards elementary and middle school level textbooks for the first 70 years, and then more towards high school texts in the mid-20th century onwards; some decades (1930s) had particularly large textbook availability while others were more limited (1880s). Lastly, there were no textbooks in this collection published after 2005.

Data Collection

In order to further strengthen the geographic diversity in my sample and address a few decade gaps missing from this collection, I also acquired several textbooks in U.S. bookstores or online with subject orientations besides history (such as geography) or that were state-specific (Texas) in order to explore if passive voice constructions were as readily observed in these texts as in my sample's primarily non-state specific U.S. history textbooks. Time and funding constraints limited the purveyance of additional textbooks. Upon opening a textbook to confirm that it met the aforementioned criteria (i.e. avoiding having any decades, editions or authors

overrepresented), I automatically included it in my study; the only exception was regularly excluding world history textbooks that had little to no U.S. content coverage. I adopted this ‘no exclusion’ orientation so that I could not exclude a textbook, consciously or not, that may have challenged any of my theoretical preconceptions. Therefore, in the absence of a randomized data set, I employed these varied measures in order to make my convenience sample more robust.

Data Analysis

After selecting texts, I coded them for the word “suffering” as well as words with similar meanings such as distress, hardships, or misery.³ Next, I recorded these mentions and distinguished when each respective term referred to elite (defined as someone either wealthy and/or recognized as holding noteworthy leadership roles) or non-elite persons, an individual or a group, and whether the people discussed as suffering were white or non-white. I then coded these selected passages according to four criteria (see Table 2) in order to measure whether a textbook passage draws in readers (approximative discourse) or distances them (distancing discourse) to the historical persons’ suffering.

Table 2

Markers of Historical Distance in History Passages

Coded Variable	Approximative	Distancing
Linguistic Valence	Active Voice	Passive Voice
Word Choice	Unambiguous or Clear	Vague or Euphemistic
Tone (including punctuation)	Emotional or Pleading	Dry or Factual
Perpetrator Explicitly Identified	Yes	No

Lastly, I copied each coded passage verbatim for later analysis, such as distinguishing between which groups involved in hardship discussions were the subjects or objects in these sentence constructions. My coding scheme is loosely based upon a similar discursive framework provided by Coats and Wade (2004), whose work analyzed how texts conceal violent actions through obfuscating perpetrators’ responsibility. Below are examples of how I coded textbook excerpts according to the criteria listed in Table 2.

Code 1: Does a passage use active or passive voice constructions?

³ Given that it is seldom possible to know which specific author wrote a particular sentence, I usually identify “textbooks” as the discussing agents rather than “textbook authors”.

American marines were sent to the Dominican Republic to see that a ‘fair election’ was held. They were resisted by a revolt. (Adams & Almack, 1931, p.727)

Here, the depersonalizing expression “revolt” and passive voice constructions (e.g., were sent, were resisted) omit –and thus remove –the agency of those “revolting”, namely, the Dominican people. The passage also does not explicitly identify the perpetrator (i.e. the United States) as sending marines of subjugate the revolt. This passage is likely to have a distancing effect on readers by inhibiting their capacity to imagine suffering Dominican people fighting against an occupying power (Turner & Rommetveit, 1968).

Code 2: Does the passage use words that are clear or vague?

Sometimes, however, poorer classes of whites who felt injured by competition with Negroes, did take violent action. (Harlow & Miller, 1957, p.454)

It is unclear if “did take violent action” meant that white people threatened, assaulted or killed black people. Such ambiguous expressions can disengage readers from emotionally responding to the text (Bohner, 2001). Furthermore, it noted whites “felt injured” but failed to address how black people felt. This account aligns to textbook authors’ inclination to discuss white persons’ hardships approximatively and black persons’ experiences in a distancing manner.

Code 3: Does the passage use dry or sentimental language and/or punctuation?

The English determined to tear these poor people {Acadians}, more than seven thousand persons in all, from their native homes, and scatter them abroad... now a desolate wife might be heard calling for her husband. He, alas, had gone, she knew not whither; or, perhaps, had fled into the woods of Acadia, and how now returned to weep over the ashes of their dwelling. O, how many broken bonds of affection were here! (Anderson, 1880, p.105-106)

This passage draws in readers with exclamation points and sentimental words as it enlists readers to put themselves in these suffering Acadians’ shoes. U.S. textbooks very seldom described non-white oppression so approximatively, such as when Americans kidnapped and enslaved millions of Africans throughout history. However, as this sentimentalist style of writing largely disappears from later 20th century textbooks, I primarily included this to illustrate how earlier sentimentalist writing was biased in favor of sympathizing with whites’ suffering.

Code 4: Does the passage identify a perpetrator in the same sentence as the oppression or violence described?

Negroes were almost entirely excluded from the exercise of the suffrage, especially in the Far South. Special rooms were set aside for them at the railway stations and special cars on the railway lines. In the field of industry ... they lost ground ... a condition which their friends ascribed to discriminations against them in law and in labor organizations and their critics ascribed to their lack of aptitude. (Beard & Beard, 1922, p.398)

By regularly employing the passive voice, this passage avoids identifying white people as perpetrators discriminating against black people, thus likely to distance readers' affective responses (Bohner, 2001). Furthermore, by giving equal weight to a "blame the victim" explanation for why black people have not advanced (i.e. "lack of aptitude") alongside possible "discrimination", the author employed a problematic "both sides" rhetoric that minimizes perpetrator responsibility (Jimenez, 2019); in other words, by presenting discrimination as the argument offered by 'friends' and lower ability as the critical perspective, this downplays how Jim Crow legislation (and its supporters) significantly oppressed black people.

Lastly, regarding my researcher positionality, I am a second-generation U.S. citizen with Latino heritage raised in a predominantly Latinx community. I have previously taught high school social studies for over a decade and I am currently an Education professor in a teacher-training program. My doctoral training and previous research has primarily focused on social studies curriculum designed for, and by, high school students.

Findings and Discussion

My sample's textbooks only approximately discussed specific individuals as suffering if they were elites, and all but 2 of the 26 people mentioned had European heritage. Interestingly, the only accounts discussing non-white elites' hardships were written by the same 19th century textbook, and both referred to indigenous American leaders (Anderson, 1878; Anderson, 1880).⁴ Being a foreign spy or a traitor did not necessarily exclude approximative textbook treatment. For instance, one textbook sympathized with disgraced general Benedict Arnold, as it

⁴ Although I cannot generalize from these examples given that my textbooks are not a representative sample, they nevertheless provide an example concerning how U.S. historians were less disinclined to write about non-whites' hardships approximately before the U.S. Civil War, as Northern and Southern historians writing later in the 19th century focused on reconciling their historical narratives, with the priority of emphasizing white unity (Novick, 1989).

empathically asserted that his traitorous actions stemmed from having “been mistreated and humiliated by Congress” (Adams & Almack, 1933, p.233). This text also had a particularly sympathetic account of a captured British spy:

But poor Andre! What became of him? ... all Americans felt deep pity for him because of his youth, his virtues, his many accomplishments, his belief that he was serving his country, and because he had been the victim of a villain. But Americans could not forget that the British, four years before, had captured a brave young American officer, Captain Nathan Hale, and hanged him as a spy without any manifestation of pity or sympathy... Washington, who shed tears when he signed the death warrant, would gladly have saved Andre’s life; but the stern rules of war and the good of the American cause left no room for mercy. (Adams & Almack, 1931, p.282-3).

My sample texts consistently implored their readers to empathize with whites’ suffering—even when treasonous—before approximatively describing non-white Americans’ hardships. While more recent textbooks had frequently discussed the persecution of important non-white leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., these textbooks had rarely, if ever, discussed their experiences approximatively. While this no doubt may stem more from distancing historical writing norms from the mid-20th century onwards (Phillips, 2013), it should be noted that my sample textbooks seldom discussed non-whites’ suffering approximatively even in the heyday of 19th century sentimentalist writing.

My sample textbooks gradually extended compassionate discourse beyond just white elites to include all whites. Groups with the most ‘suffering’ mentions were religious sects, especially Quakers and Pilgrims/Puritans (found in 46% of my sample textbooks); this is perhaps unsurprising, given the deeply-ingrained traditional narrative in U.S. history textbooks of being a refuge for those persecuted for their faith (Fitzgerald, 1979). The next five most common groups who were mentioned as experiencing hardships were indigenous Americans (38%), Cubans (34%), southern whites (32%), debtors/prisoners (28%), and non-Pilgrim colonists/settlers (26%). Only 24% of textbooks in my sample discussed blacks’ suffering, the same proportion attributed to soldiers experiencing hardship.

Although it is noteworthy that indigenous groups’ hardships were the second most commonly discussed, this coverage paled in comparison to considerably more frequent racist and other negative depictions (Henry, 1970). And while the other groups were seldom explicitly

identified as white, previous research has found that, in absence of such specificity, readers in the United States would presume that such texts were referring to the dominant group, namely, white people (Giroux, 1997). Table 3 below contains representative excerpts of the aforementioned white groups.

Table 3

Typical approximative discussions of white groups in U.S. textbooks in the 20th century

Group	Textbook Quoted Passage
Debtors	Years ago, it was the custom to put men in prison whether they could not pay their debts. It is a terrible thing now to think of such a condition, for the misery was unspeakable. (Meany, 1912, p.84)
Immigrants	In his efforts to find a place for himself in his new homeland and in the industrial age, the immigrant did not always meet with sympathy and understanding. (Todd & Curti, 1961, p.511)
Mormons	The Latter-day Saints suffered persecution because of their custom of plural marriage. (Harlow & Miller, 1957, p.149)
Pilgrims	Thus it came about that the Pilgrims suffered severely from exhaustion and Disease. (Blaisdell, 1901, p.61-62)
Settlers	What sacrifice and suffering! With what bodily fatigue and mental suffering! With what loss of dear ones, breaking up of families, and cutting off of rich friendships! The luxuries, even the comforts, of the established communities of the East were given up by this restless horde of land-hungry pioneers (Rugg, 1937, p.290).
Soldiers	The condition of the American soldiers was deplorable. Clad in clothes unsuited to the climate, fed on food equally unsuited to the climate, and often not fed at all, the men stood hour after hour ankle deep in mud (Barstow, 1912, p.567-8)

Foreigners

Textbooks in my sample usually only discussed non-whites' suffering if their perpetrators were not English-speaking white people. Much like other countries' state-mandated textbooks keen to focus on human rights abuses outside their borders (Bromley & Russell, 2010), many U.S. textbooks in my sample similarly emphasized the suffering of marginalized people abroad only when such accounts could help rationalize U.S. military interventions, purportedly on their behalf.

Typically, these textbook examples focused on violence committed by countries or empires with whom the U.S. had recent conflicts, as when these textbooks discussed the "Syrians that have fled from the tyranny of the Turkish government" (Burnham, 1929, p. 547) during WWI, "the cruel treatment of Jews and other minorities in the Axis countries" (Southworth & Southworth, 1946, p.457) during WWII, the "starving people of Russia" under the Soviet

government (Adams & Almack, 1931, p.730), and how “harsh and brutal” Spaniards persecuted Filipinos during the Spanish American War (Rugg, 1937, p.477). By far, though, no groups’ hardships were discussed approximatively as often as the “Cuban people that suffered the most” (Graff, 1980, p.546) during the Spanish-American War as “thousands of helpless old men, women, and children (were) shut up like cattle” (Blaisdell, 1901, p.408).

Many of my sample textbooks composed quite lengthy accounts of Cubans’ oppression during the Spanish-American War with clear and approximative language such as “extreme harshness and cruelty” (Scudder, 1897, p.473). Among my textbooks discussing the Spanish-American War, nearly all portrayed the Cubans’ plight more approximately than discussing the hardship experiences of any non-white Americans throughout U.S. history. Furthermore, rationalizations of subsequent U.S. military responses generally accompanied these accounts, with concomitant appeals to readers’ sentiments in order to justify U.S. intervention on behalf of the oppressed Cuban people. While later 20th century accounts of Cuban suffering (in my sample) constructed their narratives less sentimentally, more recent textbooks in my sample still frequently shared approximative hardship accounts whenever doing so justified U.S. military actions or helped to advance other U.S. national goals, whether these goals were national protection (supporting U.S. soldiers), territorial expansion (supporting U.S. settlers) or industrial/economic expansion (welcoming the economic contributions of immigrants).

Indigenous Americans

My sample textbooks generally adopted notably distancing writing styles when discussing non-white oppression, with occasional exceptions. The passages in Table 4, written a century apart, illustrate vastly differing moral judgments concerning indigenous genocide.

Table 4

Textbook discussions of indigenous genocide

Passage 1	The white man’s past treatment of the Redmen is open to serious question. However, one cannot with reason question the advantages that the European settlements brought to America. The natural resources which now support over one hundred seventy million people and many others in foreign lands provided less than a million Redmen with a wretched existence. (Schwartz, 1968, p.201)
Passage 2	Our forefathers too, in those days, drew sometimes something like a sanction for their unsparing severity in dealing with the Indians from the examples set them, in the Mosaic history, by the children of Israel, in the Pagan aborigines of Canaan. Neither of these excuses seem to us at the present day to justify their proceedings...an impartial reader at the present day can hardly fail coming to the conclusion that by their own showing the whites were most in the wrong. (Abbott, 1863, p.110-111)

While both accounts acknowledged whites' mistreatment of indigenous people, they differed in key ways. In addition to using the derogatory expression "Redmen," the first account paid lip service to the suffering of indigenous people while advancing the position that –however whites may have mistreated them– such mistreatment was justified because of the resulting 'progress'. In short, this author used ends-justifies-the-means logic to silence potential affective concern that might move readers to at least acknowledge the enduring trauma endured by indigenous people.

Meanwhile, the second account compared the indigenous experience with the biblical Canaanites, thus encouraging readers to empathize with both. Dramatic expressions such as "unsparing severity" are more likely to emotionally engage readers than the previous vague expression of past treatment being 'open to serious question' (Phillips, 2013). Interestingly, the more approximative account originated from the earlier textbook (Abbott, 1863), while the unsympathetic passage comes from a textbook published over a century later (Schwartz, 1968). Considering the historical context of each textbook, though, it is perhaps unsurprising that the mid-20th century textbook passage lacks any attempt to empathize with indigenous people, given Novick's (1989) assertions that post Civil War textbooks were especially keen to disregard nonwhite suffering in order to promote white solidarity.

In short, nearly all of the U.S. textbooks in my sample from the late 19th century through the 21st century discussed indigenous hardships in distancing ways, seldom explicitly identifying white people as perpetrators. However, when indigenous people committed violent acts, textbooks used clear and affect-inducing language to describe, for example, how presumably (Giroux, 1997) white "men, women, and children were cruelly put to death, often with the hideous tortures at which the Indians were expert" (Southworth & Southworth, 1946, p.68). Even when textbooks used the passive voice to describe indigenous violence, any distancing impact is mitigated by explicitly identifying them (eg Indians) as perpetrators, and by other approximative signifiers such as provocative descriptions of violence (e.g., "cruelly put to death", "hideous tortures").

The intersection of Indigenous Americans and Foreigners

Perpetrator identification is another key variable mediating historical distance. For instance, my sample textbooks often used approximative narratives when discussing Spain as persecuting indigenous people in the Americas. This may, in part, reflect anti-Spanish sentiment

following the Spanish-American War, as attested by this representative excerpt stating a “band of Spaniards left a most miserable record of downright cruelty toward the Indians, whom they enslaved and tortured” (Meany, 1912, p.33). This sentence uses both affect-inducing terms (e.g., “miserable”, “cruelty”) as well as active sentence constructions (e.g., “enslaved, tortured”). The same applies to when Spaniards killed indigenous people in their conquests of Central and South America. If the perpetrators were not English-speaking North Americans, my textbooks usually condemned these non-American perpetrators with approximative punctuation, clear verbs, and active voice sentence construction:

Another Spaniard named Francisco Pizarro ... and his greedy soldiers could think of nothing but gold! The lives of the Indians seemed to mean nothing to them! They plundered the Inca cities, stole their gold, and robbed them of their wealth. They captured the Inca emperor and killed many of his people! (Aker et al., 1937, p.505)

Many of these sample textbooks that drew attention to suffering foreigners simultaneously failed to extend any compassion to domestic marginalized groups, unless non-U.S. nationals were the oppressors. For example, a few textbooks highlighted –and discussed approximatively—a fairly obscure historical event concerning Dutch atrocities against indigenous people, namely, when Dutch governor William Kieft “ordered the massacre of some fugitive Indians who were encamped where Jersey City now stands” (Channing, 1903, p.57). Nearly all my sample textbooks typically reserved direct language (e.g., massacre) and active voice construction (e.g., ordered) for when non-English speakers (such as the Dutch or Spanish) oppressed indigenous people.

Textbooks, however, did not similarly describe the British or U.S. mistreatment of indigenous Americans; for instance, one textbook maintained that “the English colonists usually treated the Indians fairly” (Southworth & Southworth, 1946, p.44). Thus, my sample textbooks usually described non-white hardships (taking place within the United States borders) in an approximative manner only if foreigners (excluding the British prior to U.S. independence) were the responsible agents. Approximative language in these excerpts serves to elevate American moral superiority vis-à-vis the deplorable behavior of foreigner perpetrators, while many domestic groups being simultaneously persecuted by English-speaking settlers at the same time were not afforded the same concern.

Africans and Black Americans

The Mexican workers, or peons, were again almost slaves. They were paid such small wages for their work they could scarcely buy enough to eat. They were not treated nearly so well as the negro slaves in the United States had been treated before the Civil War.

(Aker et al., 1937, p.493)

The quote above exemplifies a disturbing trend regarding such selective compassion, namely, the whitewashing of blacks' suffering throughout U.S. history. After the Civil War, many U.S. historians were keen to heal the wounds of a war in which whites killed each other (Novick 1989). Northern historians became "harshly critical of the abolitionists" and "accepted a considerably softened picture of slavery", because "for northern historians to resist these efforts would be adding 'insult to injury' and would show a want of understanding and sympathy" (Novick, 1989, p.77). Northern historians sought to build compassion towards Southerners in order to unify white northerners and southerners through a single historical narrative, namely, that slavery wasn't as bad as the abolitionists might have you believe (Novick 1989). As such, many of my sample textbooks emphasized whites' (especially Southern) hardships, both during and after the Civil War:

What additional agony must the man have felt who pressed the trigger knowing that he might be killing his own father, his own brother, or the son he had reared to young manhood! And, what is seldom considered, how must the hearts at home have bled, the hearts of mothers, sisters, daughters, as they prayed and waited for the gloomy news of battles with their long lists of dead! (Meany, 1912, p.409)

This passage draws in readers with its exclamation marks and sentimental language (e.g., 'agony', 'gloomy'). Similarly, another textbook from half a century later stated:

Widows and helpless orphans, beggared and hopeless, are everywhere... diseases, always the companion of hunger and lack of sanitation, swept across the South...tens of thousands of people – men and women and children – died during the summer and winter of 1865-66. In some crowded urban areas disease swept away as many as one quarter to one third of all the Negroes, and the death rate among the white population was almost as grim. (Todd & Curti, 1961, p.16)

This passage discussed the suffering and "death rate" of the white people that "died", yet used the distancing euphemism "swept away" to refer to black victims.

My sample textbooks also applied the suffering southerner narrative to justify why

Reconstruction policies had to be abolished, as when another textbook asserted “southern people, already impoverished by the combined afflictions of war, blockade, and a paper currency, were still further burdened with taxes assessed by negroes and northern adventurers” (Fiske, 1899, p.447). Although written in the passive voice, this passage clearly identified perpetrators (“negroes and northern adventurers”) and employed affect-inducing language to empathize with these whites’ suffering (e.g., “impoverished”, “afflictions” and burdened”). Even Charles Beard, considered a ‘progressive’ historian, highlighted suffering women and children as a justification to extol the racist Ku Klux Klan as merely a “social club” whose primary purpose was to “protect the weak, the innocent, and the defenceless from the indignities, wrongs, and outrages of the lawless, the violent, and the brutal; and to succor the suffering, especially the widows and orphans of the Confederate Soldiers” (Beard & Beard, 1922, p.382).⁵

At the same time, many textbooks routinely minimized blacks’ oppression (Carpenter 1941) sometimes by emphasizing the fundamental goodness of most slave-holders (Meany, 1912, p.141; Burnham & Jack, 1934, p.172-175), rationalizing how Africans were better able to “bear long hours of work tilling the soil or harvesting a crop under the hot southern sun” (Rugg, 1937, p.224), and making outlandish claims that black people “would rather be slaves than try to earn a living for themselves” (Aker et al., 1937, p.442-3). In fact, the only textbook example I found where a post-Civil War textbook explicitly identified whites as committing violence against black people referred to the fairly obscure historical event concerning a New York riot that broke out in response to the Civil War draft, when it discussed how a mob of northern whites assaulted free Black men in New York City (Fiske, 1899). Though for every textbook in my sample that defended, justified, or minimized the harmful effects of slavery, another textbook entirely ignored the issue.

Textbooks from the post-Civil Rights era

From the 1960s onwards, social studies textbooks began incorporating the experiences of people of color into their narratives (Fitzgerald, 1979), and some of my sample textbooks even included primary source materials and images that approximatively described marginalized groups’ suffering (Meyers, 2001, p.35). Nonetheless, textbooks’ proclivity to differentiate their

⁵ It should be noted that ‘Progressivism’ has had not only different meanings over time, but also within the same time period; for instance, while many educators associate progressive education today with the student-centered pedagogy championed by John Dewey, other educators in the early 20th century, who considered themselves ‘progressive’, were more focused on reforming administrative efficiency (Labaree et al., 2004).

linguistic valence in racially biased ways still persisted in my sample's more contemporary textbooks. For instance, this same textbook passively described U.S. violence towards its indigenous people, indicating that "hundreds of Native American men, women, and children were killed" and "Native Americans were forced to move to reservations" (Meyers, 2001, p.223). One page later, however, the textbook actively stated how indigenous Chiefs Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse "killed Custer and all of his men" (Meyers, 2001, p.224). The only time this textbook used approximative language to describe white or American violence occurred when it discussed racist groups like the KKK (Meyers, 2001, p.200) or well-known and undisputed atrocities, such as the Wounded Knee massacre (Meyers, 2001, p.226).

Although another contemporary textbook explicitly discussed marginalized groups' hardships, it described foreign oppressors' brutality more approximatively than similar actions by Americans. For instance, when Americans were the perpetrators of forced internment, the textbook passively stated, "120,000 Japanese were moved from their homes to relocation camps" (Nash, 2002, p.546). However, when Spain was similarly interning its people, it expressed that Spanish troopers "forced some 300,000 Cubans into concentration camps" (Nash, 2002, p.221). Similarly, the text reserved highly approximative words such as 'murdered' for indigenous acts of violence, as when the textbook mentioned that "Native Americans had murdered the unlucky Estevanico" (Nash, 2002, p.34). However, when the text used the word "murder" and active voice construction to discuss whites' violence (albeit rarely), the text described them using the race-neutral terms "low-paid workers" and "rioters":

The draft riots had racial overtones as low-paid workers blamed African Americans for the war. Rioters...began lynching African Americans, murdering them in ruthless mob attacks. (Nash, 2002, p.178)

On the other hand, it used the active voice when recounting how indigenous people "repeatedly attacked settlers, killing more than 800 soldiers", yet it passively presented white perpetrators' violence, describing how "the Native Americans were soundly defeated" by the (unmentioned) U.S. army (Nash, 2002, p.119).

When chronicling white violence towards black people, this textbook sometimes used the *antipassive* voice, meaning the text identified white perpetrators but not their victims:

Klan members participated in violent activities – tarring and feathering, flogging, and lynching...In a single year, Oklahoma's Klan was responsible for no less than 25,000 floggings. (Nash, 2002, p.400)

Furthermore, this book seldom pointed out victims of U.S. wars. When discussing the Vietnam War, for instance, it narrates U.S. enemies as active agents that kill, such as “Vietcong forces attacked...and killed eight Americans” (Nash, 2002, p.772). When the text did note the United States as a perpetrator, it used dehumanizing language as when it reported that the “United States forces killed 220,000 communists” (Nash, 2002, p.773). Similarly, although its concluding remarks used the active voice to state that the “United States forces routed the Vietcong, killing an estimate 33,000 enemy troops” (Nash, 2002, p.773), the dehumanizing use of “enemy troops” strips the Vietnamese of their humanity. Lastly, while the textbook acknowledged the large Vietnamese death toll in its concluding chapter paragraph, it passively noted (without identifying a perpetrator) that “12,500 Vietnamese civilians were killed” (Nash, 2002, p.773).

A contemporary world history textbook described oppression approximatively provided that the oppressor is historically distant and foreign, as when it actively recounted the “cruel punishments of the Assyrians” (Farrah, 2001, p.50), the Mongols that “killed large numbers of people” (Farrah, 2001, p.140), Crusaders that “killed most of (a city's) Muslim and Jewish inhabitants” (Farrah, 2001, p.145), and the Khmer Rouge that “killed more than 3 million people (through) starvation, torture, and executions” (Farrah, 2001, p.688).

This textbook also actively described foreigners killing Americans, stating how the Japanese “killed more than 2400 people (Farrah, 2001, p.619)” and “beat, bayoneted, shot, and even beheaded many of the prisoners” or used them “for research in chemical and biological warfare, and for cruel medical experiments” (Farrah, 2001, p.700-701). In contrast, when the United States was the violent agent, the textbook passively stated that “nearly all 21,000 of the Japanese on the island died” at the battle of Iwo Jima and how “thousands of others soon died from the radiation release by the {atomic} bomb” (Farrah, 2001, p.709). It similarly defaulted to the passive voice for other events with U.S. perpetrators, as when it passively related that “thousands of Africans were being imported to the Americas as slave labor” (Farrah, 2001, p.433) and that “an estimated 1.3 million Vietnamese soldiers and civilians had lost their lives” (Farrah, 2001, p.762) during the Vietnam War.

The same pattern emerged in state-specific history books. For instance, although a Texas textbook actively stated that the (ostensibly white) “Texas army attacked the Cherokees”, it doesn’t mention the indigenous victims until the next sentence, passively stating that “nearly 100 Cherokees were killed” (Anderson et. al., 2003, p.277). Compare this, however, with how it both used active voice constructions and identified white victims when it stated that the indigenous “Comanches killed many of their white captives” (Anderson et. al., 2003, p.277).

This inequality in historical distance was also not limited to history books. A contemporary geography textbook discussed marginalized groups’ oppression passively without identifying perpetrators, as when it described how indigenous people “were forced to live on areas of land that had been set aside for them” (Mcgraw Hill, 2015, p.145) and “were required to provide contribution in the form of food and periods of labor” (Mcgraw Hill, 2015, p.205), and how it was not settlers but rather Westward expansion that “brought suffering – loss of land, culture, and often life – to Native Americans” (Mcgraw Hill, 2015, p.144). However, it actively described similar actions by foreign perpetrators, describing how British landowners in the Caribbean “brought enslaved people from Africa to work on the plantations” (Mcgraw Hill, 2015, p.200) and how settlers in Canada “pushed native peoples off their lands” (Mcgraw Hill, 2015, p.300).

Another geography textbook passively described an entire paragraph of slavery without ever mentioning perpetrators:

By the mid-nineteenth century, slavery had become a threat to American unity. Four million enslaved African Americans were in the South by 1860, compared with one million in 1800. The South’s economy was based on growing cotton on plantations, chiefly by slave labor. The South was determined to maintain the cotton economy and plantation-based slavery. Abolitionism, a movement to end slavery arose in the North and challenged the Southern way of life. As opinions over slavery grew more divided, compromise became less possible. (Spielvogel, 2015, p.331)

Overall, this textbook’s victimization accounts were nearly always written passively, whether it was Jews in Nazi Germany (Spielvogel, 2015, p.458), Armenian genocide victims (Spielvogel, 2015, p.455), victims of Pinochet (Spielvogel, 2015, p.547), or Rwandan genocide victims (p.591). Interestingly, though, the active voice dominated accounts in which foreign socialist governments committed violence. For instance, when describing the Russian revolution, the text

described the Russian Revolution using clear language and the active voice, stating that “members of the local soviet murdered the czar and his family” (Spielvogel, 2015, p.423); elsewhere, the Romanian “secret police murdered thousands of people who were peacefully demonstrating (Spielvogel, 2015, p.574).”

Conclusion and Implications

To some degree, U.S. historical writing conventions describing people’s hardships have changed over the past centuries. Specifically, social studies textbook authors have gradually moved from melodramatic language describing people’s hardships that was commonplace in the 19th century to considerably more dry accounts today. If these authors applied such writing shifts universally to all historical persons, this adjustment would merely signify changing cultural norms of historical writing over time. What is problematic, though, is the inconsistent application when referring to dominant groups of people versus marginalized groups of people, particularly people of color. This study has provided evidence that U.S. textbooks have long emphasized elite and white hardships while they have minimized the oppression experienced by people of color. Although U.S. social studies textbooks have –to varying degrees –gradually increased their celebration of diversity and have begun to acknowledge the oppression of various marginalized groups over time, their continued discriminating use of affect-inducing strategies (i.e. linguistic valence) in discussing marginalized groups’ oppression can potentially inhibit readers’ from empathizing with their experiences (Bohner, 2001; Frazer & Miller, 2009). While this study makes no empirical claims about demonstrated impacts on students’ capacity to empathize with marginalized groups’ experiences after reading such textbooks, it invites further studies to explore the extent to which students reading these textbooks may be internalizing more affective responses to the hardships of dominant group members (i.e. white Americans) while developing more tacit acceptance of the historical suffering of non-white people, based on the textbooks’ continued discriminating use of linguistic valence and other approximative measures.

Thus, this research calls upon scholars and educators alike to look beyond just the textbook content coverage of marginalized groups to also examine how writers’ discriminating use of affective language can negatively impact students’ perceptions of historical oppression. As such, this research serves two purposes. First, it encourages textbook authors to scrutinize their writing for such potential biases, most notably through utilizing more conscientious

applications of passive voice constructions. But equally important, it seeks to alert social studies teachers of this phenomena so they can more effectively equip their students to be cognizant of how textbooks' discriminating use of approximative language may shape how they remember and process their course content. In doing so, students can further be encouraged to probe for such biases themselves, whether in their school textbooks, contemporary media narratives, or even in their own writing.

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