



## **Aims in the practice of historiography: An interview study with Finnish historians**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many recent approaches to history education—such as those related to historical thinking, historical reasoning, or inquiry-based learning—have brought the practice of historiography (i.e. historical research and writing) to the center of learning about history. Students are to learn about how historical knowledge is constructed, and this is often pursued by instructional methods such as modeling or simulating expert historians' practices in classrooms. In this paper, we approach historiography primarily as an epistemic practice that is shaped in part by (historians') aims or goals. Understanding those aims can contribute significantly to our understanding of the historical inquiries that ensue. Yet education has not made these aims a central focus of research or instruction. Therefore, we explored academic historians' aims in their practices of historiography. We interviewed 26 Finnish historians about their ongoing research endeavors. Our results display a range of aims in academic historiography, including general epistemological concepts (e.g. knowledge), dialogical aims (e.g., questioning existing ideas), textual products, dissemination (e.g., popularizing), bringing about societal change (e.g., influencing a sense of possibilities), connection to present, and emotions. These findings improve our understanding of the diversity of historiography as an intentional practice, and thus provide a better ground for developing the kind of history education that builds on historians' practices.

### **KEYWORDS**

Epistemic practices, epistemic aims, expertise in history, historiography, history education

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## Introduction

It is not so much the study of the past itself that assures against its repetition but how you study it, to what aim, interest, or purpose. (White, 1982, p. 137)

Like other fields of education, history education has focused increasingly on engaging students in disciplinary (i.e., historians') epistemic practices. During recent decades, this focus has become popular under rubrics such as historical thinking, historical reasoning, reading and thinking like historians, and inquiry-based learning (Boadu, 2020; Fitzgerald, 1983; Leinhardt et al., 1994; Levstik & Barton, 2015; Luís & Rapanta, 2020; Reisman, 2012; Retz, 2016; Seixas, 2000, 2017; van Boxtel & van Drie, 2018; Thorp & Persson, 2020; VanSledright, 2011; Voet & De Wever, 2017; Wineburg, 2001).<sup>1</sup> Epistemic practices (including those of historians) are shaped in part by (historians') aims or goals (Chinn et al., 2011; Chinn & Sandoval, 2018; Kainulainen et al., 2019; Peels, 2018; Sandoval, 2018). Understanding these goals can contribute significantly to our understanding of the practices that ensue. Yet education has not made these aims a central focus of research or instruction (Barzilai & Chinn, 2018; Chinn et al., 2011).

To be sure, both educational scholars and historians have written much about the aims of history education (Berg, 2019; Carretero & Bermudez, 2012; Donnelly, 1999; Fitzgerald, 1983; Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019; Stearns, 1998; von Borries, 2000). Still, there remains another set of aims that have received less attention—the aims of historians themselves. History education now includes a focus on the practice of historiography (i.e., historical research and writing)<sup>2</sup>, and students learn about this practice through instructional methods such as modeling, simulating, or even just scrutinizing historical writings. Because a significant part of history education targets students' understanding of how historians go about their work, researchers and educators need to comprehend what historians aim to achieve through their work. Recently, Mathis and Parkes (2020) argued that history teachers and educational researchers should reflect upon and investigate “the perceived purpose of history” (p. 205). One might ask, however: exactly *whose* (e.g., citizens', experts', educators', students', producers', or consumers') perceived purpose of *which history* (e.g., the school subject, the movement in time, the discipline, the research practice, the past itself, a single study, or the whole of the produced literary output) ought to be considered? While their proposal leaves room for multiple interpretations, we find that empirical knowledge about the aims of historiography is one important way to answer this call. In short, we seek to address the relative lack of attention to historians' aims.

Barzilai and Chinn (2018) proposed three lines of scholarship as especially relevant for informing epistemic education (i.e., education directed at enhancing epistemic cognition, or ways of knowing): philosophical analyses, studies of lay practices, and studies of expert practices. In the current study, we seek to contribute to an understanding of the aims of historical practice through a study of expert thinking. More specifically, we present an interview study with academic historians about their aims for their current historical investigations. Through exploring historians' aims as part of their situated epistemic practice, we hope to contribute towards an empirical basis of knowledge regarding the practice of historiography for educational and other uses. In the following, we elaborate on the key theoretical ideas and previous scholarship we build upon. Then we present an empirical study of the aims of academic historians in their research projects and beyond. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings for future research on historians and for history education in both K-12 and higher education settings.

We build especially on research on epistemic cognition. *Epistemic cognition* broadly refers to “how people acquire, understand, justify, change, and use knowledge in formal and informal contexts” (Greene et al., 2016, p. 1). Much of the work analyzing epistemic cognition—especially the early and the psychologically oriented studies—have studied mainly individuals' beliefs regarding the nature and justification of knowledge. More recent lines of research building on an interdisciplinary scholarship (including philosophy and sociology as well as psychology and education) have promulgated new approaches to epistemic cognition (Chinn et al. 2011; Elby & Hammer, 2000; Sandoval, 2005). Regarding the current study, a key extension is to focus on the

actual practices of developing and justifying knowledge, while attending carefully to the situations or contexts in which those practices take place (e.g., Alexander, 2016; Chinn & Sandoval, 2018; Sandoval, 2018).

Chinn and colleagues (Chinn et al., 2014; Chinn & Rinehart 2016) developed the AIR model, which is a heuristic framework for analyzing situated epistemic practices. The acronym refers to three components: epistemic **A**ims and value (i.e., the epistemic goals set by actors and the perceived importance of those goals); epistemic **I**deals (i.e., the criteria or standards used to evaluate whether aims have been achieved); and **R**eliable processes for producing epistemic products (i.e., those strategies and methods that have a good likelihood of success). All components are seen as tightly connected parts of epistemic practice. Our overall project investigates them both individually and together. However, for the purposes of this study, we limit our attention only to the first component, epistemic aims and their value.

Dewey (1930) raised two important points regarding aims. First, Dewey defined aims (or ends, ends-in-view, objectives) as “those foreseen consequences which influence present deliberation and which finally bring it to rest by furnishing an adequate stimulus to overt action. Consequently, ends arise and function within action” (p. 223). Thus, an aim is not merely a final signpost “lying beyond activity” but instead, “a *means* in present action” (p. 226, italics in original). Dewey’s second point is a moral one: because aims do not necessarily represent all important—or even the most important—consequences of an act, it is necessary to hold oneself and others accountable across all kinds of consequences of acts. In literary theory and philosophy of language, parallel points have been argued in critiques of logocentrism and of the semantic autonomy of texts, i.e., the “fixedness” of meaning in texts (e.g., Jackson, 1989; Lüdemann, 2014). Therefore, while in this paper we address aims specifically, it is crucial to keep in mind that aims are not entirely separate from actions (or processes, in terms of the AIR model), and that they do not constitute the full accountable consequences of a practice (such as historiography).

Among aims, we focus our current investigation primarily but not exclusively on epistemic aims. One debate among epistemologists and philosophers of science revolves around questions related to epistemic goals: What exactly counts as epistemic? Is there one or several primary epistemic goal(s), and if so, which might it/they be? Truth? Knowledge? Understanding? (e.g., Potochnik, 2015; Steup et al., 2014). Likewise, similar questions have been discussed regarding the purpose of historiography and history more generally. What does historians’ intellectual output consist of? White (1973) characterized historiography as an attempt to mediate between the past, the historical record, other historical accounts, and an audience through works that combine chronicle, story, emplotment, argument, and ideological implication. However, it is uncertain to what extent White considered these as conscious and intentional parts of historians’ output (Gunn, 2006, p. 34). Following Dewey, Kuukkanen (2015) defined historiography as a practice aiming to construct rationally warranted conclusions. For Maza (2017) the historian’s task is twofold: “to explain the unfolding of change in the past, and to make the people and places of the time come alive for their readers” (p. 4). There are many proposals for historians’ aims, and the epistemic demarcation of these is often not a clear one. We approach historiography as an essentially epistemic pursuit that involves other dimensions—for example, emotional, aesthetic, or political (e.g. Pihlainen, 2017) —that are embedded in its practice. Further, we do not aim to settle the questions about the best characterization of the epistemic aims of history, but opt for a pluralistic stance (see Coliva & Pedersen, 2017; Grajner & Schmechtig, 2016) that is open to many kinds of aims (Chinn & Rinehart, 2016). Ultimately, we wanted to understand how historians view their own aims, however they might be characterized.

Within philosophy of historiography, the pioneering work of Martin (1989) emphasized the need for empirical research on the objectives historians pursue and the ways historians try to achieve them. For Martin this involved examining historians’ products to reveal their objectives. But there are limitations to this approach. First, Paul (2011) argued that philosophy of history has studied almost exclusively the published output of historians, thereby ignoring the broader practice of historical scholarship. Second, a focus on a selected few “best” works may not provide a good representation of the field at large. Third, historians’ aims may change during the course

of a study, and thus may not be so easily grasped from research publications. Therefore, we contend that empirical investigations of historians' aims should also use diverse research methods to investigate a range of historians' work-in-progress.

In this paper, we explore academic historians' perceived aims in their practices of historiography, and ask: what kind of aims do academic historians have in historiography and why do they consider these aims valuable? Finally, we discuss how this empirical knowledge could help us think about the practices of history education.

## **Methodology**

### ***Participants and Data collection***

The first author conducted interviews with 26 Finnish historians. All participants held doctorate degrees and had at least authored several publications. Sixteen participants had the title of docent (adjunct professor). All were affiliated (through adjunct professorship, grant, employment, or status of emeritus/emerita) to a Finnish university. Overall, most participants were affiliated with one of three universities in Finland. Participating historians represented many different departments and sub-disciplines of history. Often individual historians also identified with several different sub-disciplines, such as cultural history, social history, political history, European and World history, global history, Finnish history, Nordic history, business history, and the history of ideas. As it comes to the institutionalized sub-disciplines in the Finnish academic context, some notable fields of historical study missing from our sample include art history, legal history, and religious history (e.g., church history).

According to latest figures by Karonen (2019), there were 56 history professors and 56 history lecturers working in Finnish universities in 2015. Our interviews were conducted a year later. Thus, our sample includes about 11% of both history professors (six professors) and lecturers (six lecturers) in Finland. In addition to these, there were also one professor who worked abroad, two professors emeriti, as well as several post-doc and senior researchers.

All interviews were conducted by the first author in Finnish. The lengths of the semi-structured interviews ranged from 45 minutes to nearly 3 hours, averaging about 1.5 hours. Individual interviews did not always follow the planned protocol word-for-word. Instead, they proceeded on the basis of content and meaning. This allowed for a more relaxed and personal atmosphere and made it easier to temporarily veer deeper into emerging topics of interest. Conducted in such manner, the interviews are understood as active meaning-making and construction of knowledge in collaboration (Holstein & Gubrium, 2003). Overall, the format of the questions can be placed at the intersection of an expert interview and a professional biographical interview (see Meuser & Nagel, 2009); the questions targeted many aspects of being and becoming a historian, including the aims of their research projects as well as historical research and history writing in general.

To situate the interview in actual work, historians were first asked to describe an ongoing or recently finished study. Later, many questions specifically connected to the described project. Regarding the focus of this paper, some questions prompted historians' aims generally, specifically epistemic aims, the value of these aims, and the aims of historical research and writing in general. The questions included "What goals do you have in the mentioned project, and how did you decide on them?", "What are the most important goals of historical research and historical writing in general?", "From an epistemic standpoint, various ideas about the goals of history include knowledge, narrative, understanding, truth, explanation etc. What do you think about the goals of your project from this perspective?"

All interviewees participated voluntarily and signed an informed consent form. To protect the confidentiality of our participants, we have omitted the following details from our data extracts: participants and their close colleagues' names, department and university names, as well as any revealing details of their research topics. We proposed that the interviews remained confidential so that our participants would have less pressure to protect their professional identity and feel

more comfortable in discussing also issues that are uncertain or relate to emotions such as anxiety or sadness. Even though this meant that we had to withhold the deserved public credit of our participants from the products of their reflection, we feel that this was to some extent a successful decision: many historians ended up discussing sensitive issues that may not have been raised without the protection of anonymity.

## Analysis

All interviews were transcribed, anonymized as needed, and then analyzed through qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012). Our analysis involved data-driven development of codes and clusters through a collaborative and iterative process. To avoid inferences that were not clearly warranted, we endeavored to keep our interpretation close to the manifest expressed level of the responses. Thus, our coding procedure relied mainly on initial, descriptive, and in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2016). Our unit of analysis was at the level of (complete) ideas or thoughts. In the coding software used (NVivo), codes were assigned to either full responses or parts of them, depending on the length of the response. Some of the responses included many aims, and thus some sections were coded multiple times.

Our authorial team consists of two researchers who are native Finnish speakers and one researcher who does not speak Finnish and whose native language is English. Thus, in order to work with a shared language during the analysis, a number of short and some longer interview extracts were translated from Finnish to English. Likewise, the codes and clusters were also developed in English, while the majority of the data remained in Finnish.

We started coding a sub-sample of extracts selected to represent different historians and different parts of the interview protocol. All three authors processed the set of extracts individually through open coding, after which all the coding and reasoning was shared and negotiated. We repeated this process with a new, different subset of data. The codes were then collected together, and the first author categorized them into clusters. These clusters were then discussed collaboratively, revised, and an early draft of a codebook was developed. This codebook included general coding rules as well as examples, descriptions, clusters, and boundary cases for codes. This codebook guided the further analysis, conducted by the first author, but also continued to be refined throughout the analysis (e.g., by adding, removing, or merging codes). The full authorial team continued to hold collaborative review meetings that sometimes also included colleagues external to this study. Thus, the coding scheme was a team-developed analytic tool, which we then used, tested, and further developed during the analysis.

Rather than narrowing the coding down to a small number of broad codes, we wanted to remain sensitive to a possibly broad variety of aims. We sought to capture a full range of aims expressed by the historians, while also targeting a consistent, dependable, and confirmable analysis (see Cho & Trent, 2014; Schreier, 2012). In addition to the above-mentioned procedures, these criteria were considered in a research phase where the second author reviewed all of the coding and proposed some changes and clarifications.

## Results

In this section, we present the main findings. Table 1 summarizes the final coding scheme of our analyses, including the frequencies for each code. At the very end of the analysis, we eliminated several codes that were used for only a single interviewee.<sup>3</sup> We classified the various specific aims into categories. Below, we discuss seven principal categories using quotations from our data.<sup>4</sup> Quotations are marked with numeric codes referring to different historians and parts in their interviews (e.g. H1.1).

TABLE 1. Categories of codes, their descriptions, and example quotes from the interview data for codes used for at least two historians.

Cat.	Code	Description and example quote	f(H) <sup>a</sup>	f(U) <sup>b</sup>
General (more or less) epistemological concepts	Understanding	Gaining and/or providing understanding. <i>H18.98: "Making the world understandable, making being a human understandable."</i>	18	37
	Knowledge	Gaining and/or providing knowledge. <i>H1.96: "... producing knowledge of this phenomenon...."</i>	10	19
	Narrative	Forming and/or presenting a narrative. <i>H9.77: "... narrative is probably also important because people need a kind of more comprehensive narrative in order to understand the functionality of world and their own existence in relation to others."</i>	9	10
	Explanation	Providing explanations for things, processes, phenomena etc. <i>H4.10: "And then history, for me, turned into this knowledge with which one can explain society and politics..."</i>	9	10
	Description	Gaining and/or providing a description, depiction, or an "image". <i>H7.76: "I try to describe something that has existed, some development that has occurred."</i>	5	6
	Interpretation	Forming and/or presenting an interpretation <i>H15.85: "I think that the among the most important tasks of historical research are precisely this kind of understanding of the past, knowledge, new knowledge, also making new interpretations, and also challenging old interpretations."</i>	3	3
	Truth	Getting at a truth or something truthful. (Note: this can also be an unachievable aim) <i>H13.81: "And here we return to the concept of truth. [...] it is not truth, but aims at being truthful."</i>	2	2
Dialogical aims	Question or critique existing ideas	Challenging previous beliefs and knowledge, deconstructing, dispelling prejudices, debunking. <i>H6.52: "... the question is of course about putting existing conceptions of history under question..."</i>	13	25
	Widen interpretations	Broadening interpretations or thinking regarding some topics, and/or contributing to a "multiplicity of interpretations" <i>H18.96: "... diversifying that contemporary image. [...] it is somehow a value in itself that we diversify views of something. ... Emphasizing many-voicedness is somehow deeper, if we think about a kind of deeper goal of my project."</i>	11	20
	New ideas	A general code for newness, i.e., for offering new ideas, interpretations, perspectives, knowledge etc. <i>H16.83: "... To give others some possibly new knowledge of it"</i>	10	14
	Discussion and interaction	A general code for contributing to and participating in public or collegial discussion or interaction. <i>H13.99: "...it provides many different points of view also for different public discussions."</i>	6	8
	Prompt others to discuss	Evoke, or inspire others to discuss, ask questions, and/or offer critique. <i>H24.56: "... to inspire ... that they would question, and then to get discussions, and that also means more knowledge."</i>	3	4
	Historicize new people or things	Doing historiography about topics (people[s], things, or phenomena) that are not so often considered as part of history. <i>H20.74: "So I've tried to bring history for the kind of groups of people that have not had it previously..."</i>	3	4

TABLE 1. Continued (2/3)

Cat.	Code	Description and example quote	f(H) <sup>a</sup>	f(U) <sup>b</sup>
Textual products	Publication specific	A specified type of research publication. <i>H11.43: "... we got the book done with an international publisher, where there was one chapter from me. That was our main aim..."</i>	9	10
	Publication general	An unspecified research publication. <i>H2.46: "I want now to write a book about this."</i>	8	11
	Other digital objects	Other types of digital output. <i>H13.63: "So the end result would be that those websites would be good..."</i>	3	3
Dissemination	Lectures and presentations	A general code for talks of various sorts for either expert or lay audiences, or both. <i>H10.40: "...of course also to lecture, present in conferences, and in that way to kind of verify that knowledge..."</i>	9	13
	Popularize	Transforming findings into—or communicating about them in—a more accessible format or for a wider audience. <i>H2.46: "As an extra goal, [...] not only to do scientific work, but at the same time you have to popularize"</i>	9	9
	Interaction with society	A general code for interacting with society. Especially relevant in reference to the so-called "third task" of universities. <i>H6.16: "Another aim is [...] to be available if and when there is need for expertise in history, Finnish language, ethnology, or art history, so to be in this so called societal interaction ..."</i>	8	9
	Spread consciousness or knowledge	Spreading knowledge, understanding, and understanding of issues. Implies one-directional communication, and can also relate to history itself. <i>H19.75: "I guess spreading correct [or right] knowledge is one of the most important tasks."</i>	4	6
Societal change	Societal change (general)	A general code for promoting change in society. <i>H10.46: "... potentially what I do can change the world. It is at the same time political, the choice of research topics, and especially this kind of research topics."</i>	4	8
	Influence identities	Influencing identities and conceptions of them. <i>H4.62: "...this concept of what it is to be Finnish [...] in my research I would like to open up this concept."</i>	2	2
	Empathy, tolerance, and belonging	Bringing about tolerance or a sense of belonging. <i>H18.98: "... the task [...] is to increase understanding, and through that, tolerance and a sense of togetherness."</i>	2	2
	Influence sense of possibilities	Influencing the appearance of the possibility of things, either making things appear less or more possible. <i>H10.90: "I see that an image of the past must increase our understanding of what is possible for humans and increase our understanding of what should not be done again."</i>	2	3

TABLE 1. Continued (3/3)

Cat.	Code	Description and example quote	f(H) <sup>a</sup>	f(U) <sup>b</sup>
Connection to present	Value for present interests	The value of historical knowledge is for understanding some present phenomena or for other present interests. <i>H1.98: "... producing knowledge about the action of past humans might in the best case increase our understanding of our own action. So in a way history is not something that is gone, but history is kind of a dimension of the present."</i>	24	50
	Irrelevance for present interests	Pursuing aims that appear irrelevant to present interests. <i>H13.99: "... I think is great if someone studies something that has nothing to do with this day."</i>	2	2
Emotions	Having fun	Having fun and/or enjoying the work. <i>H8.47: "Well the aim was just that I and COLLEAQUE have some fun (laughing)"</i>	4	4
	Insight and surprise	Bringing about surprises or insight for oneself or others. <i>H24.56: "... publish something that someone wants to read, that would give them an aha-experience or an insight..."</i>	3	3
	Interesting	Being interested or getting excited. <i>H4.56: "It is a kind of dimension, 'time', forwards and backwards. And taking it seriously makes one's life less banal. It is more exciting."</i>	2	2
Other aims	NOT truth	Disavowing the aim of truth in full or in part. <i>H8.94: "Everything else but not truth because truth does not exist. It is interpretation."</i>	11	13
	Epistemic competences	Personal development of epistemic competence or a reflection on such competence. <i>H10.40: "...to gain myself a new kind of expertise again, to get to see new groups of sources."</i>	8	11
	Aim & value combination	An aim is valuable in itself or is otherwise inseparable from value. <i>H1.98: "... an equally good aim is to produce good depictions of the past society. And it is a value in itself."</i>	3	3
	Gather together people or form a network	Gathering together people with similar interests, or with interests that contribute to shared aims. <i>H7.32: "I had as an aim there to bring about a broader network..."</i>	3	3

<sup>a</sup> Freq. of historians mentioning the aim; max = 26

<sup>b</sup> Freq. of utterances the code was used for

Although we list the frequencies of all codes in Table 1, we wish to highlight that the differences in the frequencies were in part a consequence of the interview scheme. For example, in the case of general epistemological concepts (see Table 1), some of the high frequencies of codes in this category are explained by the fact that some of the concepts (such as the concepts of knowledge, understanding, and explanation) were specifically queried in the interview scheme; when the interviewees then discussed these concepts specifically, this resulted in high frequencies for these codes. In some other cases, frequencies varied due to the specificity or generality of the code; codes with more specific characteristics tended to be used less than ones that were defined in a more general way. However, even with these limitations, it is probable that some of the frequencies also represent the prevalence of certain points or statements in (Finnish academic) historians' discourse.

### ***General (more or less) epistemological concepts***

Philosophers of science and humanities have entertained several general concepts as aims of inquiry, such as knowledge, understanding, and explanation (e.g., Potochnik, 2015; Peels, 2018). The historians we interviewed also articulated these and similar general aims. Our questions targeted aims broadly, and in cases where historians did not spontaneously consider (explicitly) epistemological aims, we also inquired about these aims specifically by referring to the concepts of knowledge, narrative, information, understanding, truth, and explanation. While our intention was only to use these as an example of possibilities, most historians responded to the follow-up question by treating it as a checklist. Commonly, truth was rejected while one or several of the others were preferred:

I would immediately cross out truth. [...] Truth no, but realities yes. Because I do not believe in truth. Not in the way it is presented here. (H26.83–84)

It is a kind of depiction and explanation. And it is also a narrative. But I do not myself think it is any truth, but instead, a single well organized thought construction that has strong enough empirical justification. (H23.92)

Some did not reject truth outright but considered it an unachievable aim, alongside other achievable ones:

Among all, I think the concept of understanding is for me the central one. And the increasing of understanding about those cultural processes that make this world turn. It is the central aim. I do not think we get to truth, because I think truth is a very tricky concept from the perspective of philosophy of history. Still, I do not believe in pure relativism. I am not so dumb. I think there are better truths and worse truths. (H10.86)

Other common abstractions included descriptions, depictions, images<sup>5</sup>, and interpretations:

In a way, I think that increasing of self-understanding is probably the most important aim. Of course, one can say that an equally good aim is to produce good descriptions of the past society, and that is a value in itself. (H1.98)

Some of the common abstractions were also considered with specific characteristics, such as "intentional explanation" or the kind of knowledge "that is hard to abuse" (see excerpts below). The latter indicates a concern with how epistemic products might be used by others.

Well, earlier I was even fanatically of the opinion that we should prefer this human-centered explanation, explanation of events and phenomena. This Aristotelian [...] intentional explanation. So to go into that level of the historical agent and concentrate on what they were after and what they considered necessary to achieve that goal, what needs to be done. (H4.32)

So there the responsibility is just that I do not create any new knowledge that can be abused. So that I at least don't aim for something like that, that I try to avoid that kind of material, or that kind of writing. (H3.86)

The different kinds of abstractions varied, both between historians and within individual historians' projects. For example, in some work, narrative can be considered a more or less important goal than in other work.

Narrative, yes, at times I also want to narrate. But in this research project it does not come off so strong. Perhaps in other types [of projects] [...] it has been more the case that I want to write a story that is, not that it would be entertaining or widely readable, but maybe an exciting narrative, and a maybe a bit courageous, even polemical, that somehow also brings a new perspective, or that somehow awakens one to look at the thing from another perspective. Then the narrative grip, and telling a good story—if this is what we here understand by the concept of narrative, then it is a way to get people thinking or reading or [doing] something that could bring about discussion. But in this project it is more [...] understanding about how history in this field should be studied, if we think about public policy, or something like that. (H24.56)

### ***Dialogical aims***

The second category draws on the notion of dialogicality, as applied to history and collective memory by Wertsch (1998, 2002). Building on ideas from literary theory and semiology, Wertsch proposed that narratives have both a referential function and a dialogic function. Regarding the latter, Wertsch (2002) proposed that “the key to understanding the meaning and form of one narrative is how it provides a dialogic response to previous narratives or anticipates subsequent ones. And the nature of the response can range from hostile retort to friendly elaboration, from a studied attempt to ignore another narrative to its celebration” (p. 60). The current category *dialogical aims* extends this idea beyond narratives. In our interviews, many of the historians' aims—narrative and other—can be considered to exist in dialogic relationships with a broad range of previous accounts and beliefs, including myths, popular beliefs, public discussion, collective memory, and previous scholarly interpretations and understanding.

I am trying to widen this [...] context related to the research object, regarding to what it tells not only about the past, but what it tells much more about today's society, and what are the perspectives to the future. So I see here a Koselleckian approach in that past, present, and future are strongly connected together. (H2.44)

The nature of the dialogical relation varied. In some statements, historians found it important to contribute to a multitude of interpretations regarding a given topic of investigations, proposing their version alongside some previous one(s). In others, historians aimed to renounce and/or replace previous versions through myth-busting, debunking ideas, dispelling prejudices, or deconstruction.

What I find interesting is not this truthfulness or objectivity, but precisely this multiplicity of interpretations [...] That we sort of let new voices have a look at existing truths and commonalities. [...] the question is, of course, about putting existing conceptions of history under question and offering something different in their place. (H6.52)

But if I think about that from the larger perspective of my work, from those research themes that I have done, they have all been of the sort that have involved very big societal oppositionalities and even political confrontations and so on. And then the task of the historian is precisely to try to bring into them a dimension that [...] inspects that intense societal discussion [...] from another perspective so that different parties get a fair treatment as part of that process. (H5.78)

Some historians distinguished between ‘basic research’ and other, more specialized or applied research.<sup>6</sup> For them, basic research contributes to forming an understanding of the context for further investigations. It locates a relatively major lack of knowledge (missing dialogical reference point in the past) and anticipates more detailed inquiry (possible dialogical point of reference in the future).

I have a kind of aim regarding a data set that is collected, and from which some basic research has already been done, but so little. So from that Finnish data set I could [...] produce some new knowledge (H17.38)

[T]his theme that we are studying is in its early stages, so there is need for basic research, this kind of mapping of the phenomenon [...] (H9.50)

Thus, one can assume the dialogical character of historians aims to differ depending on whether they are engaging in basic research or more specialized investigations. While highly appreciating basic research, one historian viewed it as nearly impossible to conduct in contemporary academia. Similar to the notion of basic research, the value of some aims arose out of some relatively major gaps in previous works of historiography. This was most apparent when historians aimed to historicize new groups of people, things or phenomena, i.e., to bring something or someone (a) new into the sphere of history and historiography.

So I’ve tried to bring history for the kind of groups of people that have not had it previously [...] Also children, and women in general, people living in the margins of society, that they are also historically significant, that they also have history, and that they also have historical value [...] (H20.74)

### ***Textual products***

The next category of aims is various textual products. When asked about the aims of their ongoing investigations, historians commonly stated publications of various kinds, most commonly monographs and journal articles in domestic and international outlets. Some targeted very specific outlets even early on:

[B]ut in these other projects the aims have been similar, that is, JUFO-3 level [the highest level in the Finnish ranking of academic journals] international publications. [...] the goal is of course [to publish in] Palgrave Macmillan and from there upwards. Others will not be discussed. (H8.47)

For others, their publication aims were more general.

And I have articles as an aim, or a book, depending on how much time I have for it amidst other work. (H23.42)

Historians occasionally specified other kinds of textual outputs such as blog posts and newspaper columns. Such texts were planned for both popularizing one’s research as well as discussing matters—such as methodological reflections—for which there was not enough space in formal publications. Some projects also aimed specifically to produce websites and databases.

[O]ur tasks are research, teaching and then this societal interaction, so [...] I have been a columnist in a paper, but am not anymore, so probably I will now blog or write something about this [...] (H12.38)

Overall, historians’ investigations were not only in search of understanding or knowledge more generally; publications—often specific ones—were also involved. While there is something obvious about this, a less obvious aspect is that choosing a specific outlet is likely to lead one’s overall research practice in a certain direction. It is well known that some publications have strict rules and formats for writing, whereas others encourage experimental forms of writing. Regarding philosophical inquiry, Lysaker (2018) has eloquently explored how literary forms

influence, enable, and constrain different kinds of thought. Likewise, historians' aims regarding publishing in specific styles or outlets might be considered an epistemically relevant part of historiography.

### ***Dissemination***

Closely related—and in many cases tightly connected—to both textual products and dialogical aims is the category of dissemination, or the various ways of communicating about one's research. Commonly, a textual product of some sort stands as a core output of historian's work, which is then further communicated to various audiences through lectures, media appearances, popularized texts, and so on.

And in a way the passing forward of that knowledge [...] participating in discussions outside the field of history in a multidisciplinary way regarding themes to which history or past cases also somehow contribute in its own way (H15.85)

As an extra goal there's always of course that, not only to do scientific work, but at the same time you have to popularize. [...] And in that context I always create each time some kind of series of lectures. So in that way I have this societal part, or the kind of third goal set by the university world, that is, research, teaching, and societal interaction. (H2.46)

A bit over a decade ago, MacMillan (2010) observed a trend in professional historians' interest in public discussion, finding it “unfortunate that just as history is becoming more important in our public discussions, professional historians have largely been abandoning the field to amateurs. The historical profession has turned inward in the last couple of decades, with the result that much historical study today is self-referential” (p. 35). In the context of our study, this trend does not appear so unidirectional, but instead both aims appeared common for these historians: contributing to public discussion and selecting dialogical aims based on it; but also speaking to the specialist community and reflecting on the methods and theories they are using.

### ***Societal change***

In addition to challenging and adding to various communities' understandings and participating in public discussions, many historians also articulated goals of somehow bringing about societal change. In their articulations, this focused on aspects such as influencing ideas about (national) identities, promoting a sense of belonging together, and influencing decision-making regarding socio-scientific issues.

[T]hrough successful historiography and research and writing, one can make historical presentations, and by introducing oneself to them, others than historians learn empathy, they understand better the history of other kinds of humans, the history of other cultures, and hopefully it changes their conception of human and their worldviews towards more tolerant. The task of historical research is to increase understanding, and through that, tolerance and a sense of togetherness. (H18.98)

Well, the aim is kind of societal. I would like that this conception about what it is to be Finnish, that it would be an open one, and well, dialogical. So that it would have room for people who are not necessary part of this hegemonic basic group that speaks in the name of Finnishness [...] in many of my studies I would like to liberate this concept. (H4.62)

There the question is more about what ways climate change influences—and comes to influence [...] living conditions, and we are part of that discussion. If we do nothing, things will definitely go awry. But if even a small change occurs, it will have huge consequences. (H8.76)

Some historians also directly highlighted the political nature of their scholarly endeavors.

Because it is an important question: Why are people poor? [...] It is a political question. (H8.69)

Potentially, what I do can change the world. It is at the same time political, the choice of research topics, and especially this kind of research topics. In the same way, if I study TOPIC, the question is of course about me wanting to make sure that certain things do not happen again. (H10.64)

In sum, these accounts speak of a historiography that is not a neutral, view-from-nowhere kind of investigation aiming at accumulating findings and steadily filling self-evident gaps in common knowledge. Instead, this category suggests that historiography as a practice is itself embedded in historical processes and discussions, and thus there exists a place for societal—even political—agency regarding the kinds of topics, perspectives and questions to consider worth taking up in studies. This, in turn, requires openness regarding one's motives and aims. To this end, many historians also spoke of being attentive towards the possible (ab)uses of history in society—a popular topic during the time of the interviews especially due to the then-recent organization *Historians Without Borders* in Finland (Blåfield, 2016; see also, MacMillan, 2010).

### **Connection to present**

A common response related to the value of the interviewees' aims—and also of historiography more broadly—was their relevance for various present concerns, such as understanding some contemporary phenomena better through its points of origin or some contingent turns of events (see e.g. Simon, 2019).

That it [a work of historiography] produces the kind of knowledge through which the present can be understood better. So many things that exist currently are based on something earlier, and that might in an amazing way enlighten that birth process of how it has been formed, and about how we should relate to it. (H16.106)

[H]istory is important so that we would see that things do not have to be the way they are now. So a kind of existentialist contingency (laughing) ... that everything kind of happens to be the way it is for certain reasons, but it could very well be in some other way, and very much depends on what people choose, what choices people make and how they behave and so forth. In that way, I think [...] that history is kind of emancipatory, that it shows us the extent of human freedom, but it also shows its limitations. (H14.81)

Yet some historians also challenged the idea of the value of historiography being necessarily determined on the basis of its relevance for known present interests.

Well, the standard answer is what I already gave, that it [a work of historiography] has some touching points to the present. [...] But I also think that—this is a kind of answer of an old generation humanist about research—it is really great that someone studies a kind of thing that has nothing (laughing) to do with today [...] that someone can commit to it, and have knowledge of it, and I think that it is kind of good that in this country also we have the kind of people who have very different points of interest and who do their things passionately. (H13.99)

### **Emotions**

Historians also referred to affect or emotions as either one of the aims of their project or reasons for regarding the work worthwhile. The mentioned emotions were either their own or others', and included enthusiasm, insight, surprise, aha-experiences, and having fun.

It is intellectually a very fascinating topic. (H14.59)

[T]o publish something that someone would like to read, and that would give them an aha-experience or an insight, and maybe inspire them. (H24.56)

Currently, emotions are an acknowledged and important part of historiography in many ways. They are both an aspect of the past that is specifically investigated (Matt & Stearns, 2014) as well as an aspect of historians' practice in many kinds of investigations (Barclay, 2018; Rossi & Aarnio, 2012; Rösen, 2008). Emotions are recognized as a relevant part of many cognitive activities, such as reasoning and problem-solving (e.g., Muis et al., 2018; Thagard, 2008). As Morton (2013) writes, "[e]motions directed at a topic will drive imagination of associated facts, possibilities, and actions." (p. 14). Our findings also support the idea of considering emotions or affect as part of historians' epistemic practice—specifically as aims. Emotions are thus not only emerging phenomena to reflect upon but also something aimed at.

## Discussion

Stearns (1998) noted that "[t]here is no reason not to prod historians to articulate what their purposes are, but the fact is that the exercise will often be somewhat unfamiliar" (p. 283). Having taken up this bid, we noticed that—at least in our semi-structured interview in a Finnish context—this exercise was not so unfamiliar to contemporary historians as one might assume from Stearns' statement more than two decades ago. We analyzed a set of interviews with historians about the (epistemic) aims of their work. Our results show that historians express a range of aims that can vary considerably depending on the different kinds of investigations the historians are involved in. These aims also extend beyond knowing and understanding phenomena to publishing and disseminating findings, as well as bringing about changes in society through their work.

From the perspective of educational researchers who wish to understand the practice of historiography, these findings about historians may be conceptualized as one part of a broad set of aims of agents, communities, and cultures of history. In addition to these expressed aims, there is likely a range of aims that remained unexpressed. We might also further differentiate the aims of history educators (Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019) and the aims of various kinds of learners, users, consumers, and critics of historiographical output (see, e.g., de Certeau, 1984; Pihlainen, 2017). Even within the practice of historiography, aims can be approached through various analytical levels, ranging from macro to micro aims. The former level focuses on institutions, systems, or the profession of historiography in a broad manner (e.g., Torstendahl, 2015), whereas the latter level focuses on some detailed processes or actions that are part of individual scholars' (and their collaborators') everyday research work (e.g., Korkeamäki & Kumpulainen, 2019). At times, our analysis touches the macro level, but since our analysis targeted especially historians' (and their collaborators') research projects, it locates mainly between these two—on what could be termed a meso level of analysis. Differentiating such levels is important because certain aims may appear mainly—or even only—in fine-grained situations, whereas others find relevance in the system or community level (see Longino, 1990).

As outlined in the introduction, current approaches to history education are tightly linked to (knowledge about) the practice of historiography. Thus, the educational implications of our findings about historians' aims are also manifold. First, they contribute to a basis of empirical knowledge about the epistemic aims of actual historiography that is needed for a continuing reflection on the legitimacy of educational practices that are justified through notions of acting "like historians" (see also Kainulainen et al., 2019). In this regard, our results indicate parts of the practice of historiography that are not so commonly regarded as part of historiography in educational models. For example, apart from empathy (see Endacott & Brooks, 2018; Lévesque & Clark, 2018), emotions are rarely considered as part of historical thinking and reasoning in educational models. However, in both science education and history education, some educational researchers have argued for including emotions experienced within inquiries as an important part

of what students should learn when engaging in practices of science or historiography (Goldberg & Schwarz, 2016; Jaber & Hammer, 2016). Our findings also provide support for this direction.

Second, having a broader range of aims to draw upon, our findings can be used to (re)design history classes—and especially their inquiry-based activities. In K–12 contexts the educational goal is usually to grasp some core aspects of the practice of historiography. Quite often, the goals of inquiry are given to students ready-made rather than as something to actually reflect and decide upon. In Voet and De Wever's (2017) synthesis of different models of inquiry-based learning in history, all models begin with evaluating (the nature, origin, biases, and reliability) of sources. Thus, an obvious possibility of expanding inquiry-based learning would be to grant inquirers themselves some agency regarding what the activities aim to achieve and why. Having a range of aims to build upon also provides a possibility for making history classes more engaging. Historians themselves have a variety of aims that motivate them to keep going; we should certainly not expect students to motivate themselves with a much-more-restricted range of aims. More specifically, student agency regarding dialogical aims could allow inquiries a stronger connection to contemporary events, arguments, debates, concepts, and phenomena. This, in turn, would likely make inquiries more meaningful for students. Knowledge about historians' aims—such as those provided in this paper—could then be used as a grounding point for reflecting and evaluating students' inquiry aims and the ways they relate to those of historians.

Further along the trajectory towards domain-specific expertise, students of history in higher education often aim at actually becoming historians—or at least developing the capabilities required for it. Practice-oriented teaching, historical thinking, and inquiry-based learning are relevant to higher education as well. Nye and colleagues (2011) have highlighted the importance of student agency in this regard. Designing courses in a way that allows students both a say and support for making choices regarding the inquiry aims of activities would appear a relevant part of promoting student agency. And indeed, some inquiry-based approaches in the humanities have done so when students have selected the kind of issues or questions they wish to address (Feldt & Petersen, 2020; Watts, 2014) and when instructional approaches have considered writing and publishing in different formats as possible aims (Bihrer et al., 2019). Alleviating the difficulties in the transition to university and history studies through such courses has been a long-standing goal for many educational scholars and historians (Booth, 2001; Díaz et al., 2008; Neumann, 2015). Because the practice of historiography is—or at least should be—at the core of history departments, reflecting on its aims might thus prove a useful activity not only in inquiry settings, but also in introductory courses to historical studies.

As mentioned earlier, the AIR model of epistemic cognition (Chinn et al., 2014; Chinn & Rinehart 2016) conceptualizes epistemic practices as situative composites of aims and value, ideals, and reliable processes. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the limitation of this study: we have here only focused on one of these aspects, and have done so by exploring the range of historians' aims and their value. While our overall research project also investigates these other aspects (Kainulainen et al., 2019), in this paper we have not reported findings about how these aims come together with ideals and processes. Still, it is worthwhile to keep these other aspects in mind when considering the implications of our study. When new kinds of aims are taken up for inquiries, students and teachers will also need to consider new ways of reaching those aims. For example, affectively or dialogically oriented aims will likely require ways of dealing with emotions or managing the intersections of current/past events and phenomena.

In sum, we believe our results might find best use as a ground for critical and reflective discussions at many educational levels. Such discussions might ask questions, such as: Which aims are most valuable in historiography? How much can the aims differ across different kinds of studies? Which aims should be incorporated into inquiry in history education at different age levels? How should one account for the aims that arise more from institutional demands than curiosity or societal need? What kind of unpronounced aims might historians have? In what ways—if any—should the aims of historians matter for readers of their work?

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The data set used in this study is registered at:

<http://urn.fi/urn:nbn:fi:att:217b3c98-9306-47d9-b1f4-072ee4ddbfa2>

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> As Reisman (2012) and Retz (2016) make clear, such approaches also have a much longer history.

<sup>2</sup> We rely here on a definition derived from philosophy of historiography (Kuukkanen, 2015; Tucker, 2009), in which *historiography* refers to writing about history (past events, processes, phenomena, etc.), usually in forms that centralize results of inquiries. In order to refer clearly to the thinking, activities, and work of historians in conducting and producing historiography, we use the term *practice of historiography*.

<sup>3</sup> Remaining categories with only one code were merged under “Other aims”. A full and more detailed list of codes can be requested from the first author.

<sup>4</sup> Because of to the probabilistic nature of open-ended interviews, these findings are best not considered as an exhaustive list of the aims of any individual interviewee or of historians in general. Likewise, we are wary of generalizing from what is *not* presented here because historians also discussed many other things important to their practice that just did not happen to be given as responses to questions about aims or through the kind of intentional utterances that we focused on.

<sup>5</sup> The translation of some epistemological or inquiry-related concepts from Finnish to English is tricky. For example, the Finnish word *tieto* is commonly used to refer to both *knowledge* and *information*. Also, the Finnish words *kuvaus* and *kuvailu* are commonly used to refer to *description*. However, these words have the word *kuva* (image) as their basis, and thus also have a visual side to them. In many cases, all three words (*kuvaus*, *kuvailu*, and *kuva*) can be used interchangeably, and the interviewed historians used all of these in explicating their aims. Therefore, it is not always easy to infer whether they refer to a visual concept or not.

<sup>6</sup> It was not always clear precisely how the notion of “basic research” was used in different situations: sometimes it was used simply to refer to work with sources in archives, and at other times it appears to refer more specifically to the kind of early stage research from a given topic or set of data that is less theory-driven, more empirical, and that establishes some core facts and chronologies. Still, overall, there was a sense of relative “preliminariness” that paved way for something.