



## History teachers and historical knowledge in Quebec and Sweden: Epistemic beliefs in distinguishing the past from history and its teaching

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### ABSTRACT

This article looks at upper secondary school history teachers' understandings of how historical knowledge is constructed and at the impact this might have on their classroom practice. The article has two objectives: (1) to examine how teachers view the relationship between *the past* and *history* – as a basic entry point peek into their epistemic thinking; and (2) to explore their reflexiveness regarding epistemic issues and what their view might mean for their perspectives and their teaching of history, and by extension, whether they see themselves as being political in the process or not. As part of an international, comparative study on history teachers and their epistemic positioning in the teaching of rival histories, we use a mixed-methods approach to present empirical data from Quebec and Sweden. Forming a cross-cultural dialogue, this comparative focus permits us to identify and discuss nuances that emerge in teachers' thinking in two completely different societies that nevertheless share similar democratic and political outlooks when it comes to the teaching of school history. In discussing the relationship between the past and history, it appears that teachers have different understandings of what historical knowledge is, how it is constructed, and the implications these meanings have for their practice. The findings demonstrate that there is a main difference and an important similarity between both sites. The difference is one where Swedish teachers are more inclined to make a clear distinction between the past and history, than their Quebecois counterparts who tend to be less prone to making this distinction clear. The similarity, in turn, refers to a majority of participants who are located in between these two extremities – objectivist and critical – and who demonstrate a case of epistemic “wobbling”. In describing the reasons for this difference, namely Quebec's overt quest for nation-building among its various historical communities, the political nature of history teaching comes to light. In digging deeper in this difference to better qualify the emergent wobbling, the results furthermore illustrate a strong connection between criticality and reflexivity in teachers' thinking and practice. More specifically, those who clearly distinguish between the past and history demonstrate an ability to account for history's subjectiveness and are therefore more attuned to questioning their own role in the whole teaching process.

## KEYWORDS

Epistemic beliefs, history teachers, Quebec, Sweden, upper secondary school, mixed methods

## CITATION

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## Introduction

Historians have been engaged in debates over the relationship between the past and history for a long time. These debates have been about methods, language, the nature of reality, and the construction of knowledge (see e.g. Bernheim, 1894; White, 1973; Novick, 1988; Jenkins & Munslow, 2004; Torstendahl, 2015). Lately they have also impacted the development of secondary school curricula. The acknowledgment of an important difference between the past and history has – together with ideas of intercultural understanding – given the notion of multi-perspectivity a prominent place in history teaching over the last three to four decades (see e.g. Elmersjö, 2021; Ammert, 2013; Cannadine, Keating, & Sheldon, 2011). Multi-perspectivity can be seen as a recognition of history's subjectivity to the extent that it contains multiple coexisting viewpoints of the same events rather than a blind embrace of one closed narrative believed to be objectively true.

One fundamental aspect of multi-perspectivity that results in history's subjectiveness is the whole meaning-making process that specifically differentiates between the past itself, as everything that has happened, and the history about that past, providing a melody out of the noise of all past happenstances (McCrum, 2013; Mathis & Parkes, 2020). Or, in the words of Bruce VanSledright:

The past, of course, is all those events and incidents that have gone on in the world of human experience before this moment. The scope of the past is mind-bending. It is complex, unwieldy, and resists full comprehension. [...] History [in turn] emerges as distinct from the past in that it is the name we give to our efforts to interpret the past, to tell stories about what it means. It cannot be isomorphic with the past. It is particularistic, selective, laced with perspective. [...] The word history more aptly describes a practice of interpreting the past. (VanSledright, 2014, pp. 26-27)

Irrespective of how evidence, prior knowledge, and accepted scholarship are employed, the subjective meaning-making process of historical endeavours constitutes an important starting point for epistemologically separating all that has happened before the present ("the past") from what we choose to remember and attribute meaning ("history"). This relationship between the past and history is one of the most fundamental aspects of understanding historical knowledge and its inherent incompleteness, its interpretational aspect, and its particularity and selectiveness. In school history, however, given the predominance of core master narratives that promote a particular vision of the nation, the distinct relationship between the past and history is often only acknowledged in some parts of curricula, while other parts – where historical events of vast cultural significance are discussed – lack this acknowledgment, leaving teachers and students with a subject that both tries to objectively (re)construct the past and subjectively deconstruct history

at the same time (see e.g. Stradling, 2003; Grever, 2012; Elmersjö, Clark, & Vinterek, 2017; Wansink, Akkerman, Zuiker, & Wubbels, 2018).

It could be argued that, because of this ambiguity, history teachers may come to view the teaching of their subject matter as a political act, in the sense that it always makes “something” visible while simultaneously hiding “something” else (see Rancière, 2001), where teachers make decisions about whether or not and how to question and transmit officially sanctioned information. Some teachers may consciously turn students’ attention to how specific and subjectively selected parts of the past are brought to the fore in any history. Others, by establishing a common cultural reference, may instead turn students’ attention to some of those subjectively selected parts of the past, teaching them – seemingly apolitically – as objectively closed narratives. Others yet, may find themselves somewhere in between these two extremities. What is of particular interest here is the extent to which teachers are reflexive in their thinking and teaching when navigating history curricula, and whether or not they engage in discussions regarding the processes involved in the construction of historical knowledge and its social and political uses. Doing this may provide some kind of barometer enabling them to assess where they stand and why.

This leads to the very important issue of how teachers think about the nature of their subject, especially in regard to the relationship between the past and history, and whether or not they see history teaching as a political act. This article looks at Quebecois and Swedish secondary school history teachers’ understandings of the relationship between the historical knowledge they teach and the past itself. More specifically, the article has two objectives: (1) to examine how upper secondary school history teachers discuss the relationship between *the past* and *history* – as a basic entry point peek into their epistemic thinking; and (2) to explore their reflexiveness regarding epistemic issues and what their view might mean for their perspectives and their teaching of history, and by extension, whether they see themselves as being political in the process or not.

## **Epistemic beliefs and the relationship between the past and history**

As a point of departure, we subscribe to the notion that teachers need to have knowledge of the epistemology of history as a discipline in order to teach history according to the historical thinking model innate in history syllabi in many countries (see e.g. Mathis & Parkes, 2020; Elmersjö et al., 2017). We also see the ability to reflect upon epistemic issues as an important competence for teachers of history to possess (see e.g. Brownlee, Ferguson, & Ryan, 2017).

There are different ways of interpreting how teachers talk about epistemic beliefs in history. One way of doing so is to assess their way of conceptualising historical knowledge with regard to the concept of evidence and how they reason about the relationship between narratives about the past and the evidence left behind from that past. A three-stage model has been proposed based in more generic research regarding epistemic beliefs (King & Kitchner, 1994; Kuhn & Weinstock, 2002; Hofer, 2016): objectivist beliefs, subjectivist beliefs and criterialist beliefs (see also Maggioni, 2010; VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016; Stoel, Logtenberg, Wansink, Huijgen, van Boxtel, & van Drie, 2017). The objectivist belief is one where knowledge emanating from what are considered authoritative sources is considered to be true, a direct copy-paste of reality. The subjectivist belief could be described as a “give in” to the notion that there are multiple accounts, and that history is therefore ultimately subjective and knowledge creation is relative. Criterialist beliefs introduce judgements regarding the interpretation of history, and these judgements could be considered better or worse, emphasising historical thinking skills as a way of making sense of and assessing the plausibility of different accounts about past reality (VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016; Voet & De Wever, 2016; Stoel et al., 2017).

While these analytical tools are very important for understanding different ways of conceptualising how historical knowledge is constructed, we believe that attention to the relationship between the past and the history of that past has been somewhat downplayed in

earlier research. Our specific attention to this relationship could be considered an important contribution to better understanding the nuance that Hofer (2016) makes regarding epistemic beliefs and the preconceived conceptions of the disciplines they deal with (i.e., how we understand history when comparing it to other disciplines as well as in relation to our pre-given understandings of what constitutes history).

After all, even if a person holding objectivist beliefs clearly sees no difference between the past and history, the criterialist might not really differentiate between the past and history at the epistemic level either. The criterialist might hold the belief that history, when done right, actually takes you to the past itself. They might still see a very direct – even though not simple – relationship between the past itself and the history about that past. Few studies on epistemic beliefs focus directly on how teachers or student teachers view the relationship between the past and history, even if there are recent notable exceptions (Miguel-Revilla, Carril-Merino, & Sánchez-Agustí, 2021). Our attention to the relationship between the past and history produces two distinct epistemic stances. The first is an objectivist stance that identifies the relationship between the past and history as being straightforward, e.g. “history can tell us the truth about the past”. The second is a critical stance that identifies the same relationship as being complex and perhaps even impossible to resolve in any meaningful way; the past itself and the history about that past are not epistemically congruent.

There is also a shortage of research that compares epistemic beliefs in different countries, especially regarding the relationship between the past and history. A recent study of the aims of history teachers in ten European countries shows that “learning critical thinking” seems to be the most valued goal of history teaching in Europe, and this aim also correlates with history teachers’ more nuanced, or criterialist, epistemic beliefs. At the same time, they also found a correlation between more objectivistic epistemic beliefs and less common aims relating to nation-building (Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019). While this sheds light on the beneficial workings of the three types of epistemic beliefs for empirical research and for understanding teachers’ practice in general, it still doesn’t provide insight into whether or not and how teachers differentiate between the past and history. Could such understandings actually be camouflaged by what is described as critical thinking? If so, it is not clear whether teachers are moreover reflexive in their approach.

There are a few reasons why comparing Quebec and Sweden is interesting when it comes to history teaching. For one, they are similar in a lot of ways, especially when it comes to their socio-economic development and schooling in a general sense. Moreover, the history syllabi in both Quebec and Sweden have corresponding foci on the transmission of cultural heritage and historical thinking skills. There are also interesting differences, mainly when it comes to language and cultural politics connected to Quebec being a majority French-speaking province in a mainly English-speaking country. One of the more important variations in the history program for upper secondary schools is the Swedish attention to teaching students about different “uses of history”, which could be said to highlight history’s multi-perspectivity, by bringing its uses in different social and political contexts, both past and present, to the fore. This competency is lacking in the Quebec history curriculum, and begs the question of whether teachers, given the similarities and differences between the two contexts, are consciously political and reflexive in their approach or seemingly apolitical and non-reflexive.

History teaching may also – as described above – be seen as a political act. This emerges by virtue of the information teachers raise and the questions they ask, both of which are done selectively. As these questions result from differentiating the past from history, they also relate to teachers’ perspectives on the construction and use of historical knowledge, which consequently, as an expression of their historical sense-making, are closely intertwined with their enactments of historical culture (Zanazanian, 2019). The manifestation of their historical consciousness thus has a political dimension, especially when it comes to trying to make sense of what is the right and wrong way of producing and transmitting historical knowledge (Rüsen, 2002; 2017; Mårdh, 2019; Zanazanian, 2019). As curricula intertwine knowledge and culture, this sense-making forms the basis for negotiating how to teach *officially sanctioned history*; history deemed important and

common-sense in a given society at a given time (cf. *official knowledge*: Apple, 2000; Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991).

No matter how they teach history, the way teachers make sense of the past is always political. How and if teachers view this political aspect as something separate from ideology, might shed some more light onto the issue of how the past can be separated and made distinct (or not) from history. Two questions come to mind; questions we will explore more in the following sections: Do teachers see themselves as performing a political act when teaching? How does this relate to their view of the relationship between the past and history?

## Method

As part of an international, comparative study on history teachers and their epistemic positioning in the teaching of national history, we use a mixed-methods approach to present empirical data from both Quebec and Sweden. We explore and compare the two sites quantitatively, while also analysing teachers' deeper thoughts qualitatively as they surface (Creswell, 2003). First, we utilised a questionnaire trying to see how teachers in upper secondary schools in Quebec and Sweden reason about the relationship between the past and history. Forming a cross-cultural dialogue, this comparative focus permitted to identify and discuss nuances that emerge in teachers' thinking in two completely different societies that nevertheless share similar democratic and political outlooks when it comes to the teaching of school history.

The part of the questionnaire we mainly consider in this article relates to four statements regarding the relationship between the past and history. Participating teachers' answers were on a 4-point Likert-scale: "totally agree", "strongly agree", "somewhat agree" and "do not agree at all". The statements were the same in both countries, translated into English and French for the Quebecois teachers and into Swedish for the Swedish teachers. 375 history teachers responded to the Swedish survey, while 106 history teachers participated in the Quebec one – 58 teachers who teach in French in French-language schools and 48 who teach in English in English-language schools. For the Swedish questionnaire, a database with all teachers in Sweden under the control of Sweden Statistics (*Statistiska centralbyrån*, SCB) was utilised and the questionnaire was sent directly to the teachers.<sup>1</sup> In Quebec, teachers were approached through social media and at annual meetings of professional teacher associations and encouraged to fill out the questionnaire virtually, on-line.

The questionnaire did not include a specific definition of *the past* or of *history*, since doing so would have been very difficult without inadvertently giving the teachers a "right answer". However, the statements identified the past and history as two *potentially* different concepts and there was also a specific question that urged the teachers to distinguish between them in their own way, and to estimate their view of the complexity involved in distinguishing them from each other. One problem with this approach is that there were some potential differences in how teachers defined these words (past and history). However, we were not particularly interested in their definition of the words, but rather in their view of the epistemological relationship between *the concepts* of "past reality" and "things we write about past reality". The statements themselves (for example, "History can tell us the truth about the past"), the questions about the estimation of complexity and the way all questions in the questionnaire were formulated, contributed to a more-or-less clear definition of the concepts involved. We also tested the questionnaire in a pilot study in order to make sure respondents understood the concepts at hand and to maximise the reliability and validity of our measuring instrument, we moreover compared our initial results across both research sites. However, the questionnaire was also mostly utilised for a qualitative purpose; to facilitate categorisation and the follow-up interview component of our study. Regarding the sample, Table 1 indicates some differences between the teachers who answered the Quebecois questionnaire and the teachers who answered the Swedish questionnaire, where the Quebecois teachers were younger on average. The distribution of males/females in the Swedish questionnaire was 59/41 (%) while it was 40/60 (%) in the Quebecois questionnaire.



TABLE 1: Gender, age and amount of history education in the sample of teachers (absolute numbers)

	Gender		Age			History education			
	Male	Female	22–39	40–49	50–68	Less	BA	More	N/A
<b>Quebecois teachers</b>	42	64	64	29	12	16	60	28	2
<b>Swedish teachers</b>	220	155	118	141	116	39	305	28	3

Note: Education in history is reported as BA with history as a major (or equivalent) as a baseline, and the two categories “less” (which mean less history education than a BA) and “more” (which mean more history education than a BA).

The concerns that were raised from this questionnaire gave rise to ideas for the study’s smaller, qualitative interviews in an effort to dig deeper into the perspectives that teachers held regarding the production of historical knowledge. In this article we present results from the first set of these interviews in Quebec in which five English-speaking teachers participated. All of them indicated an interest in wanting to take part in our follow-up interviews through the questionnaire, and the five were randomly chosen out of ten English speaking teachers who answered the questionnaire and volunteered to be interviewed. Because the Swedish questionnaire was distributed from an official state register and thus was not under our control (the SCB database of Swedish teachers), we could not conduct this follow-up with the Swedish teachers. This is why we only focus on our teacher participants from Quebec in the present article.

The interviews were semi-structured, and they centered on a series of questions and short activities that sought to mainly examine participants’ understandings of the relationship between the past and history, which correlated with but went beyond those similarly themed questions and statements in the questionnaire. To ensure the reliability of these participants’ perspectives, questions with similar ideas were asked more than once with a different wording to expressly see if they would answer in the same way or not. Although, at times, the questions may have seemed redundant to attentive participants, this permitted us to engage more deeply with them about their ideas and to have them think beyond what they are usually used to in their professional setting.

It is important to keep in mind that the interviews do not form part of our study’s quantitative component and thus should not be understood quantitatively. Instead, comprising the qualitative component of our mixed-methods approach, they are to be viewed as supplementary, allowing us to see examples of what the teachers who answered the questionnaire might have meant, or how they might have been thinking when differentiating the past and history. Proceeding in this manner opens up the opportunity to better understand the results from the questionnaire, and provides examples of ways of thinking about the nature of historical knowledge in a deeper sense.

## **Inconsistencies, age-related and culturally related differences – results from the questionnaire**

The categorisation of the teachers (Table, 2) was based on the combined responses to the statements “The past can be truly known”; “History can tell us the truth about the past”; and “The past has a meaning that we can hope to discover”, as well as their answer to the question “How would you define the relationship between the past and history”. Teachers who answered “totally/strongly agree” for all three statements, while indicating a straightforward relationship between the concepts, are categorised as having a “consistent objectivist” view while teachers who answered “somewhat agree” or “do not agree at all” for all three statements, while indicating a complex relationship between the concepts, are categorised as critically consistent. Teachers who answered strongly agree for one or two of the statements while answering somewhat agree for one or two of the others are categorised as “middle ground-semi consistent”. All other teachers are categorised as “inconsistent”, i.e., “wobbling”, that is, epistemic inconsistencies about the relationship between the past and history.

The categorisation provided results that point to one major difference between the teachers from Quebec and the teachers from Sweden, as well as one important similarity. The difference between the two sites lies in how Swedish teachers tend to recognise history's complexity and to nuance their approach when distinguishing the past from history more so than their Quebecois counterparts who, in turn tend to see a more straightforward relationship between the two, i.e., critical and objectivist, as defined above. The similarity, in turn, refers to a majority of participants who are located in between these two extremities – objectivist and critical – in both sites. On this latter point, our participants' answers revealed a lot of “wobbling”.

TABLE, 2: Categorisation of respondents' epistemic beliefs, Sweden and Quebec  
(absolute numbers, percentage in parentheses)

Nationality	Consistent objectivist	Consistent critical	Middle ground - semi consistent	Inconsistent	Total
Swedish	77 (21)	86 (23)	109 (29)	103 (27)	375 (100)
Quebecois	39 (37)	9 (9)	27 (25)	31 (29)	106 (100)
Total	116 (24)	95 (20)	136 (28)	134 (28)	481 (100)

As evident from Table, 2, only 44 percent of teachers in the survey responded consistently (either positively or negatively) to the statements. Out of this 44 percent, almost half (20 percent of the total) clearly identified a complex relationship between the past and history (identified in Table, 2 as consistent-critical). In previous research on prospective history teachers this figure has often been much higher. For example, in one Spanish study more than 50 percent of students studying to be teachers in secondary schools, identified a similar complex relationship (Miguel-Revilla et al., 2021). While this Spanish study was not conducted in the same way as ours, the discrepancies are still noteworthy. Part of this variation could be explained by the age difference between prospective teachers, who are often young, and a random sample of working teachers, which entails teachers of all ages (see Table 1, especially regarding the larger Swedish sample). In our study, there was a notable difference between older and younger teachers, with older teachers being more objectivistic than their younger counterparts. In considering the teachers in our study younger than 40, the percentage of critical teachers rises from, 20 to, 26 percent (see also Elmersjö, 2021), thereby suggesting a potential generational difference.

A potential problem with this categorisation is the high percentage of inconsistent teachers. This points to the problems of identifying epistemic beliefs in a reliable way, perhaps due to teachers' didactical, rather than epistemic, approach to matters regarding their teaching subject (see Elmersjö, 2021). However, the standard for consistency in the teachers' answers needs to be set high for a confident separation between the objectivist and critical teachers to be made. The difficulties in attributing the teachers a specific stance, also shows something that has been prominent in earlier research as well; teachers are “wobbling”/switching between different positions (Miguel-Revilla et al., 2021; Wansink et al., 2018; VanSledright & Maggioni, 2016; VanSledright & Reddy, 2014, McCrum, 2013). It is also not possible, given the methodology utilised here, to assess whether the teachers are inconsistent as a consequence of not being able to articulate a consistent epistemological stance, or if it is a consequence of a conscious changing of epistemological criteria to align with specific allegiances in relation to specific events in history, or to differing thought processes when thinking as a teacher or as an historian (see Gottlieb & Wineburg, 2012).

In comparing the Swedish teachers to their Quebecois counterparts, both contexts seem to approximately have the same ratio of consistent teachers (around 45%). However, while the distribution between objectivist teachers (who see the relationship between history and the past as straightforward, e.g. “history can tell us the truth about the past”) and critical teachers (who see a complex relationship between the past and history) are almost even in the Swedish sample (21% and, 23% respectively), it is highly skewed towards the objectivist stance in Quebec (37% and 9%). This difference could relate to some nation-building aspect, as previous studies have shown a correlation between teachers with objectivist beliefs, and teachers viewing nation

building as an important part of history teaching (Lanoix, 2017; Éthier et al., 2017; Zanazanian & Moisan, 2012; Zanazanian, 2017; Sakki & Pirttilä-Backman, 2019). It is also possible that this difference relates to the Swedish upper secondary school history program focusing on “uses of history”, as mentioned earlier. Obligated to teach this concept, we thought Swedish teachers, who were specifically asked about this, would thus be more inclined to possessing a critical approach. But, given how they answered questions about their attitude in its teaching, where no correlation emerges between their ability to teach the concept and their acknowledgement of a clear difference between the concepts of past and history, this does not seem to be the case.

Since the questionnaire was distributed in different languages, translation could also have affected the objectivist outcome for Quebec. There was an important variation in the answers to one of the statements – “the past has a meaning that we can hope to discover” – when comparing the Swedish teachers to their Quebecois counterparts who answered the French version of the questionnaire (of the 106 Quebecois participants 58 answered the questionnaire in French). This led us to believe that a certain nuance was lost, thereby skewing the reliability between both research settings, but only to a matter of degree.<sup>2</sup> In disregarding this statement, a difference between the two sample populations nonetheless still arises, with a larger percentage of Swedish teachers being categorised as critical. Despite a consequently smaller variation, this suggests that language only plays a minor role and that the difference between Quebec and Sweden still stands.

When comparing the Quebecois and Swedish teachers, we have so far described the results from our study in terms of a dichotomy regarding teachers’ inclination to differentiate between the past and history. However, 56 percent of the teachers, in both Quebec and Sweden, display inconsistencies in this regard. There seems to be something hidden in between the objectivist and critical approaches, where these teachers’ inconsistencies are perhaps due to their struggles in dealing with history’s subjectiveness as well as with the ambiguity in its teaching in terms of what they are comfortable in transmitting and how. This leads us to the political issue discussed above, which also relates to teachers’ reflexivity. This raises new questions that we need to analyse more deeply, which we do next in qualitative terms.

## History teaching as a political act – results from the interviews

Combining the questionnaire with interviews from English-speaking teachers who teach in English-language schools in the greater Montreal region made it possible to look further into how teachers might differentiate between the past and history and describe their struggles with subjectivity and the political aspect of history teaching, with input on their degree of reflexivity. This should be viewed as both an attempt to present a plausible discussion about the results extracted from the questionnaire, as well as an attempt to answer the second question addressed in this article: Do teachers see their role in making the past meaningful to students as a political act? Or do they instead see themselves as merely observers of a given past that they transmit, with a meaning that *is* and has always *been there*, objectively innate in the events themselves? This is where distinctions made between the past and history become insightful, where it is possible to discern what an acknowledgement of such a distinction actually signifies for how history is taught. Given that only five teachers were interviewed we do not claim to be able to *explain* the thought process of all the teachers who answered the questionnaire, but we present a discussion about how teachers *might* think about issues of historical knowledge and what that might mean for their teaching, in more depth. All five teachers who were interviewed made some sort of distinction between the past and history, but the way they did so was very different, especially with regard to what they considered to be political in the teaching of history.

One of the younger teachers interviewed, a 27-year-old female (categorised in the questionnaire as consistent critical), had a strong opinion on the relationship between the past and history, and the subsequent political dimension of history teaching, responding to the question “How would you define the relationship between the past itself, and history?”:



I definitely see them [past and history] as two very, very different things. Specifically, when we are talking about history and the context of how it's taught in Quebec, it is a very deliberate construction of what we want our students to be understanding. So, if we think of the past as things that happened before us and we look at history, history is a deliberate retelling of this past, retelling [a] very specific... perspective with a very specific goal at the end of it, ...and that obviously changes depending on who is determining what that goal is, where that history is being constructed, so where the past is something that occurred, the history is the malleable interpretation of that past.

This statement indicates this teacher's critical standpoint towards historical knowledge and its ability to tell something conclusively true about the past. She sees the act of turning the past into history as one that makes the past teleological, where there is "a very specific goal at the end of it". When she elaborates on what this means for her practice it becomes obvious that she sees it as a political act, where the teacher always plays a central role:

I specifically teach teenagers; they don't know about this distinction [between past and history]. When they are sitting in a history classroom, they think that they are being told the past, they think they are being recounted what happened. And they are very much not aware of the fact that it is a human creation, the history that they are learning is a story that has been deliberately written for very specific reasons. [...] If they are consuming this information as fact that has no right to be interpreted or thought about, then they are going to continue on repeating it and living it in a way that isn't being thought about and isn't being critically analysed [...]. They are the consumers and they have to be employed with the right intellect to be able to have the ability to say "why am I learning this?" "why do other people think it's important that I'm learning this?".

This seems to be a very postmodern approach to history teaching (Seixas, 2000; Elmersjö et al., 2017), where the difference that is identified between the past and history is seen as unbridgeable. This participant teaches history with the question she asks at the end of her statement: "why am I learning this?" Her ideas about history probably push her to teach it as a form of discursive deconstruction where the reasons why history is constructed in a certain way are at the core of the thinking process and requires asking questions like: under what pretenses and discursive conditions was this history created, for whom is it important that we learn it, and what does that do to us and the society we are a part of? These questions push history teaching to be understood reflexively in the sense that it has as its main aim to show students how history, by definition, when separated from "the past", is political. But it also points to a *self*-reflexive inclination, as this teacher obviously thinks about what her teaching *does* to students and her role in that regard. Her own view of the nature of history is very present in her ideas about teaching.

One of the other teachers interviewed, a 68-year-old male (categorised in the questionnaire as consistent objectivist), also identified some sort of disparity between the concepts of past and history, even though he labeled them in "reverse" compared to our and VanSledright's definition above (i.e., the teacher explained that history is what happened, and the past is what we make of it). This "reverse" definition does not really influence our interpretation, because the distinction between what has happened and what is written is still there, no matter what label is chosen. However, he did not see good history teaching as a political act, but as an issue of doing better research and coming up with the right interpretation. When discussing the relationship between the past and history, he mentions the importance of developing an "accurate interpretation":

I think [accuracy] matters a great deal. Because we cannot hm... how can I word this? We [historians and history teachers] are trying to succeed in interpreting history [the past]. Our success is measured by our opinion, our opinion is measured by the sources we use. [...] For [students] to accept our opinion, we have to work harder at the interpretation of history [the past]. And I think that's what matters, because it forces us to be clear, it forces us to be succinct, it forces us in a lot of ways to be accurate, it forces us to be very open... extremely open.

While this teacher clearly sees the subjectiveness of historical interpretation when he uses the word “opinion” about historical accounts, he seems to struggle with subjectivity and its relationship with objectivity. He does not see the political implications involved and the consequent need for reflexive thinking. Instead, he seems to view history teaching as more of a scholarly act. He highlights the idea that one of the more important parts of teaching history is to be accurate, and at the same time to be open with how this accuracy was achieved. However, he is not at all reflexive regarding what history does to students. His ideas about accuracy point in the direction of an objective history, where evidence is clearly needed, but where he is not reflexive about his or the historian’s own role in the process of knowledge construction.

Yet another teacher (a 45-year-old female, categorised in the questionnaire as consistent critical) made it clear that there is both a political and ideological dimension to history:

I mean that’s been proven so often that people use history or change [the] interpretation of history for political means or ideological means whether that be governments or educational institutions [...]. [W]hat if you ask it in simple terms, what went down versus who interprets what goes down, there are many interpretations. I encourage [students] to question, I think that’s what’s really important. I don’t think the Quebec history program wants teachers or students to question the course, but I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t ask kids to be critical thinkers. And that includes questioning me [...].

This statement again acknowledges the difference between the past and history, and the importance of teaching students to be critical towards the production of historical knowledge and history’s different uses, even including her own uses of it as well. In highlighting that history can be interpreted for political and ideological reasons, she definitely takes a stand but seems to stop there and not go further. When looking at her feedback as a whole, it is as if she is helping her students to ask questions so that they remove layers of complexity and that they arrive at some neutral understanding of history that is there but is hidden. Moreover, she does not provide any information regarding the ability to be self-reflexive in her own thinking and construction of knowledge, and how this affects her teaching and her students. This turns out to be the case even despite the critical edge in her teaching where she asks her students to be critical of her. In standing outside and looking in, she seems to be apolitical in her approach, albeit with a critical inclination. It is as if she observes and acknowledges the uses of history in society, thereby making it political, but does not extend that to her own thinking and practice. On this point, she is different from the younger teacher mentioned above.

When combined, these interviews provide for a complex topic when discussing teachers’ rapport with the construction and teaching of history. While all five teachers more or less distinguish the past from history in the interviews, not all of them identify this distinction as important (cf *reconstructionist*) or see that difference as bridgeable (cf *constructionist* and *deconstructionist* history: Jenkins & Munslow eds., 2004; Parkes, 2009; McCrum, 2013; Elmersjö et al., 2017) and perhaps do not even see it as their duty to overcome it. To this point, it is only the youngest teacher who is self-reflexive about her own construction and use of history, clearly situating herself as an actor who has the agency to question and expose the processes involved in transforming the past into something that is tangible. These interviews also highlight an important difference between recognising a difference between the past and history and its teaching as a political act in making meaningful sense of the past. It is clearly not enough to simply distinguish between teachers who differentiate between the past and history in this regard as we did in the prior quantitative section. Because of the many epistemological layers hidden within the group of teachers who make this distinction what is needed is to dig deeper into their thinking processes regarding where and how they position themselves when faced with transmitting historical information to their students. Distilling the political aspects of teaching seems to be a very important part of examining teachers’ degree of reflexivity in terms of what their teaching of history *does* to their students.

If teachers acknowledge history's political nature, the chances of adopting a form of reflexivity regarding their teaching may increase, thereby enabling them to make sense of the subjectivity involved in the construction of historical knowledge. The three interviewees quoted in this article tend to fall on a spectrum of reflexivity directly related to their acknowledgement of the political act of teaching history. Of interest, their position on this spectrum tends to correlate with their age, which is moreover supported by the findings from our questionnaire, which also show a difference in criticality related to age, with a larger number of younger teachers being categorised as critical. The fact that the youngest teacher from our interviews is more critical in differentiating the past from history might then not be a coincidence.

## Conclusions

In bringing the results from the questionnaire and what we learned from the interviews together it is possible to tentatively describe and theorise two simplified ideal typical teachers: (1) a young teacher, inspired by post-structural thought, critical of the idea of a straightforward relationship between the past and history, who sees history teaching as a political act, and who is self-reflexive in the process, and (2) an older teacher, more positivist in approach, believing that historical knowledge corresponds directly to the past itself, who is more inclined to teach the past "as it was" and who does not see its teaching as a political act, and thus is not as self-reflexive in his thinking and practice. These ideal types have some connections to two of Ronald W. Evans' (1989) five typologies of teachers' conceptions of history: the relativist/reformer and the storyteller. While there may be some similarities, Evans does not really engage with the political dimension of history teaching that we propose, relating more to pedagogical orientation, and none of his typologies relate to epistemology the way our ideal types try to suggest.

However, it is also important to remember that most history teachers from the survey seem to have an inconsistent view of epistemological matters, probably lacking the language needed to convey how they categorise and view the nature of historical knowledge. Most of these teachers seem to "wobble" between different positions, perhaps depending on the circumstances they face regarding their students or the historical events they are teaching; a kind of situational approach to epistemological matters and epistemic cognition, filtered through what the teachers think of as possible teaching strategies in their classroom. As most of them do not fit into the ideal types mentioned above, we have obviously only come a short way in mapping the ways history teachers think about these matters. However, we posit that teachers might be struggling with the subjective nature of the historical information they are responsible for teaching. As such they are "wobbling" between objectivist and critical approaches to distinguishing the past from history, and are perhaps, by extension, not reflexive in their thinking towards the production and transmission of historical knowledge. This, however, does require more scholarly attention.

Based on this, we can assume that there exists a spectrum of teachers, of all ages, who are more or less "critical" or more or less "objectivist", with a large in-between who are trying to account for history's subjectiveness with regard to the meanings that emerge from the past. Those, we believe, who have come to terms with this and are consciously political are in all probability those who are also self-reflexive in their practice. The results of our study, which we will pursue further, clearly indicate some sort of connection between criticality and reflexiveness, especially when teachers are aware of history's subjectiveness and the need to situate themselves in that regard. Having this reflexivity probably makes it easier to cope with the ambiguity of history curricula, and the multi-perspectivity that is advocated there.

To dig deeper into this and to better examine the different ways in which teachers' rapport with subjectivity makes them political in their teaching would require looking at the impact of their sense-making on the various positionalities they adopt in that regard. As humans' individual production of historical knowledge and its uses in our sense-making are cultural in nature, one way of deciphering teachers' degree of self-reflexivity is by examining the history-as-interpretive-filters they use for negotiating where they stand when faced with transmitting officially sanctioned historical knowledge (Zanazanian, 2019). In following Zanazanian's comprehensive

methodology, such an analysis could provide deeper insight into the cultural cognitive frames that teachers use in their position-taking, as it could also indicate, in the enactment of these templates, the extent to which they are political/apolitical in their thinking and teaching. Examining the workings of teachers' history-as-interpretive-filters in their sense-making can moreover provide insight into how to move them from objectivist and subjectivist stances, to one where they are self-reflexive and open to multi-perspectivity.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> 1,000 history teachers in upper secondary schools were randomly selected from the SCB database of all teachers in Sweden. 375 responded.

<sup>2</sup> Because it is difficult to convey the issue of intrinsic meaning, perhaps especially when translated into Swedish, the word "inre" (which could be translated to "inner" or "innate") was added to the statement "The past has a meaning that we can hope to discover" ("Det förflutna har en inre mening som det är möjligt för oss att finna"). In French, the statement reads: "Le passé a un sens que l'on peut espérer découvrir". It is therefore possible, and even probable, that the teachers who answered the French version of the questionnaire were more inclined to interpret the statement to mean that it is possible for us to extract *any* meaning from the past, while the statement in Swedish explicitly mentioned intrinsic meaning in and of itself. This issue goes to show how difficult it is to overcome language barriers in research on epistemological issues.