



# Measuring epistemological beliefs in history education: An exploration of naïve and nuanced beliefs



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## ABSTRACT

This study investigates a questionnaire that measures epistemological beliefs in history. Participants were 922 exam students. A basic division between naïve and nuanced ideas underpins the questionnaire. However, results show this division oversimplifies the underlying structure. Exploratory factor analysis extracted 5 factors, separating items connected to nature of knowledge from nature of knowing. Furthermore, EFA problematized the distinction between naïve and nuanced ideas on subjectivity. Experts also reported large variance on subjectivity; therefore, these items were excluded from the questionnaire. The final questionnaire contained 3 factors focusing on the objective nature of (1) historical knowledge and (2) historical knowing, and on (3) methodological criteria. Finally, differences between school tracks and relationships between epistemological beliefs, interest and history grade were explored.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, the importance of developing students' epistemological understanding of history as a disciplinary form of knowledge, with specific procedures for ascertaining the validity of historical claims, has gained more attention in Western history education (Bertram, 2012; Clark, 2009; Davies, 2011; van Drie and van Boxtel, 2008; VanSledright, 2011; Wineburg, 2001). An emphasis on what we call "interpretational history" is now visible in the educational curricula of many countries including Australia, Canada, Germany, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US (Erdmann & Hassberg, 2011). In the discourse on epistemological beliefs, more naïve beliefs often correspond with a knower assuming a passive role and perceiving the past as fixed, or a knower assuming an active (yet uncritical) role and regarding historical interpretations as mere opinions. More sophisticated epistemological beliefs correspond with a knower acknowledging multiple interpretations of the past but simultaneous appreciating the disciplinary criteria needed to evaluate historical accounts (Davies, 2011; Seixas, 2004). Students who hold these sophisticated beliefs are, in the words of Kuhn, Cheney, and Weinstock (2000, p. 310), able to "coordinate the objective and subjective dimensions of knowing and knowledge".

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Several studies have focused on epistemological beliefs in history (e.g., Buehl & Alexander, 2001; Lee & Shemilt, 2003; Maggioni, 2010; O'Neill, Guloy, & Sensoy, 2014). These studies built on general models for conceptualizing (progression of) epistemological beliefs and developed domain-specific frameworks and instruments for history education. To date, however, studies that developed paper-and-pencil tests to measure students' epistemological beliefs in history are scarce, limited to small sample sizes, and have only been conducted within a North American context (VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016). The most well-known study that developed a quantitative instrument to assess epistemological beliefs in history primarily focused on history teachers (Maggioni, VanSledright, & Alexander, 2009). Operationalizing and measuring students' and teachers' epistemological beliefs in history has proven to be difficult, leaving issues such as the validity of the instruments open to debate. One core problem has been whether ideas about the (un)certainly of historical knowledge and ideas about the sources and criteria of historical knowing should be operationalized as coherent "stances" or whether they should be regarded as separate, independent dimensions. Another problem concerns interpreting the value students attribute to subjective ideas—do these ideas always represent naïve epistemological beliefs or can they also be reflective of more nuanced epistemological beliefs?

We sought to develop and test a questionnaire that measures the epistemological beliefs of history students enrolled in one of the two highest educational tracks in the Dutch secondary school system. Students from both tracks were in their final year of secondary education (10th and 11th grade) and were preparing for their central exams. The developed instrument is underpinned by a division of beliefs between naïve and nuanced ideas. Ideas about the subjective nature of history are divided between both naïve and nuanced levels. To test the validity of the questionnaire, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis (EFA), looked at the consistency of expert scores, analyzed the differences between school tracks (and between students and experts), and explored the relationships between students' epistemological beliefs, their interest and their history grade. Apart from the scientific relevance, we also aimed to develop an instrument that can practically assist teachers in assessing and supporting the development of their students' epistemological beliefs about history.

## 1.1. Theoretical framework

### 1.1.1. History and epistemology

Imagine a history teacher who tries to explain the causes of World War I. After giving students the opportunity to discuss different causes with each other, the teacher models the idea that there can be multiple causes and many "right answers" and that this is dependent on the chosen perspective of the researcher. After the lesson, however, several students still express the need to know the right answer about the exact causes of World War I. This example highlights the challenge of teaching interpretational history in the classroom. When teachers design lessons to emphasize the fact that historical knowledge is interpretative and dependent on a chosen perspective, they often experience that students' beliefs are quite resistant to change and that they demonstrate a strong desire for fixed, factual knowledge about the past (Wansink, Akkerman, & Wubbels, 2016).

In line with our example, researchers in history education assume that naïve epistemological beliefs influence or even hinder a students' ability in or disposition towards historical thinking (e.g., Lee & Shemilt, 2003). Moreover, research across different subjects has shown that epistemological beliefs influence students' task motivation and academic performance (e.g., Alexander, 2005; Buehl & Alexander, 2001). Students should come to realize that historical knowledge changes—not necessarily because prior understandings were wrong (although this too could be the case) but because of the different perspectives people hold and the different questions people and societies ask at different points in time (Seixas, 2004). Furthermore, students should grasp the notion that historical claims cannot be "proved" by conducting an experiment. This notion makes the domain fundamentally interpretative and ill-structured (cf. Goldman et al., 2016). At the same time, however, the construction of historical accounts is confined by specific heuristics and a focus on evidence-based argumentation in the construction of historical accounts (Wineburg, 2001), or stated more simply—by a domain-specific method.

Epistemological beliefs are not only regarded as an important prerequisite of sophisticated historical thinking. Students with more sophisticated epistemological beliefs are also assumed to be better equipped to participate in a pluralistic, democratic society because those beliefs can help them to develop mature ideas about why multiple accounts or perspectives about the same event can coexist (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Straaten, Wilschut, & Oostdam, 2015; Stradling, 2003). Research has shown that representations of the past can influence how people live their present lives and interpret conflicts (Kolikant & Pollack, 2009). Therefore, developing nuanced epistemological beliefs seems important not only for learning history but also for becoming a critical democratic citizen.

### 1.1.2. Conceptualizing epistemological beliefs in history

Educational researchers have been interested in epistemological beliefs since the 1970s, if not earlier (e.g., Perry, 1970). Focal points of this research have been questions pertaining to how to model these beliefs, how epistemological beliefs develop with age, and how these ideas influence learning, thinking, and performance on academic tasks (Buehl & Alexander, 2001; Hofer & Pintrich, 1997). Two generic models in particular have strongly influenced the conceptualization of epistemological beliefs in history—the three-stage reflective judgment model (King & Kitchener, 1994, 2002) and the four-stage model of epistemological understanding (Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002; Kuhn, 1991). These models were both based on interviews with people from multiple age groups, focusing on tasks that elicit problem solving and critical reasoning.

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