

LESSON 2 HANDOUT 2.1 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE TAKING

How can we better understand people in the past? David Lowenthal, an influential American historian and geographer, coined the phrase “the past is a foreign country” in his 1985 book of the same title. It aptly captures the challenge we face when ‘visiting’ the past as part of our study of history. Like travelling to a foreign country, the past can be difficult to understand and contextualize within our lived experience. It is difficult to understand the past if we do not speak its language. This activity will assist you in understanding the social, emotional, cultural, and political influences that shaped the experiences of Japanese Canadians in the 1930s. Here we will learn to speak the language of the past.

Aspects of Historical Perspective Taking

Taking the perspective of historical actors **depends upon evidence** for inferences about how people lived, felt, and thought. We examine primary sources of evidence to help decode the past.

It is important to avoid **presentism** — the imposition of present ideas on people in the past. It is difficult to separate how we think today and how people thought many years before.

Historical events or situations involve people who may have **diverse perspectives**. Exploring these is **key** to understanding the event. Not all people of a specific region, time, ethnicity or age experienced the past the same way. One of the more challenging aspects of looking at the past is recognizing the varied perspectives people hold for the same event.

Taking the perspective of a historical person **does not mean identifying** with that person. We can never truly feel the emotion, injustice or trauma of the past as it was experienced by the people we are studying.

Using evidence and understanding of the historical context to answer questions of why people acted the way they did (or thought what they did) even when their actions seem at first irrational or inexplicable or different from what we would have done or thought.

Adapted from The Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness. *The Historical Thinking Project*. historicalthinking.ca/historical-perspectives.