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Informal historical learning at home: on historical culture and everyday historical thinking of children

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Abstract

This article presents several insights from an ethnographic study that explores the private lives of 39 children aged between 7 and 12 in Austria. It examines the forms of historical culture present in their home environments, how these objects are engaged with by the children, and how such interactions influence their conceptualisations of the past and history. The data for this study were collected between 2017 and 2020. Unlike the laboratory-style tests frequently employed in empirical research conducted in schools, the methodology adopted here seeks to provide deeper insights into the cognitive habits and social practices related to engaging with the past and history by slowing down the research pace and meeting children in their home environments. The study particularly emphasises the everyday historical thinking, a distinct mode of thought that fundamentally differs from academic historical thinking.

Keywords everyday historical thinking; historical culture; home; ethnography; material culture

Framing informal historical learning at home

Informal learning is conceptualised as a form of learning intrinsically linked to the everyday experiences of individuals. It occurs outside formalised structures specifically dedicated to learning, such as museums, archives, memorials or educational institutions. The German educational theorist Günther Dohmen (2018: 57) distinguishes informal learning from more institutionalised forms and defines it as a freer, more open to life, more direct, and closely occasion- and application-driven' process, one that unfolds 'incidentally and sporadically, driven by situational and interest-based factors (see also Overwien, 2005). This form of learning is thus associated with the acquisition of various practical competencies (physical, cognitive, aesthetic and so on) that emerge not through deliberate planning or targeted instruction, but rather as a by-product of unconscious, incidental processes. A significant dimension of this type of learning is influenced by cultural imitation, a process through which culture, while capable of transformation, is often reproduced and reinforced through habitual practices (the 'doing culture' in Scherr [2018: 139]). In this article, informal learning is not framed within the context of a neoliberal economic model, which posits that individuals must continually optimise themselves or rapidly adapt to the demands of a highly competitive economic system. Rather, it is construed as learning that occurs organically within the fabric of everyday life, without being consciously recognised as such – especially when contrasted with formal or institutionalised modes of learning (see Scherr, 2018). Informal learning is therefore categorised as non-intentional (see Röhr-Sendlmeier and Käser, 2016). In everyday contexts, individuals accumulate experiential knowledge concerning structural patterns or linguistic representations; however, these experiences typically do not undergo reflective examination. While they largely remain implicit (or the tacit knowledge in Polanyi [1966]), aspects of this knowledge can nonetheless be articulated and made explicit under certain conditions.

In the context of historical learning, such situations can quickly arise in the child's everyday life at home, for example, when reading historical fiction, playing with Viking figurines, engaging in video gaming set in castles or dressing up as princesses or knights. Children who engage in adventures with their small-world pirate ships on the living-room floor are not primarily aiming to learn about the past, but they unintentionally absorb relevant cultural elements, including aspects of history. Thus, children's homes can be understood as rich sources of stimuli for informal historical learning, offering specific opportunities for engaging with the past and history. However, little is currently known about the historical culture that surrounds children at home (see Green, 2016; Kühberger, 2018a). Therefore, this article, based on an ethnographic study, highlights the potential of an ethnographic approach to history education that is concerned with the child's everyday life at home, while remaining open to a field that has largely remained unexplored. The focus is not confined to conventional aspects, such as inquiries into the available genres of historical culture or particular historical periods. Rather, attention should be directed towards those aspects that history education has overlooked, suppressed or ignored. Following an overview of the research methodology and the presentation of quantifiable data, the primary focus will be on examining the historical thinking that children develop at home within a context of informal learning, and how they engage with their personal objects of historical culture in this process.

Research methodology

To date, findings on children's everyday lives have been predominantly fragmented, originating from interviews conducted in controlled, laboratory-like settings, assessments of historical thinking based on isolated historical-cultural artefacts within school contexts or speculative assumptions drawn from publicly accessible representations of historical culture. These approaches have offered only fleeting insights into the historical culture of children at home. The study outlined here seeks to adopt a different approach. It aims to provide a more contextually grounded documentation of the historical-cultural objects present in children's homes and to engage in more direct dialogues with children about these objects within their everyday living environments.

An ethnographic research design appears to be ideal for this purpose. Ethnography should be understood as a 'research style' (Thomas, 2019: 1), indicating that ethnography does not prescribe fixed rules or procedural steps for dealing with the material produced in the field (Breidenstein et al., 2015):

> Ethnographers are social scientists who undertake research and writing about groups of people by systematically observing and participating (to a greater or lesser degree) in the lives of the people they study. Ethnographers value the idea of 'walking a mile in the shoes' of others and attempt to gain insight by being in the same social space as the subjects of their research. (Madden, 2017: 1)

Ultimately, the task is to engage the collected materials, which can take various media forms (fieldnotes, artefacts, copied documents, digital photographs, videos, recorded interviews and so on), in a meaningful dialogue. By creating spatial distance from the social spaces where the data were collected, the everyday practices experienced there, and the modes of thinking observed, and by turning towards the ethnographic material at the researcher's desk, a process of writing begins. This process involves organising, analysing, interpreting and selecting the relationships and meaning making documented in the field, and it is shaped by the researcher's disciplinary frameworks:

> Having been trained in a particular discipline … the field researcher draws upon and develops ideas that make sense within the conceptual language of that discipline. While disciplinary concerns will already have shaped many fieldnotes entries, in actually composing ethnographic texts, the researcher self-consciously makes his observations and experiences of particular local scenes speak to the concepts and traditions of a scholarly discipline. The ethnographer as author must *represent* the particular world he has studied (or some slice or quality of it) for readers who lack direct acquaintance with it. To do so, he moves back and forth between specific events recounted in his fieldnotes and more general concepts of interest to his discipline. (Emerson et al., 2011: 201, emphasis in the original)

This back-and-forth process is key to transforming field experiences into scholarly narratives that reflect both the nuances of the local context and the broader disciplinary conversations.

In ethnographic projects conducted within one's own culture, it is essential to generate a fresh perspective on the ordinary in order to shed a false familiarity with one's own cultural context (Amann and Hirschauer, 1997; Kuhn and Neumann, 2015). The strength of the ethnographic approach – even within the field of history education – can only be fully realised if insights into cultural practices are not derived primarily from a priori disciplinary focuses, but rather through an openness to the field that allows the social practices observed to develop their own intrinsic logic. At the same time, it would be an illusion to believe that a researcher in history education could completely disregard the disciplinary focuses ingrained in their understanding of how individuals engage with historical forms, places and practices.

For this reason, it is necessary to clarify the structural conditions of ethnographic research in history education and to critically examine the perspectives adopted in relation to the field in order to avoid the reproduction of conventional perspectives and the associated conceptual fixations of one's disciplinary framework. Against the backdrop of the research tradition in history education, ethnographic investigations must strive to achieve a critical yet productive balance between employing categories that facilitate engagement with ongoing scholarly debates, and the opportunity to develop new categorical insights from the relationships observed in the field. This is crucial because only when the field and its phenomena are not exclusively viewed through a priori (mono-)theoretical frameworks and their entangled categories does the ethnographic report have the potential to reveal underexplored or overlooked specificities in the thinking and actions observed within the social space under investigation. Only in this way is it possible to critically engage with the absolutised theoretical assumptions of disciplinary order, without this option being obscured, prematurely dismissed or neglected due to traditional categorical premises (Kühberger, 2024a).

The ethnographic study presented in this article can be described as a rapid multi-sited focused ethnography (Pink, 2004; Vindrola-Padros, 2021). A total of 39 children's bedrooms and other playrooms in households across Austria were visited, primarily located in the western regions of the country. The interviewed children were between the ages of 7 and 12 (average age 9.6 years). The data collection was conducted before the onset of formal history education in lower secondary school (Grade 6). The

sample includes children's rooms from both urban and rural environments, with examples from large and small towns, as well as from rural communities. Even remote rural areas were considered. These rooms are part of single-family homes, row houses and apartments, located on farms or in residential settlements. Additionally, children with and without migration backgrounds (see Kühberger, 2022) and from various educational and socio-economic backgrounds, determined by their parents' occupations (bus driver, teacher, consultant, nurse, truck driver, secretary, doctor, cook, farmer, occupational therapist and so on), were included (see Grundmann et al., 2006).

A relatively broad distribution of cases allowed for theoretical saturation to be reached, as it became evident towards the end of the data collection that no fundamentally new insights could be gained from additional case studies (referred to as 'conceptual representativeness' by Strübing [2014: 32; author's own translation]). However, the sample lacks representation from single-parent households, with only one such case included. Moreover, no families in precarious social situations were successfully recruited for the study, despite initial contact attempts, leading to certain limitations. Consequently, the ethnographic material primarily reflects insights into a broadly defined middle class in Western Austria.

The ethnographic data collection was conducted in Austrian households by students and the author through snowball sampling between December 2017 and March 2020, just at the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Contrary to typical ethnographic practices, the visits to the children were relatively short, usually lasting around one hour, to minimise intrusion into the private and sensitive spaces of families and to avoid overwhelming the children. Parents were invited to observe the visits from the room's doorstep, although this was rarely taken up. To ensure the highest ethical standards for this research involving children at their homes (Alderson and Morrow, 2011; Christians, 2000), the research design, instruments and data handling for the study reported in this article were reviewed and approved by the University of Salzburg's Ethics Committee.

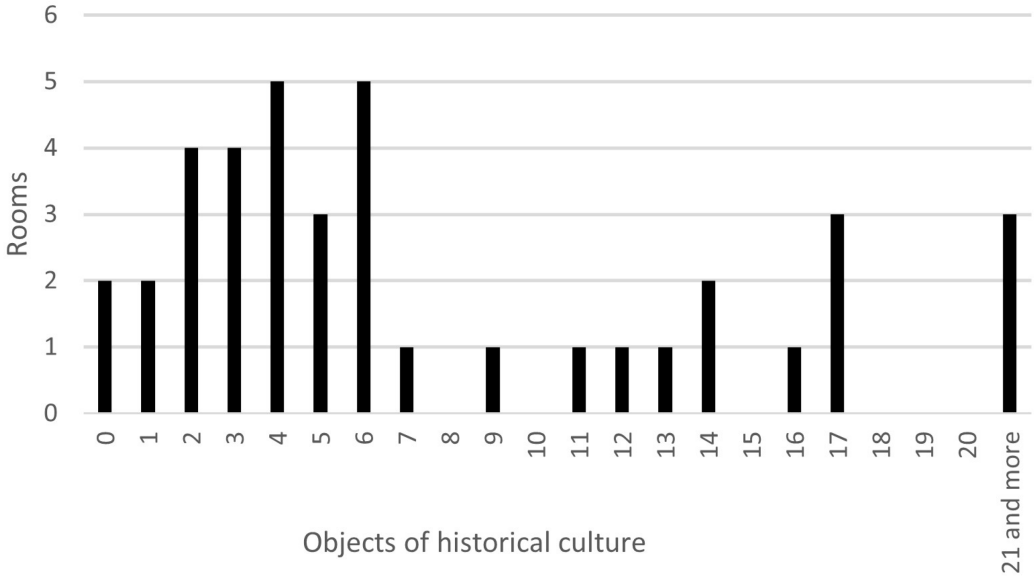
The visits were characterised by three methodological approaches: (1) an audio-digital recorded tour of the room conducted by the child; (2) a photographic-digital documentation of the room and of specific objects; and (3) an audio-digital recorded interview with the child to discuss their own room and objects of historical culture, following an open-ended questionnaire. Additionally, fieldnotes were maintained to document observations made before and immediately after the data collection, and socio-demographic baseline data were collected. This approach employed an ethnographic design similar to that used in British youth culture research (Kühberger, 2018b; Lincoln, 2012). The transcribed tours and interviews were systematically analysed in conjunction with the photographic documentation using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA, focusing on questions related to the handling of the past and history. The challenges of an ethnographic investigation of history education quickly became apparent. A tension emerged between the necessary openness in the field and the domain-specific interests that operate with a priori established categories. The aim is to productively navigate the contradiction between maintaining relevance within the discourse of history education and simultaneously gaining new perspectives or categories from the material that have previously received little or no attention. For this reason, only a few broadly open-ended categories for engaging with history were defined at the outset of the investigation. This approach was intended to align with the principles of ethnographic research, allowing for the detailed exploration of phenomena that emerge from the field itself rather than being predetermined. Central to the insights presented in this article is the category of 'objects of historical culture', which was particularly used for the quantitative description of the rooms. These objects were understood and categorised by the author as manifestations embodying historical knowledge, historical interpretations or memories of the past. Examples include figurines representing knights, board games set in antiquity, plush dinosaurs, posters of historical sites or audiobooks narrating the lives of historical figures. In sum, this encompasses all manifestations of historical culture that serve as manifest expressions of historical consciousness. However, this article does not consider objects of historical culture that blur the line between *ficta* and *facta* or surpass it (for example, Harry Potter, unicorns or dragons).

Staking out the field with quantitative data

Even though the collection of quantitative data was not the primary aim of this study, interesting aspects emerged from the visits to the children that are worth reporting here. The children's rooms, with an estimated average size of 13.6 square metres, are equipped very differently in terms of the presence

of manifestations of historical culture. While some history educators assume that children's everyday environments are saturated with elements of historical culture (see Kübler, 2018), the ethnographic visits to the children's actual living spaces in Austria revealed that this is not the case. Two rooms were documented that contained no objects related to historical culture (Figure 1). When comparing the number of available manifestations of historical culture per room with the household's educational background as determined by the parents, it can be observed that the more objects of historical culture are present, the higher the educational affinity of the household. In this context, the available books (both fiction and non-fiction with historical references) in the children's rooms also play a role, with their number increasing in correlation with a higher educational background of the parents (Kühberger, 2024a).

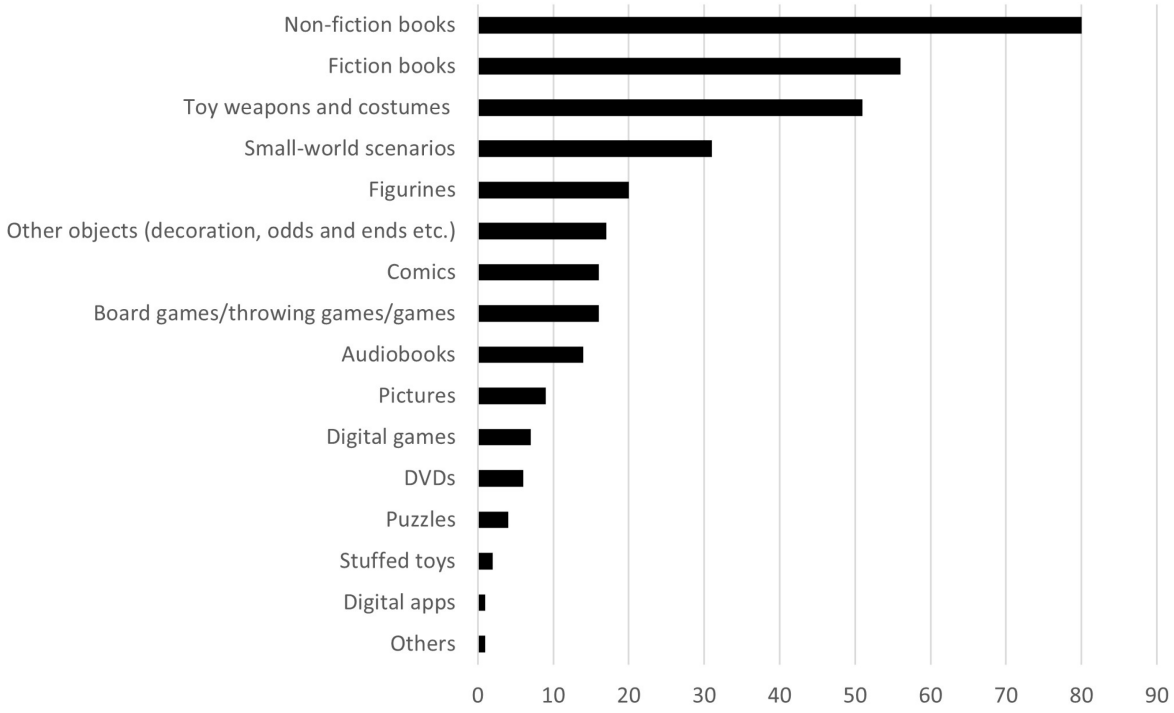
Figure 1. Number of historical culture objects in the rooms (Source: Kühberger, 2024a: 142)



In the children's rooms, it is ultimately the diverse manifestations of historical culture that, through their interpretations of the past, embed history into the everyday lives of nearly all children through objects of material culture (Figure 2). A comparison of the total number of documented objects reveals that three categories dominate: (1) historical non-/fiction books; (2) historical toy weapons and costumes; and (3) historical small-world scenarios (for example, Playmobil® Vikings or Lego® knights). If we take the implications of this diagram seriously, future history teaching would need to place a stronger emphasis on both non-fiction and fiction books, which has not been the case so far. Although there are various studies on these media (see Braas, 2005; Chick, 2006; Matijević and Schwabe, 2017; Rox-Helmer, 2006; Youngs and Serafini, 2011), it seems that in the twenty-first century, there has been a growing focus on digital media, overshadowing the fact that – at least according to the sample presented here – books continue to hold a prominent place in children's rooms. This is also supported by other studies, such as Andrew K. Shenton's (2004: 76) research on the use of books available at home, in which he observes that a 'home collection of books forms an important information resource in the eyes of youngsters'. Books, by their presence in children's rooms – at least within the age group studied here – surpass digital media by a significant margin. It is also important to note that the many shades of grey between *ficta* and *facta* in the engagement with a perceived past, which can also be observed in film and digital media (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones* and so on) (see Bernhardt, 2016; Eisele, 2009; Eldridge, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2019; Larrington, 2016), have long made their way into children's literary worlds (see 'Warrior Cats', 'Brotherband', 'Ranger's Apprentice') or, as the Harry Potter phenomenon illustrates, have even originated there. These works not only activate various historical notions (see Barratt, 2012; Blake, 2009; Curthoys, 2011, 2014; Lyubansky, 2010; Patient and Street, 2009; Spencer, 2015), but they also invent pasts (Winter, 2017; Zimmermann, 2009). Both are areas that, given their availability in children's rooms,

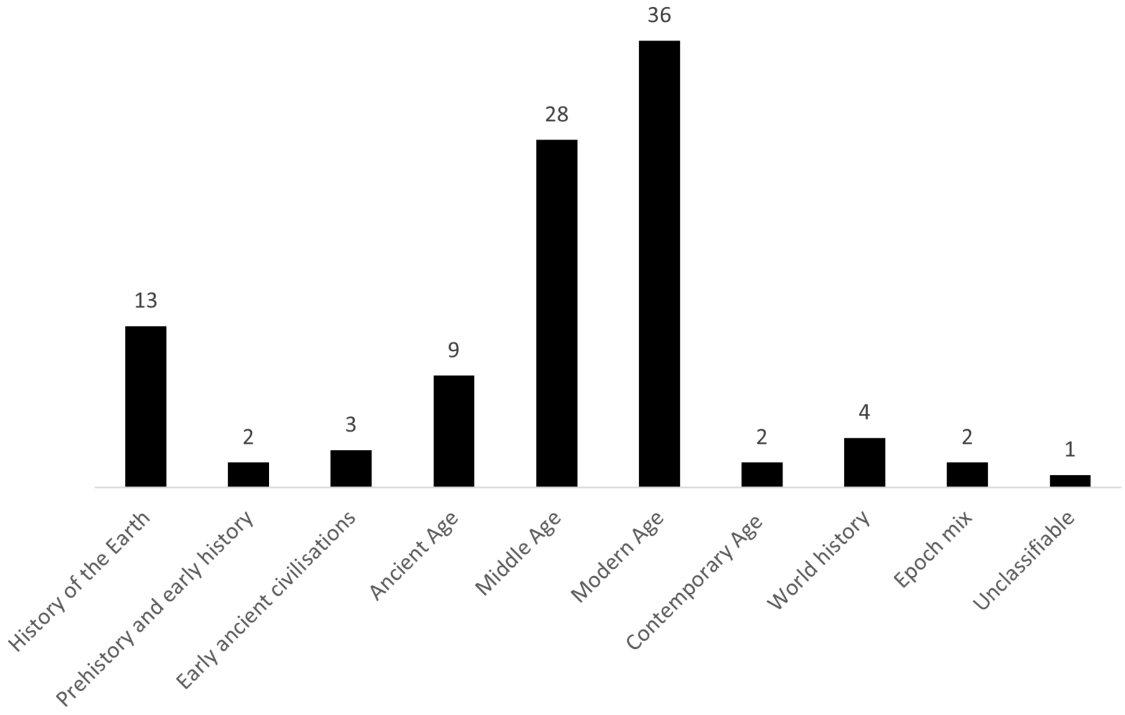
should not be overlooked by history education. However, in the diagram presented in Figure 1, such objects that overlap into the fantasy genre are not numerically accounted for.

Figure 2. Genres of objects of historical culture in children's rooms expressed in whole numbers; *n* = 331 (Source: Kühberger, 2024a: 135)



Another quantitative aspect that can be highlighted here is the chronological classification of the objects of historical culture (Figure 3). Across all genres, the modern era (36 per cent) and the Middle Ages (28 per cent) dominate. The category 'history of the Earth' is included alongside the epochs of human history because children within the age group studied in Austria have a pronounced interest in dinosaurs. This is also reflected in the percentage figures (see, for Finland, Rantala, 2011: 499). Specific aspects of this have already been discussed elsewhere (Kühberger, 2021a). Manifestations related to prehuman history are particularly considered as objects of historical culture because they provide an opportunity to engage with a wide range of historical concepts (alterity, temporal difference, reconstruction, change and so on) (Kühberger, 2021a). Apart from ancient history (9 per cent), all other epochs are marginalised (contemporary history, prehistory and early history, ancient Egypt).

Figure 3. Objects of historical culture by epoch; *n* = 331 (Source: Kühberger, 2024a: 28)



At home in historical thinking

It is nearly impossible, within the limited scope of this article, to provide a comprehensive insight into the body of the ethnographic material. Therefore, I will limit myself to presenting some slices here. One aspect that repeatedly emerged in the dialogue between theoretical assumptions of history education and the ethnographic material was historical thinking. Theoretical models related to this have been widely discussed in recent years (see Ercikan and Seixas, 2015; Körber et al., 2007; Lévesque, 2008; Lévesque and Clark, 2018). However, it should be noted that these discussions primarily refer to formal cognitive processes within institutional frameworks. Theoretical and empirical research in history education have thus focused less on examining how children or adolescents engage with history in their immediate life contexts, how they generate concepts about the past or which tools they use in this process. Instead, this kind of research has generally evaluated, starting from theoretical models, whether children and adolescents meet the normative expectations of the school system and its historical thinking as part of the ongoing and evolving European Enlightenment. The question of whether historical thinking at home operates differently from an academic historical thinking expected in school-based historical learning has not been explored. Instead, Andreas Körber (2007, 2018) conceptualised an explanatory model suggesting that an elaborate form of historical thinking, which would be close to academic standards, evolves from a basic version possessed by all individuals. His framework assumes that there is only one mode of engaging with the past and history, which could be refined through formal education (Körber, 2007, 2018). Based on the ethnographic material and interactions with children in their social spaces, the investigation presented here did not address their academic historical thinking, as the children had not yet been exposed to formal schooling and had acquired only fragments through cultural imitation in everyday encounters. Documented conversations in the children's spaces about their artefacts of historical culture and their use (for example, in play) revealed a previously almost neglected cognitive world, which, from a traditional perspective, was either to be overcome through history teaching or entirely ignored. These observations drew attention to discussions from the 1970s, when some voices in German-speaking history education proposed the idea of an everyday historical thinking – a differently oriented cognitive mode that manifested within society (Becher, 1978; Rumpf,

1977). However, by the end of the 1980s, a highly normative theoretical discourse of history education in schools overshadowed interest in these ideas. During their brief discursive period, these considerations, primarily based on non-systematic observations, aimed to describe a highly divergent range of modes of thinking about the past, each of which the theory of history perceived as having very distinct qualities. Their scope included that area of historical thinking 'which manifests influence from the findings of academic history only in the loosest sense, or not at all', as Rolf Schörken (1979a: 23; author's own translation) described aspects of what he termed a 'trivial historical consciousness'. Indeed, it is notable that Schörken (1979b) and Bodo Von Borries (1980) applied stigmatising and exclusionary labels to these forms of historical thinking (see also Knigge, 1987). Although the discourse in the German-speaking world largely subsided, scholarly work in various regions around the world continues to address the gap between an academic culture of historical thinking and the public's engagement with the past and history. Anna Clark (2016) indirectly identified such phenomena by exploring the connections between Australian history and the people living in Australia. She built on the discomfort that exists between historical scholarly discourses and popular discourses about the past: 'One is official and knowledge-based – taught in schools, tested in official surveys, and promoted by public institutions. The other is familiar, experiential, and is deeply connected to people's families and communities' (Clark, 2016: 7; for the UK, see Green, 2013, 2020; for the USA, see Rosenzweig and Thelen, 1998). It is therefore unsurprising that Sam Wineburg (1999: 491) is also referenced in this context, who argues that:

> historical thinking, in its deepest forms, is neither a natural process nor something that springs automatically from psychological development. Its achievement, I argue, actually goes against the grain of how we ordinarily think. This is one of the reasons why it is much easier to learn names, dates, and stories than it is to change the fundamental mental structures that we use to grasp the meaning of the past.

He goes further a few years later by refining his position:

> thinking ahistorically may well be our psychological condition at rest, a kind of blissful state in which the complexities of disciplinary history needn't get in the way of our snap judgements and facile analogies. The self-assured layperson alights on surface similarities between past and present, welding the two in a 'timeless past' that blithely ignores nettlesome issues of context, circumstance, contiguity, and chronology. Doing something different requires effort and must be cultivated. (Wineburg, 2007: 7)

Wineburg's considerations essentially encapsulate the form of thinking about history and the past that I term 'everyday historical thinking'. This is not intended to imply any form of hierarchy in relation to academic historical thinking, neither as a precursor nor as a 'trivial' form. Instead, history education should aim, through empirical research, to render these everyday uses and engagements with the past and history describable as an independent system.

If the acquisition of everyday historical thinking is understood as part of informal historical learning, as it emerges from or in interaction with objects of historical culture at home, a wide range of elements in the engagement with the past and history can be identified. These elements are not to be seen only as an exhaustive list, but as a contribution to conceptualising children's everyday historical thinking and its informal acquisition from their social practices and lifeworld at home. The aim is to highlight elements that have so far been underrepresented or absent in discussions of history education, yet still influence children's perceptions of and engagement with history and the past through the structures of informal learning.

Elements of children's everyday historical thinking

Across all documented areas of engagement with the children's lifeworld at home, three preliminary components were identified that emerged in the context of informal learning. These were the phenomena of: (1) crafting and organising; (2) accepting and believing; and (3) feeling and experiencing.

Crafting and organising

Focusing on the children's performed historical thinking within the framework of ethnographic encounters, and drawing on Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966), reveals that children can be seen as bricoleurs. This refers to the idea that children have access only to fragmented explanations and isolated elements to make sense of the world – including the past and their encounters with history. They utilise observed and accessible patterns, from which they draw conclusions or simply reproduce them. The children engage in a dialogue with these patterns to explore what can be done – or thought – with them. Sometimes, these patterns are repurposed, for example, when patterns originating from engagement with the present are applied to the past. This represents a variant of presentism that bypasses the alterity of the past. However, children between the ages of 7 and 12 generally have no other means to generate meaning than through the elements they are familiar with. It is a logic of thinking derived from their immediate everyday experiences. The patterns they activate, which come from a kind of 'mental junk box', partly draw on culturally widespread fragments. It can be observed that these elements are (re)combined to avoid getting lost in the surrounding cultures, thereby remaining capable of explanation and action.

In this mental junk box, there are also patterns derived from encounters with objects found in children's rooms. Most children are surrounded by various fragments or elements from historical culture. However, the organisational system in the room is not based on historical categories (for example, representations of the Middle Ages grouped with other representations of the Middle Ages). Instead, objects are grouped either by the children or according to their parents' preferences. Manifestations of historical culture are thus not distinguished from other objects in the room. They are hierarchically equal and are typically organised according to major categories (audiobooks with audiobooks, board games with board games and so on). This everyday logic of storage positions objects from historical culture within an assemblage that can confuse children, not only in terms of temporal logic but also in distinguishing between *ficta* and *facta*. This is well illustrated by the example of 10-year-old Anna's old wooden costume trunk, which does not conform to traditional gender roles (Figure 4). In this trunk, she stores, alongside a 'Pippi Longstocking' costume, a vampire cape, a knight's suit of armour and princess dresses (Case 17w). The children's objects thus exist without temporal order and do not distinguish between reliable sources of information and more fictional fragments. Rather, it is an arbitrary juxtaposition of various fields of history. The term 'fields' here refers not only to a spatial arrangement, but primarily to the static coexistence and proximity of different areas. In this landscape, time and change play no role. Children explain these aspects to themselves by organising the connections between the objects of historical culture.

Figure 4. Anna's trunk with weapons and costumes (Case 17w)

In interviews with the children, such individual logics were indeed documented. For example, 7-year-old Christian was able to correctly sequence various historical epochs in a conventional chronological

order (for example, dinosaurs, Stone Age humans, Romans) (Case 9k_m, pos. 295–307 and 355–62), while other children were engaged in bricolage. For instance, 10-year-old Valerie uses historical figures familiar to her as temporal markers to define the past. The interview also includes a discussion about a white-and-pink neo-Gothic castle:

Interviewer:	That [castle] is from Playmobil®, right? … Wow, that's a great castle. And who actually lives inside?
Valerie:	A queen.
Interviewer:	A queen, OK.
Valerie:	And her maid.
Interviewer:	And a maid, OK. 'Erm… and is this castle also from the past?
Valerie:	Hmm. Yes.
Interviewer:	Yes? And how do you know that?
Valerie:	Because, I think, there wouldn't be such castles anymore.
Interviewer:	So, you mean nobody would build something like that now.
Valerie:	Mhm. [Affirmative.]
Interviewer:	So, you mean in terms of its shape? OK. And how old do you think it could be – approximately?
Valerie:	… and I also think it's from the time when Caesar was already ….
Interviewer:	Pardon?
Valerie:	I think it's also from the time when Caesar already lived [there]. (Case 8k_w, pos. 213–30; author's own translation)

'Caesar' is used here as a historical figure to denote a temporal distance. However, 'Caesar' does not explicitly refer to the Roman emperor Gaius Julius Caesar; rather, it functions as a historical element that the child possesses and employs in this context. This also highlights the tendency towards a holistic approach that characterises such patterns. Other children remain more vague in their explanatory patterns for temporal relationships, and have fewer linguistic means to describe time. For example, 11-year-old Sabine describes the princess as 'already from the past, but not from very long ago' (Case 6k_w, pos. 216; author's own translation). It is also interesting to observe the crafting by 9-year-old Hubert who employs technical development logics to independently explain that the First Americans must have lived after the knights because firearms already existed at that time (Case 4k_m, pos. 123–4). Thus, everyday historical thinking in informal settings does not primarily engage with the knowledge structures and conceptual frameworks of academic historical thinking, but instead attempts to craft an explanatory framework using available elements from the child's lifeworld, where temporal relationships are organised according to their own understanding. Through the chosen ethnographic approach, elements become visible which – when compared with quantitative empirical research from other countries (see de Groot-Reuvekamp et al., 2018; Solé, 2019) – indicate that primary schools in Austria place little emphasis on historical learning. It is well-documented that in the context of primary education, cyclical temporal thinking (for example, calendars, clocks, annual cycles) is predominantly taught, while linear structures associated with historical epochs are largely neglected (Hofmann-Reiter, 2014).

Accepting and believing

A challenge for children encountering history at home is that they have little or no means to verify the available elements. It can be observed that in discussions about the past, objects of historical culture themselves become evidence. For example, children's detective books become reliable sources of information about the Middle Ages (Case 17w, pos. 61–6), plastic figurines are accepted as accurate representations of the past (Case 18w, pos. 51–56) and audiobooks on knights and dragons are seen as plausible narratives about the past (Case 19w, pos. 241–9). In most cases, it is the structure of the manifestations of historical culture, specifically designed for children, which consolidates this. This is well illustrated by toy figurines, such as those from Playmobil® and Lego®. For children, these are read as unquestionable representations of the past:

> They present to children a positivist objectification of historical interpretations tailored by the toy industry to fit the figurines. The material dimension of the toy figurines is particularly central, as these suggest a dimensionally reduced reality that escapes critique due to its

> object-based nature and often becomes self-affirming through the embodiment of characters in role-play, thus gaining agency in multiple ways. The appearance of the figurines with historical references presents itself to children in a physically authentic, visually, and tactilely perceptible manner. The encounter is not an imagination but a three-dimensional figurine from a 'small world' … (Kühberger, 2024b: 238; author's own translation)

These figurines possess an abstraction that, due to their simplicity, creates a basis for blurring the boundaries between interpretive-aesthetic approaches and past reality. Typically, children often have only the opportunity to compare historical representations with other manifestations from historical culture that they encounter at home. A 9-year-old girl, Altun, uses this mode as her reference:

Interviewer:	And do you think that knights really looked like this [like this toy figurine]? Here we see a shield, a sword and a horse. Do you really believe they looked like that?
Altun:	Yes, I am quite sure about that because they also had such protective things … It might not look exactly the same, but they had everything. The knife, etc., and this horse also looks exactly like that because whenever I visited, I watched with my cousin and it was the same with the knights, and they were like the real ones. There are a few real movies about such castles and so on, and they look the same, they have two swords, etc., then gloves, and I think the horse is also really cool.
Interviewer:	So you think it's a very good representation, right?
Altun:	Yes, I think it's great that they made it like this. (Case 18w; pos. 51–66; author's own translation)

Often, children already have an understanding that statements about the past require evidence. While this is quickly grasped in connection with material culture – such as how the reconstruction of a suit of medieval armour from fragmented remains and preserved parts is possible – some children can easily be overwhelmed by abstract ideas or actions from the past. For example, a boy from the sample cannot imagine how one would discover how knights got dressed in the morning, as shown in one of his children's books (Case 4k_m, pos. 134–6). Everyday explanatory patterns quickly lead to the conclusion that everything must be (freely) invented. Children lack methodologically regulated modes of investigation and primarily reduce their approach to the past to parts of objects from the past that are still tactilely available today.

With these routines, children have no choice but to accept historical representations and believe in the presented form. The manifestations of historical culture, thus, become merely a past reality accepted in its presented form, which they engage with through play, reading a book or watching a film. The attention is directed towards the representation itself, while the inherent challenges, such as temporal difference, cultural alterity and epistemic accessibility, are accorded little or only marginal significance by the children. The children believe in the representations and accept them as they are.

Feeling and experiencing

A third domain pertains to the mode that children choose to approach history. Some of the play scenarios reported by the children reveal emotional to immersive realms that they achieve during play. These include role-playing activities in which children either experience unfamiliar roles themselves or project their role understanding on to plastic figures. In this way, imagined or enacted pasts allow for the exploration and, to some extent, the immersion in social contexts beyond the self (Howard and McInnes, 2013). Such experienced history can lead to internalisation, where the experiences from play are equated with the past in the present (see Schörken, 1995).

The representations of the past generated through children's play, which are felt or experienced, do not meet scientific standards for dealing with temporal alterity. However, they point to a dimension of everyday historical thinking in which a universal anthropological connection to past humanity is performed. This experience is perceived as a genuine emotional response in the present, and it is regarded by children with high plausibility. For example, 8-year-old Susi described her role play with her cousin to be set in the past. The girls dressed up in princess costumes reminiscent of pop-cultural fairy-tale princesses. The special fabrics of these costumes conveyed a historical vibe with an elegant and noble aura to the girls. The play itself takes place in the parents' living and dining area, where an imagined royal dinner occurs. The dining area at home transforms into a royal banquet hall: '... and

we always pretend that downstairs [in the living/dining area] is this huge banquet hall, and when there's food, we always say it's like we're eating as queens' (Case 10k_w, pos. 540–63; author's own translation). The emotional and physical experiences of the girls during play, such as sensing social situations, trying out roles or grasping alterity, not only create embodied knowledge that can be recalled as a feeling, but also form conceptions of the past that remain cognitively accessible and are available for further engagements with history. Such an approach to history points to needs in dealing with the past (see Clark, 2016; Schörken, 1995) that are less aligned with academic patterns of historical thinking. These forms can perhaps be more closely compared to the experiential worlds of historical re-enactments by adults (see Allred, 1996; Jureit, 2020; Kühberger, 2024a). Children attempt to enact a 'past' using the means available to them. A physical–emotional approach is perceived as culturally appropriate, given that many toys are offered in children's rooms (and on the market) that stimulate and facilitate such experiences. Such play situations have been observed, for instance, in the context of playing knights (Case 3k_m, pos. 450–87), pirates (Case 20m, pos. 144–65) or various princess adventures (Case 19w, pos. 335–70).

The aim is not to establish that history always has an emotional component, as discussed in history education (see Brauer, 2019; Karn, 2024; Neumann, 2019; Von Borries, 2014), but rather to focus on the specific modes of appropriation between emotional–physical activities in play and the transformation of these experiences into cognitive constructs of the past.

Conclusion and future perspectives

An ethnographic approach to children's lifeworlds at home appears crucial for making substantive statements about informal historical learning processes and the associated objects. It allows for the detection of new nuances or modes of engaging with history, due to the immersion in the social world of children and the openness to the field. This article has delineated three modes (crafting and organising; accepting and believing; feeling and experiencing), which, while exhibiting some relative overlap with academically oriented historical thinking, also highlight distinct modes of engaging with the past. This can be observed, for instance, in attempts to associate objects of historical culture with imaginatively constructed temporal explanations, to accept them uncritically as representations assumed to be self-evident or to employ them for immersive, physical and emotional engagements with the past.

Such insights should, therefore, not be hastily integrated into mainstream frameworks of history education. Instead, the disruptive potential within them should be utilised to explore how children's thinking, as cultivated in informal learning contexts at home, functions, and to investigate the elements that shape their engagement with the past in different ways. It can be assumed that these are not merely phenomena observed in children, but also in adults (see Wineburg, 2007). The relatively underdeveloped ethnographic research within the field of history education could make a significant contribution in the future by providing a bottom-up perspective on these fields (see Kühberger, 2021b).

History education in most countries is heavily influenced by the institutional contexts of historical learning, often placing greater emphasis on the goals to be achieved and the associated pitfalls related to academic historical thinking than on the diversely lived realities and everyday cognitive habits of children. It is feared that children in the school context often do not have the opportunity to perform or position their 'erratic modes' of thinking from the perspective of academic historical thinking, leading them to be suppressed or marginalised. However, given the findings from German history education from the late twentieth century, and the findings of the ethnographic research outlined here, it is plausible that a variety of other modes of engaging with the past and history exist within our Western societies.

From a decolonial perspective, it can furthermore be asserted that Western academic historical thinking is not the only approach to the past. Various theorists who engage with non-European or Indigenous traditions have repeatedly made this point clear (Mignolo, 2000; Smith, 1999). It is therefore long overdue to increasingly enquire about which forms of historical thinking – or, expressed differently, without referring to the Western concept of 'history', with its aporias, specific epistemic moments and significant ontologies – are available in our societies, among children, among various groups of adults or in various parts of the world. How does everyday performed thinking relate to academically Western-influenced historical thinking, and which uncritical mechanisms of suppression are inscribed in this relationship through institutions, power asymmetries or through neglect, such that we currently have limited to no systematic knowledge of everyday historical thinking in Europe, and Indigenous

traditions are largely ignored in the discourse of historical studies? Research in history education could, out of a fundamental interest in engaging with the past in different societal constellations, contribute to mapping the diverse ways of dealing with (representations of) the past and identifying specific characteristics, thereby enhancing our understanding of societies and their constructs, rather than perpetually promoting only one dominant variant of historical thinking while disregarding the social realities of people. If ethnography can teach history education anything about human thinking and behaviour, it is above all the need for more critical distance from our own scientific practices and theoretical assumptions. In my opinion, the objective should not be to prematurely instrumentalise the insights presented here for a more life-oriented approach to history education within formal settings by extending their influence into private spheres in a manner that could be perceived as a form of colonisation. Instead, it should be about fostering a deceleration in our theoretical frameworks of what history is and how the past is processed, and in efforts to transfer these into teaching practice – acknowledging that different styles of thinking about the past exist and are learned within different social milieux. While objects of historical culture (that is, use of history) have already been integrated into history education and critically evaluated, the scientific goal should rather be to fundamentally explore how people process the past outside of a formal framing, where an academic Western mode of thinking does not dominate.

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Data and materials availability statement

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this research design was provided by the Ethics Committee of the University of Salzburg.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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