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## Epistemological tensions in prospective Dutch history teachers' beliefs about the objectives of secondary education



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### ABSTRACT

In recent decades we witnessed ongoing debates about the objectives of history education, with different underlying epistemological perspectives. This qualitative study explored prospective history teachers' beliefs about these objectives of history education. Prospective history teachers of six universities starting a teacher educational programme were invited to answer an open-ended questionnaire about history education. Six objectives were found: (1) memorising; (2) critical/explanatory; (3) constructivist; (4) perspective-taking; (5) moral; and (6) collective-identity objectives. Almost all prospective teachers mentioned several of these objectives. A distinction between two epistemological perspectives on historical knowledge representation (factual or interpretive), was used as a framework for categorising the different objectives. More than half of the respondents mentioned objectives of history education that represent history as factual and objectives that represent history as interpretive. We propose that in actual practice most history teachers are combining epistemologically opposing objectives for pedagogical, political and religious motives.

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### Introduction

History education often serves social, cultural and political aims, as history curricula tend to prescribe what pupils should “remember” of their communal, mostly national past as the defining experiences that shape our present (Thelen, 1989).

Therefore, the aim of history education has been intensely debated in society as well as in the scholarly literature (Clark, 2009; Davies, 2011; Elgström & Hellstenius, 2011; Lévesque, 2005; Osborne, 2003; Symcox & Wilschut, 2009). Several authors have described a tension between the ambitions and goals of academic historians, educational scholars and politicians leading to so called “history wars” (Van Sledright, 2008; Wils & Verschaffel, 2012). Politicians may want to use history education to turn pupils into democratically responsible and/or patriotic citizens, whereas educational scholars and historians might stress the importance of a critical understanding of history. Politicians who want to use history education specific for nation building can be criticised when presenting one single nation building narrative. Such a one-sided approach would be at odds with the assumption that in history there are always multiple narratives possible, and that

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minorities easily can be excluded from such a single national building narrative (e.g. Barton & Levstik, 2004). What is important about the distinction between one and multiple narratives is that from an epistemological perspective, both points of view represent historical knowledge in fundamentally different ways. It is striking that history teachers, have, to date, not been involved that much in the debate on different epistemological stances, although they can be considered central actors in realising history education, as teachers provide pupils access to specific educational experiences through their daily choices of content, methods and epistemological representations (Thornton, 1991; Van Boxtel & Grever, 2011).

This study aims to explore which objectives Dutch prospective history teachers attribute to history education, and to consider how these objectives relate to the epistemological debate about the nature of historical knowledge. To frame our study, we start with discussing various epistemological perspectives on historical knowledge and as we will elaborate, we end up by distinguishing factual from interpretive history education. Subsequently, we describe how specific objectives of history education may influence the way historical knowledge is perceived and presented. We will point out that currently in the Netherlands both epistemologically opposing representations of historical knowledge coexist in one national curriculum. In addition, we will discuss the (implicit) relation between prospective history teachers' epistemological beliefs and their beliefs regarding the objectives of history education.

### *Two presentations of the past: factual and interpretive*

The traditional picture of what history refers to is quite simple, history is the study of the past and results ideally in the representation of the past 'as it was' (Southgate, 1996). In accordance with philosophical debates about truth, this traditional perspective postulates historical knowledge as independent of the observer; such history has been traditionally validated by finding knowledge through source-mining (Southgate, 1996). In this way, historians could ascertain the "facts" and in doing so, report the "truth." This empiricist view of history is ascribed to the venerate Greeks of Antiquity and exists subcutaneously until today (Breisach, 1993). Seen from this perspective, historical knowledge can be presented as one authoritative single narrative. In the present study we refer to this representation of historical knowledge as "factual," as historical knowledge is assumed to mirror objective facts.

The idea that it is possible to discover and describe a unitary historical truth has been undermined by various scholars. For example Kosso (2009) summarises two important difficulties concerning "truth" in history: first, the object of study has gone and is empirically unobservable and, therefore historians do not study the past but the remaining historical traces. This distance between the historian and the past leaves a gap between our interpretation and the object we are trying to understand. Historical knowledge is therefore always constructed and subjective because it depends on individual perceptions at different times and places (Newall, 2009). As Croce (1941) stated, "the practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of contemporary history" (p. 91). The second problem that Kosso (2009) refers to is that historians are studying people, who are wilful, idiosyncratic, not of our own time, often not of our own culture, which makes them difficult to understand from our present perspective. Nowadays, most scholars in history education agree that subjectivity may be unavoidable since we can only describe the past in our terms, and in ways that make sense to us (e.g. Barton & Levstik, 2004; Segall, 1999; Van Sledright, 2010; Wineburg, 2001). In its most outspoken form, historians associated with postmodernism such as Ankersmit (2001), Jenkins (2003) and White (1987), were critiqued for radicalising this insight by stressing that it is very difficult or even impossible to differentiate between the epistemological qualities of historical interpretations. Such radicalization can lead to the problem of epistemological relativism (Carr, 1986; Levisohn, 2010). Several historians have looked for alternative theories of truth by pointing out that there may be a cultural norm guiding perceptions and evaluations of the acceptability of a particular interpretation or construction of the past (Evans, 1997; Iggers, 1997; Tucker, 2004). Historical knowledge seen from this intersubjective perspective should not be represented as "factual" or as "fiction" but rather, should be presented as an open narrative based upon (historical) evidence that can be questioned and should be reflected upon. In the present study we refer to this historical knowledge representation as "interpretive" because historical narratives can always be doubted and questioned. In what follows we will point out that the two views on historical knowledge presented as "factual" and as "interpretive" can coexist in history education.

### *Competing objectives of history education*

Several scholars have assumed, implicitly or explicitly, competing objectives of history education (Barton & Levstik, 2008; Cuban, 2002; Peck & Seixas, 2008; Wineburg, 2001). Two orientations towards history education, emotional heritage and critical academic history, have become a frequently described dichotomy (Carretero, 2011; Lowenthal, 1985, 1998; Seixas, 2000; Tosh, 2006; Van Sledright, 2010). In this research we will use the research of Carretero (2011) as a starting point. He has redefined these two broad competing and coexisting objectives of school history, as "romantic" and "enlightened" objectives. Romantic objectives are related to the construction of the nation state in the nineteenth century and the rise of growing nationalism. Historical knowledge is used to construct and maintain a common identity and to provide examples of civic virtue and loyalty (Carretero & Bermudez, 2012; Nussbaum & Cohen, 2002). The historical narratives to achieve these objectives can be considered "closed," because they impose a structure of meaning, rather than incite questions (Klein, 2010). From an epistemological perspective, historical knowledge is represented as "factual" indicating a fixed interpretation of the past.

History education in the enlightened tradition means to educate pupils to be able to critically reflect upon historical knowledge. There is a strong relationship with professional history because the past should be understood in a complex manner, meaning that pupils should master disciplinary conceptual categories (Carretero & Voss, 1994). Mastering these disciplinary and cognitive objectives should lead to “historical thinking” (Wineburg, 2001; Seixas & Peck, 2004), or “historical reasoning” (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008). These concepts embody among other goals, the ability to form plausible critical interpretations based on evidence of multiple sources, and to contextualise the different perspectives of people (Barton, 2008). The underlying political and moral agenda is the importance of acquiring methodological skills during history education as tools for participating in a democratic multicultural society in a global world (Carretero, López, González, & Rodríguez-Moneo, 2012; Thornton, 2005). Seen from this perspective, historical knowledge is represented as principally *interpretive*, in the sense that it needs to be scrutinised because multiple interpretations of the past are possible. In addition, such provisional knowledge takes into account that the past is foreign because it cannot be directly accessed, and therefore should be approached by acknowledging historical distance (Lowenthal, 1985).

It should be noted that both romantic and enlightened objectives reflect an underlying political agenda in the sense that pupils have to be educated in history for the sake of their current and future citizenship. Given the epistemological differences in the representation of both kinds of historical knowledge, one can understand that combining romantic and enlightened objectives may cause tensions, especially in culturally diverse countries. For example, Zanazanian and Moisan (2012) found that teachers in Canada find it hard to balance between transmitting a framework for creating national identity and stimulating pupils' critical thinking skills. They often resort to teaching factual representations of the past and the main markers of their group's collective memory. Bekerman and Zembylas (2010) showed that history teachers in Israel often remain firmly in the hegemonic historical narratives of their own community, which constrains critically negotiating competing narratives. We will now discuss how in the Dutch curriculum these epistemological tensions come to the fore and show the difficulty of resolving these tensions.

#### *Epistemological tensions in the Dutch history curriculum*

Until the 1950s, pupils in the Netherlands were primarily taught history with the purpose of creating a “national spirit,” and with the intention of raising moral and responsible citizens (Wilschut, 2009a). During the 1960s, history as a school subject was in crisis. Academic historians started to emphasise the strangeness of the past and in doing so pointed out that the past provides no lessons for the future (Heuss, 1959; Plumb, 1970). Moreover, due to the Second World War, the patriotic objective of history education was criticised and deemed no longer desirable. School history moved towards developing pupils' understanding of history as *a form of knowledge* with its own disciplinary skills and epistemological problems. Accordingly, in the past three decades, more emphasis has been given to teaching practices characterising history as an academic discipline for teaching pupils what later was named “historical thinking or reasoning” (Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; Wineburg, 2001). However, at the beginning of the 1990s, Dutch politicians started rethinking the moral and ideological dimensions of education, assuming that citizens were threatened in their national identities because of, among others, globalisation, individualism and non-Western immigrants, leading to a revival of neo-nationalist history aimed at enhancing collective identity (Grever, 2007).

In the Netherlands, this development resulted in the introduction of the semi-official Dutch historical canon in 2006 (Grever, Jonker, Ribbens, & Stuurman, 2006). The advocates and compilers of this canon wanted to lay a generally and broadly accepted foundation of factual knowledge under the whole history curriculum in primary and secondary education. The canon consists of 50 topics, each summarising a particular historical event, figure or theme. An important objective of the canon was to promote and maintain the Dutch collective identity (De canon van Nederland, 2006–2007) and the canon received an official status in primary and the first three years of secondary education. From its introduction, the canon has been intensely debated in the Netherlands. Jonker (2006) observed somewhat paradoxically that, in view of its closed character of identity function, the canon was presented as open and flexible, as the compilers were afraid to exclude certain communities. Critics of the canon argue that a global perspective of the past is more adequate for preparing pupils for participation in a multicultural society (Beyen, 2006; Ribbens, 2007). Epistemologically, the representation of historical knowledge in the Dutch canon corresponds more with a *factual* representation of historical knowledge.

The controversies surrounding the Dutch canon fell amid a period in which the curriculum for upper secondary education already was renewed and discussed. Since the mid-1990s the history curriculum was criticised as ineffective, with too much emphasis placed on historical thinking skills at the expense of memorising facts and chronology. A committee led by history professor De Rooy (2001) was asked to design a new curriculum; as a result, he introduced a chronological framework of “orientation knowledge” comprising ten clear-cut “eras” with associative names and 49 distinctive “characteristic features.” The framework was created to stimulate historical thinking, and should *not* be considered a factual aim in itself (Wilschut, 2009b). The new curriculum was implemented in 2007. The response of educational scholars, historians and teachers to this new curriculum was diverse. Part of the critique concerned the characteristics ascribed to the ten eras; more fundamental criticism concerned its lack of dealing with diachronic developments and the insufficient attention given to the interpretive nature of historical knowledge (History Examinations, 2006). In 2012, a new committee was appointed that complemented the curriculum with additional descriptions. Four historical contexts were added, which can be seen as broader historical themes that cover more time eras and are related to several of the “characteristic features.” In addition,

the historical skills described in the curriculum were revisited and more emphasis was placed on the interpretative character of historical knowledge (Board of Examinations, 2013).

The curriculum developments show that there is recurrent tension between objectives of history education that represent the past as *factual* and objectives that represent the past as *interpretive*. To date, however, little attention has been devoted to which objectives prospective history teachers attribute to history education.

### *Epistemological beliefs*

The sketched debates among historians and educators on historical “truth” lead to the question of how history teachers want to evaluate historical knowledge from an epistemological perspective. Researchers have often approached this question from the assumption that teachers’ epistemological beliefs influence their pedagogical practices. Generally, epistemological beliefs refer to conceptions of the nature of knowledge and knowing (Pintrich, 2002). In history education, history teachers’ epistemological beliefs refer to beliefs that indicate how teachers understand the nature of their discipline (Maggioni, Van Sledright, & Alexander, 2009; Seixas, 1993; Wineburg, 2001). Epistemological beliefs are particularly important as history teachers can only represent historical knowledge as *interpretive* if they themselves are convinced about historical knowledge being constructed.

The literature on epistemological beliefs often departs from a developmental approach by defining a continuum ranging from naïve towards more sophisticated types or levels of beliefs. Well-known in this respect are Perry (1970) and King and Kitchener (2002) who, based on Piaget, state that beliefs about the certainty of knowledge and the process of knowing lie on a continuum, with different developmental levels ranging from simple black-and-white views towards complex evidence-based ways of knowing (Brownlee, Schraw, & Berthelsen, 2011).

In line with this general epistemological research, scholars in the domain of history education distinguish between less and more sophisticated beliefs in their studies (Fallace & Neem, 2005; Lee & Ashby, 2000; Maggioni et al., 2009; Yilmaz, 2008). Naïve beliefs are usually associated with ignoring the difference between history and the past, which is interpreted in our terminology as a *factual* representation of knowledge. More sophisticated beliefs on history acknowledge multiple interpretations of the past and the active role of the knower in historical knowledge construction. The latter beliefs relate more closely to representing history knowledge as *interpretive*. Several scholars have proposed developmental models of increased intellectual sophistication (Lee & Shemilt, 2003; Maggioni et al., 2009; Rösen, 1989, 2004). For example, Maggioni et al. (2009), based upon Lee and Shemilt (2003) has defined a three-stances model in which pupils develop from a copier stance (historical knowledge is a “copy” of the past), to a relativist stance (historical knowledge is merely a matter of opinion), to a criterialist stance (historical knowledge is interpretative, but also restrained by disciplinary criteria). However these developmental models can be questioned, both in terms of the strict categorisation of levels and the underlying norm that determines what is to be considered sophisticated (Schommer-Aikens, 2004). Not surprisingly, the aforementioned scholars who use developmental models have also nuanced their models. For example, Maggioni et al. (2009), also question how flexible or rigid epistemological stances are, particularly considering how epistemological beliefs interfere with pedagogical beliefs.

### *The present study*

We have argued that historical knowledge, from an epistemological perspective, can be represented as *factual* or as *interpretive*, and that history education tends to adhere to both representations. Currently, prospective Dutch teachers are confronted with a history curriculum in which both epistemological representations are intertwined. Despite the ongoing debates, there is no information on how prospective teachers’ position themselves regarding these two epistemological perspectives. We want to know which objectives prospective academic history teachers attach to history education at the very start of their teacher education programme, and to consider how these objectives relate to *factual* or *interpretive* representations of historical knowledge. Accordingly, our research question is: *Which combinations of objectives of history education, and in doing so, epistemological representations of history knowledge, do prospective academic history teachers attach to history education at the very start of their university-based teacher education program?*

## **Methodology**

### *Participants*

Participants in this study were prospective history teachers starting their university-based teacher educational programme in the Netherlands in August 2012. To enter this postgraduate programme, students need to have completed a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in history. Participants were spread across six different universities in the Netherlands. The intact 2012 cohort were approached for this study with a questionnaire, 66% ( $N=57$ ) responded, and 59% ( $N=48$ ) fully completed the questionnaire. Table 1 gives an overview of the details of the participants.

**Table 1**  
Information about participants in the study.

| Characteristic             | Participants |
|----------------------------|--------------|
| <b>University</b>          |              |
| Utrecht                    | 16           |
| Groningen                  | 6            |
| Leiden                     | 9            |
| Nijmegen                   | 6            |
| Amsterdam VU               | 8            |
| Amsterdam UVA              | 3            |
| <b>Gender</b>              |              |
| Male                       | 33           |
| Female                     | 15           |
| <b>Teaching experience</b> |              |
| None                       | 17           |
| Some days                  | 16           |
| 1 year                     | 10           |
| 2 years                    | 2            |
| 3 years >                  | 3            |

### *Instrument and data-collection process*

We constructed a questionnaire consisting of 12 open-ended questions and a performance task (see Appendix 1). During the first days of the teacher education programme responses were collected from the prospective teachers by means of the Web-based questionnaire tool Survey Monkey. The 12 open-ended questions covered various topics related to the Dutch history education debates, such as the general importance of history education and the objective of a national canon. Open-ended questions were used, as has been recommended for explorative studies (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). We gave the respondents maximum freedom to describe their beliefs by encouraging them to use as much space as necessary when describing their answers. Answers varied per question from several words to approximately 250 words.

The last part of the questionnaire consisted of a performance task, inviting respondents to give answers on a more concrete level than the open-ended questions (Van Sledright, 2002; Wilson & Wineburg, 1993). The performance task included a recurrent and recent upcoming controversial issue in the Netherlands related to J.P. Coen (1587–1629), chief founder and director general of the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC). In 2011, a group of citizens united and started a campaign to remove the J.P. Coen statue from the market square of the small city of Hoorn. In the so-called Dutch Golden Age, Coen established a chain of fortified posts in the Indonesian Archipelago and nowadays he symbolises the aggressive manner in which the VOC attempted to obtain a trade monopoly in Dutch East Indies (Spruit, 1987). The questionnaire contained enquiries of the respondents' position in this discussion and their teaching approach to this controversy.

### *Analyses*

We searched the scientific literature for different aims of secondary school history education (Adler, 1984; Barton & Levstik, 2004; Chiodo & Brown, 2007; Donnelly, 1999; Dorsman, Jonker, & Ribbens, 2000; Evans, 1988, 1989, 1990; Goodman & Adler, 1985; Kocka, 1977; Seixas, 1998; Seixas & Clark, 2004; Vinson, 1998; Von Borries, 2000). We used the literature for creating theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and for 'sensitising concepts' to help us in the process of coding (Bowen, 2006). We used five sensitising concepts identified by Barton and Levstik (2004) as principal activities that students are expected to perform when learning history, namely: identify, analyse, respond morally to, exhibition of and "historically empathise" with the past. Barton and Levstik (2004) refer to these activities as "stances", as these activities refer to a combination of purpose and practice. These "stances" has been identified, based on a review of existing research on historical thinking and they set it in the theoretical context of "mediated action" (Wertsch, 1998). This theory calls attention to the interaction between a person, "cultural tools", and the cultural environment in which the person is situated.

After receiving all the questionnaires, the qualitative data were entered in Atlas.ti (Muhr, 1997). The first author started the analysis by 'open coding,' or the identification of themes emerging from the raw data (Charmaz, 2006). Utterances that were not relevant to our research were excluded, including statements about pedagogy. All the utterances indicating an objective of history education were coded. We found many different objectives of history education; some were described in detail by the respondents and others more abstractly. In meetings with the second author we worked towards several broad categories in which all utterances could be coded, using the sensitising concepts. We categorised all aims under a comprehensive framework of objectives of history education. In the next sequence, the process of axial coding (Boeije, 2010), the objectives were named and a final coding scheme (i.e., six broad objectives of history education to be presented in the "Results" section) was defined through a discussion with all the authors. We checked for inter-rater reliability: 25% of the questionnaires were coded by an independent researcher resulting in an un-weighted Cohen's Kappa of 0.78. After defining

the different objectives of history education we considered how the objectives relate to *factual* or *interpretive* representations of historical knowledge. In doing so, we could calculate how many respondents mentioned objectives that relate only to interpretive or factual representations, or combined both representations of historical knowledge.

## Results

### *Six objectives of history education*

Six objectives of history could be distilled from the analysis of the questionnaire responses: the: (1) memorising; (2) critical/explanatory; (3) constructivist; (4) perspective-taking; (5) moral; and (6) collective-identity objectives. The amount of teachers referring to the objectives are displayed in [Table 2](#).

**Table 2**  
Objectives of history education referred to by respondents.

| Objectives of history education | Respondents |
|---------------------------------|-------------|
| Memorising                      | 24          |
| Critical/explanatory            | 48          |
| Constructivist                  | 37          |
| Perspective-taking              | 26          |
| Moral                           | 16          |
| Collective identity             | 7           |

### *The memorising objective*

The memorising objective of history education means that history education has to make pupils memorise and be able to display and memorise substantive knowledge. Substantive knowledge in history education refers to historical facts, persons, events, dates, etcetera. For example, in response to the question regarding what good history education is, one respondent stated: “*The building of factual knowledge of Dutch and world history.*” Another statement of a prospective teacher was that good history education should “*provide pupils with a substantial basis of factual historical knowledge.*” Twenty-four respondents gave answers referring to this objective.

### *The critical/explanatory objective*

The critical/explanatory objective of history education means that history education has to make pupils learn academic disciplinary skills in order to be able to think about history. This implies that history education should focus on learning different procedural concepts that enable pupils to understand the past in a rational and critical manner. Procedural concepts are concepts that historians use to make sense of the past, such as the concept of change and continuity. To understand what history is, pupils should be able to evaluate evidence and information, as well as be critical and present arguments. An example from a respondent referring to this objective is: “*Pupils will learn different skills from good history education such as: making causal connections, interpret sources, asking critical questions and so on.*” Another example from the data is: “*... furthermore critical thinking and the critical use of sources should be at the centre of history education.*” The different concepts were used in an explanatory way and with such concepts, pupils could make rational sense of the past and of the way the past is related to the present. All of the respondents gave answers referring to this objective.

### *The constructivist objective*

The constructivist objective of history education means that history education has to make pupils value historical knowledge from an epistemological perspective. According to the respondents, it was important that pupils learn that history is dynamic and can evolve over time; this indicated a belief that multiple stories or constructions of the past can exist. Pupils should learn that individuals produce historical knowledge and that the construction of historical knowledge is disputable. A statement from the data referring to this objective is: “*Pupils learn that multiple viewpoints are possible and that these can exist next to their own point of view.*” Another quote is: “*History is malleable and changeable, it is not science.*” Thirty-seven respondents gave answers referring to this objective.

### *The perspective-taking objective*

The perspective-taking objective of history education means that history education has to make pupils understand historical figures or events within their own historical context. According to statements by respondents in this category, through hermeneutics, pupils should try to understand others’ experience of life in history. In doing so, history is not about looking for similarities between the past and the present, but about emphasising the differences between past and present. An important aspect according to respondents was avoiding pupils’ imposition of today’s values on the past. A statement from the data referring to this objective is: “*Such a pupil would, for example, be able to ‘understand’ why a German in 1933*

could vote for Hitler.” Another example is: “History through which a person can empathise with another time without judging that time on the basis of today’s knowledge, to avoid anachronisms.” Twenty-six respondents gave answers referring to this objective.

#### *The moral objective*

The moral objective of history education means that history education has a moral purpose and can be a moral guide for the present; historical knowledge could function in sharpening individuals’ moral consciousness. Historical figures or events of the past were seen as good and bad examples for contemporary moral behaviour. History can teach us lessons for the present, but can also teach us how we should behave. An example from the data is: “I think that we can learn many lessons from our history with respect to our future. Something like the Second World War should never be repeated. This should always be remembered.” Sixteen respondents gave answers referring to this objective.

#### *The collective identity objective.*

The collective identification objective of history education means that history education can contribute to creating a collective identity. The respondents who fell within this category all expressed themselves to be proponents of a Dutch canon. They pointed out that a canon provides important events and facts that Dutch citizens should know, indicating that a collective identity for them concerned national Dutch identity. A quote from the data: “... a Dutch canon teaches us how the Netherlands became the country that we know nowadays, and how our Dutch identity developed. We should preserve that identity and therefore we could use the canon in our education.” Seven respondents gave answers referring to this objective.

#### *Objectives of history education from an epistemological perspective*

**Table 3**

Relation between objectives of history education and epistemological representation of historical knowledge.

| Epistemological perspective: objective | Factual | Interpretive |
|--|---------|--------------|
| Memorising                             | X       | X            |
| Critical/explanatory                   |         | X            |
| Constructivist                         |         | X            |
| Perspective-taking                     |         | X            |
| Moral                                  | X       |              |
| Collective identity                    | X       |              |

In the following we will elaborate how to classify the objectives of history education into the two epistemological perspectives on historical knowledge, i.e., as *factual* or as *interpretive*. In doing so we can identify epistemological tensions (Table 3).

We argue that historical knowledge in the moral objective and the collective identity objective are most likely represented as *factual*. First, both objectives of history education address historical knowledge as static and as representing truth thereby epistemologically assuming objectivity. In the moral objective, values are not contextualised historically or spatially situated, but considered with timeless validity. In the collective identification objective, elements of pre-established narratives are mobilised that present the nation state as a teleological outcome of the past. Both objectives of history education approach the past from a more “emotional” perspective. Historical knowledge is made explicitly usable for contemporary purposes. First, because the past is used as a moral guide for the present, as historical events and figures can be seen as good or bad examples; and second, because the past is used to aim for social cohesion, as represented in the form of the nation state.

Three objectives of history education represent historical knowledge primarily as *interpretive*, namely the critical/explanatory, the constructivist and the perspective-taking objective. These objectives share a rational and academic approach toward the past. The critical/explanatory objective aims to stimulate pupils to use disciplinary heuristics to critically question the past. This intellectual approach also applies to the constructivist objective of history education, as this objective implies that pupils have to learn history as an interpretive discipline, and thus that historical narratives are subjective human constructions. Finally, the perspective-taking objective represents historical knowledge as interpretive, as perspective recognition does not refer to “feeling” like an historical actor, but rather to teaching pupils to contextualise beliefs and opinions of historical figures in their historical context. Thus, pupils should also become aware of their own perspective. All three objectives share the common belief that pupils should learn to question their intuitive ideas about historical knowledge. Arguably, this can be seen as a moral goal in its own right, be it less emotional and prescriptive or more open and tolerant.

Concerning “the memorising objective,” we argue that historical knowledge is most likely represented as *factual*. However, knowing a certain amount of historical content can be regarded as a condition for engaging pupils in questioning the past. Moreover, a focus on historical content knowledge is not necessarily restricted to knowing only one construction of the past, such as in a “canon.” The epistemological nature of this objective therefore depends largely on what possible

successive objectives respondents might link it to. When seen as an educational goal in its own right, it clearly adheres to the factual domain.

#### Combined objectives of history education

**Table 4**

Number of respondents that combining objectives of history education and epistemological perspective.

| Amount of combined objectives | Participants | Mentioned objectives of history education |                |           |
|-------------------------------|--------------|---|----------------|-----------|
|                               |              | Solely interpretive                       | Solely factual | Combining |
| One                           | 0            | 0   | 0              | 0         |
| Two                           | 10           | 8   | 0              | 2         |
| Three                         | 20           | 10  | 0              | 10        |
| Four                          | 14           | 0   | 0              | 14        |
| Five                          | 2            | 0   | 0              | 2         |
| Six                           | 2            | 0   | 0              | 2         |
| Total                         | 48           | 18  | 0              | 30        |

Note: The objective memorising relates to interpretive and factual representations.

In the following we will give an overview of the combinations of objectives of history education. We will focus in more detail upon combinations of objectives that cause epistemological tension.

Table 4 shows that 44 participants combine two, three or four objectives of history education. As can be seen in Table 4, 18 respondents only mention objectives of history education that represent historical knowledge as open and *interpretive*, whereas none of the respondents represents historical knowledge solely as *factual*. In addition, thirty of the prospective history teachers mention objectives of history education that represent historical knowledge as factual and objectives of history education that represent historical knowledge as interpretive. From these 30 respondents, 13 respondents combine solely the memorising objective, with objectives that represent historical knowledge as open and *interpretive*. To provide more detailed information about which objectives respondents combine that might cause underlying epistemological tension, see Table 5.

**Table 5**

Types of combinations of objectives epistemologically opposing.

| Objective            | Memory | Factual             |       |
|----------------------|--------|---------------------|-------|
|                      |        | Collective identity | Moral |
| Interpretive         |        |                     |       |
| Memory               | X      | 5                   | 10    |
| Critical/explanatory | 24     | 7                   | 16    |
| Constructivist       | 19     | 4                   | 10    |
| Perspective-taking   | 10     | 3                   | 8     |

Note: Every cell is number of respondents combining both objectives of history education. Memory relates to interpretive and factual representations.

Table 5 shows that 16 participants combine the moral objective with the critical/explanatory objective. Only two participants combine the collective identity objective with perspective-taking. To get a sense of how prospective teachers can refer to epistemologically tensed objectives of history education we will discuss four examples.

The first example concerns respondent Betty who has referred to both the constructivist objective and the collective identification objective of history education. When Betty was asked about the importance of history education, she wrote: “One [i.e., pupils] must be open minded and accept that there is no one real truth.” However, when Betty was asked about the desirability of the Dutch canon, she wrote: “Yes, because then everybody in the Netherlands will share the same basic knowledge. That creates a bond, and recognition of our common past.” From an epistemological perspective, the plea for a canon in which historical knowledge is more represented as factual in order to provide national cohesion seems to conflict with the conviction that pupils should learn that multiple truths are possible.

The second example concerns respondent William, who argued for both the constructivist objective of history education and its moral objective. In various answers William pointed to the Bible as the norm and absolute authority, stating that it is important to teach history to pupils because: “[We should] tell the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and His might, and the wonders that He has done.” History used for this purpose is represented as closed and *factual*. Nonetheless, William also emphasised the constructive nature of historical knowledge, and acknowledged that historical knowledge



evolves over time and should be contextualised. William argued that the performance task is a good example to teach pupils “[because] you can show how history is perceived in different times, and how views upon historical events change over time.” This utterance also indicates that William wants to represent historical knowledge as interpretive.

The third example concerns respondent James, who has referred to both the perspective-taking objective and the moral objective of education. Whereas in the first objective historical knowledge is represented as *interpretive*, in the second objective historical knowledge and morals are more represented as *factual*. James’ reference to the perspective-taking objective shows in his answer to the question “What characterises a pupil who is good in history?” to which he responded that a good pupil should: “... *judge the past realising that in the past people had different norms and values.*” However, when James was asked to respond on the performance task, he referred to the moral objective, stating that pupils need to learn from history and that pupils have to be conscious of “... *the horrors that also happened in their own history.*”

A final example, showing yet another type of tension, is reflected in a single answer of respondent Peter, when he referred simultaneously to the memorising objective and the critical/explanatory objective of history education. When asked about the desirability of a canon, Peter wrote: “*As a historian among historians, I would say ‘no,’ because a canon always oversimplifies history. [...] On the other hand, a canon is more comprehensible than many history books, and is therefore a lot easier to digest and to understand for the majority of the Dutch people.*” It is noteworthy that Peter, by referring to both objectives in a single quote and by explicitly positioning himself as a historian – distancing himself from the didactical or everyday context – seems to be aware of the underlying tension. In the conclusion and discussion we will provide several possible explanations for the relatively high number of respondents who mention objectives of history education with apparently opposing representations of historical knowledge.

## Conclusion and discussion

The first part of our research question in this exploratory study was which objectives do prospective history teachers attach to history education at the very start of their university-based teacher educational programme. We discerned six different objectives of history education in the total set of questionnaire answers. Five objectives relate to the sensitising concepts that we derived from Barton and Levstik (2004), but were slightly adjusted, as we aimed for objectives that are epistemologically distinctive as well as empirically grounded in teachers’ perspectives. For one, the collective identity objective relates to the identification stance described by Barton and Levstik (2004). Whereas the identification stance refers to pupils associating themselves with individuals or as members of a large group in history when they are studying history, the collective identity objective that we identified refers only to associations with a “national” identity. Second, the critical/explanatory objective relates closely to the analytical stance described by Barton and Levstik (2004). The analytical stance refers to ability to decompose the organisational structure of the past by, among others, searching for patterns or examining causes and consequences of events. Barton and Levstik (2004) included in this description the possibility of learning lessons from the past; for epistemological reasons, we excluded this, and considered this part of the moral objective that we identified. Third, the moral objective relates to the moral response stance described by Barton and Levstik (2004), referring to judgements about people and events of the past. In our categorisation of the moral objective we added learning lessons from the past. Fourth, the memorising objective relates to the sensitising concept exhibition, which refers to displaying historical knowledge. Our category is more specific and refers only to cognitively knowing historical “facts” and not to other forms of exhibition. Fifth, the perspective taking objective that we identified relates mostly to what Barton and Levstik (2004) described as “historical empathy as perspective recognition”, referring to pupils gaining sense of historical actors. Whereas they also considered the multiplicity of historical perspectives as part of perspective taking, we distinguished this as a part of a separate objective, identified as constructivist objective. The constructivist objective is not often described as an explicit objective of history education in and of itself. However, from an epistemological and teachers’ perspective this makes sense, as teachers are found to struggle mostly with realizing this objective. Research has indicated several factors that can constrain prospective teachers in teaching history as construction, such as limited classroom control, a limited understanding of historical content, coverage of an expansive curriculum, and doubt in students’ abilities (Barton & Levstik, 2003; James, 2008; Martell, 2013; Mayer, 2006; VanHover & Yeager, 2004; Wilson, Konopak, & Readance, 1994).

Our findings reveal that all respondents refer to the critical/explanatory objective. This finding corresponds with the research of Donnelly (1999), who found that history teachers saw the commitment to developing children’s intellectual judgements as their main goal. On the other hand this result is incongruent with the findings of Van Sledright (2008) who points out that for most history teachers in the US the goal of teaching history is teaching ‘common historical knowledge’ or for the purpose of cultural transmission. The first explanation for this dissimilarity can be that all history teachers in the Netherlands have, before entering teacher education, studied history at the university level, where it is likely that a critical approach towards the past was taught as part of historiography courses. A second explanation might be that prospective teachers still have idealistic ideas about history education at the start of their career.

It is noteworthy that, in relation to the epistemological discussions and developmental models proposed, 37 respondents adhere to the constructivist objective, which is often conceived as a sophisticated belief. We consider this an important finding because teaching about the interpretive nature of historical knowledge has become an important part of the new Dutch curriculum. Although having understanding of history’s structure does not automatically translate into instruction for pupils (Bain & Mirel, 2006; Lampert & Ball, 1999).

With regard to the second part of the research question, we have described how the collective identity objective and the moral objective represent historical knowledge as rather factual, and how the critical/explanatory objective, the perspective-taking objective and the constructivist objective represent historical knowledge as rather interpretive. The memorising objective can relate to both representations depending on the purpose of knowing historical content. Considering this categorisation, we can see that 18 respondents only relate to objectives of history education that represent historical knowledge as open and *interpretive*, whereas none of the respondents represent history solely as *factual*.

We have found that 30 of the prospective history teachers mention objectives of history education that represent history as factual and mention objectives of history education that represent history as interpretive. In doing so, prospective teachers have to harmonise different epistemological representations of historical knowledge. 13 respondents solely combine the memorising objective with objectives that represent historical knowledge as open and *interpretive*. An explanation for combining these objectives is that memorising historical content is inseparably integrated in the other objectives as pupils need to have at least some substantive knowledge to construct a historical context to reason about the past (Havekes, Coppens, Luttenberg, & Van Boxtel, 2012; Lee, 2005; Van Sledright, 2010).

17 respondents combine the collective identity objective or the moral objective with objectives that represent historical knowledge more as interpretive. This finding seems to be similar to the study by Zanazanian and Moisan (2012) who point out that history teachers seek to balance the two different social objectives of history education, namely transmitting a framework for creating a national identity and developing autonomous critical thinking skills. Our findings can also be related to the empirical study by Gottlieb and Wineburg (2012), who found that individuals cannot be positioned in a singular stance, but rather engage in what they referred to as “epistemic switching” when confronted with history that is strongly connected with identity or religion. We conceive “epistemic switching” as a useful term for acknowledging that a person does not necessarily hold epistemological beliefs isolated from context, but may also be evoked by interactions in the situation, thus likely to show a certain level of adaptivity. This idea also corresponds with the research of Van Sledright and Reddy (2014), pointing out that history teachers can “wobble” between epistemic stances.

A first explanation for the finding that prospective history teachers engage in “epistemic switching” between objectives that represent history as factual and as interpretive may be that they are unconscious of how historical knowledge is represented in the different objectives of history education, perhaps instantiated by not being acquainted with different underlying epistemologies of history education in the first place. However, this explanation might underestimate the intellectual capabilities of the academically trained historians.

A second possible explanation is the developmental position that prospective history teachers are in: they studied at a university, where the past is commonly studied in scholarly isolation using scientific standards; as such, historical knowledge is represented as interpretive. As prospective history teachers, however, they are about to work beyond academic isolation, facing pupils in an educational context. This entails including a multitude of additional concerns, such as: concerns about pupils’ intellectual abilities and ways of learning history; beliefs about “manageable” education; concerns about their moral responsibilities. Such concerns align more with *factual* representations of historical knowledge. The transition process of prospective history teachers thus likely triggers a new epistemological perspective. Support for this proposition can be seen in the statements of several respondents who distinguish their perspective as a schoolteacher from that of being a historian. The quote we included from Peter in the prior section can be seen as an example, pointing out how he seems to find balance between a historian and a history teacher. Maggioni and Parkinson (2008), referring to the study by Hartzler-Miller (2001) conceptualised this phenomenon as teachers showing a “double epistemic standard;” that is, teachers can be aware of the interpretive component of historical knowledge, but still present history in school as a coherent historical narrative. This also corresponds with the idea of McDiarmid (1994) that history teacher beliefs about history as a discipline and history as an teaching subject can be incongruent. The result that prospective teachers harbour objectives of history education that represent historical knowledge in opposite ways also provides evidence that epistemological developmental models can be questioned.

Our findings show that the objectives of history education that represent historical knowledge in opposite manners are not only combined within history curricula, but also within the beliefs of prospective history teachers. In teacher education, it might be profitable to explicate and structure the on-going debates about the objective of history education. Van Hover and Yeager (2007) propose that teacher educators have to gain a better understanding of the prospective teachers’ epistemologies of history, as only then they can effectively challenge teachers to broaden their notions of what it means to teach and learn history. Discussing historical knowledge representation in the different objectives of history education might be helpful for this challenge. In several Western countries, history teachers have to teach the constructive nature of historical knowledge. However, previous research has reported that pupils tend to see history as a factual representation of the past, rather than as interpretation (Van Sledright, 2002; Wineburg, 2001). If teachers are to teach this latter aspect of the curriculum, they have to realise that particular objectives of history education pertain to a “realist” approach of the past (Den Heyer & Abbott, 2011), and that these objectives are intended to provide guidance and instruction, and therefore will most likely not challenge pupils’ intuitive conceptions of history.

Furthermore, we suggest that history teacher educators can create the opportunity for prospective teachers to reflect upon the different roles they combine, including the academic historian, the history teacher, the person with certain moral and possibly religious beliefs, and the citizen of a specific country. In doing so, teacher educators can discuss how personal bias, ingrained within our very identity, will appear when we encounter or teach about the past (Hunt, 2002). This implies that every representation of the past includes an intimate interconnection and a degree of tension between interpretation

and identification. From an epistemological perspective, history education inevitably refers to the present, which creates an unavoidable subjectivity, but which is something about which one can be reflexive (Jonker, 2012; Stearns, Seixas, & Wineburg, 2000).

A challenging task for further research would be to describe and explain the prevalence and interaction of *factual* and *interpretive representations* of historical knowledge in actual teaching practice and over time, in doing so we can gain more insight into how “epistemic switching” can come to the forefront of history teaching.

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## Appendix A

### Research instrument

- 1) Why do you think it is important that pupils attain a history education?
- 2) What are the similarities between history as an academic discipline and history as a secondary school subject?
- 3) What are the differences between history as an academic discipline and history as a secondary school subject?
- 4) Do you think that it is desirable that there is a Dutch canon? Explain your answer.
- 5) Do you think the “canon of the Netherlands” (created by the committee van Oostrom, [www.entoennu.nl](http://www.entoennu.nl)) must be the guideline for Dutch history teaching? Explain your answer.
- 6) What characterises good history education?
- 7) What characterises bad history education?
- 8) What characterises a pupil who is good at history?

Source 1: The following text was published on the website of the NOS (July 5, 2011).

### *Hoorn wants a more critical text on the J.P. Coen statue plaque*

The city council of Hoorn wants to adjust the plaque on the statue of Jan Pieterszoon Coen in the centre of the city; the present text on the plaque is not critical enough. The plaque currently reads: “Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587–1629) Born in Hoorn. Governor-General of the VOC and founder of Batavia, currently Jakarta. Statue founded in 1893”. Followed by general tourist information regarding the square where the statue was placed. Commanded by Coen, the Netherlands strengthened its position in the East through expelling the Portuguese and enslaving the local tribes. A trading post was founded on Formosa, currently named Taiwan.

*Bloody.* The expansion did cost thousands of lives. Coen commanded the troops to burn the rebellious city of Jakarta, later he founded the city Batavia on the same ground. Until the Japanese occupation, Jakarta remained the capital of the Dutch East Indies. Coen also led an expedition to the Banda Islands that was so bloody that his commanders in the Netherlands reprimanded him. To establish a monopoly on the nutmeg trade, almost the entire indigenous population was murdered.

*Citizens' initiative.* The new text should clarify, in the opinion of the city council, how J.P. Coen currently is perceived. “The text also should do justice to the dark side of Jan Pieterszoon Coen.” Part of the new text reads: “Both contemporaries as historians have criticised Coen's extraordinary hard commercial policy. In 1621, Coen captured the Banda Islands with violence, because the local tribes refused to sell their nutmeg exclusively to the VOC. These raids had cost numerous of casualties.” On the website of the municipality of Hoorn, J.P. Coen is characterised as a ruthless administrator. “He did not shy away from preaching the superiority of the white race and acted murderous against innocent islanders.” The citizens' initiative would prefer to replace the statue or move it to another place, but revising the old plaque is also an option. Next week the city council will vote on the plan.

- 9) What is your first reaction concerning this discussion about this place of remembrance (lieu de mémoire)?
- 10) What should be done with the statue? Explain your answer.
- 11) Is this case useable for your lessons? If you have chosen yes, how would you design your lesson about this case?

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