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Historical empathy in a museum: uniting contextualisation and emotional engagement

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ABSTRACT

Museums, memorial centres and other heritage institutions use various strategies to evoke an emotional response that serves to elicit empathy with the historical events and actors that are portrayed in exhibitions. To increase historical understanding, however, both emotional engagement with and contextual understanding of these historical figures are needed. Using the concept of historical empathy, this paper examines the continuous interplay between cognitive and affective dimensions of history learning in museums. We conducted a case study at *Museon* in The Hague, the Netherlands. We studied a learning session on children living through the Second World War, the museum's strategies employed in the exhibition, the entrance narratives of secondary school students participating in the session and their engagement with the exhibition and with the educational activities. While most of the students did not feel related to WWII prior to their museum visit, the museum managed to engage many of them with personal stories and artefacts and by offering multiple and new perspectives. Our findings underscore the interplay between cognitive and affective dimensions of historical empathy and show that museums can serve as powerful contexts for developing this skill among school students.

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Museums, memorial centres and other heritage institutions have traditionally relied on the use of physical artefacts to provide visitors with an experience of authenticity. Increasingly, they draw on other strategies to trigger people's imaginations, which either support or replace existing modes of display (Dicks 2003; Mason 2004). Often these strategies are – consciously or unconsciously – solicited to evoke an emotional response that serves to elicit empathy for and/or moral engagement with historical events and actors portrayed through an exhibition. Within the field of history and museum education, it has been emphasised that emotional engagement and empathy evoked in a museum context may stimulate young people's historical understanding by bringing a past world to life (Marcus, Stoddard, and Woodward 2012; Spalding 2012). On the other hand, strong emotional engagement can also hinder students in terms of contextualising historical events within the time and place in which they occurred, which is an important element of historical thinking and reasoning (van Drie and van Boxtel 2008; Seixas and Morton 2013). Within the field of museum studies, it has been argued that deep emotional engagement does not necessarily engender critical insight (Smith 2016). Thus, when

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aiming to advance the learning of history in a museum context, it is important to understand the ways in which both cognitive and affective engagement with the past emerge out of an interplay between a museum exhibition and its visitors.

This paper uses the concept of *historical empathy* to emphasise the interaction between cognitive and affective dimensions of this skill while learning in a museum. The ways in which the concept of historical empathy has been developed through history teaching methodology theories, in focusing on dialogue between caring for historical actors and the evidence-based reconstruction of their perspectives, provide a useful operationalisation for analysing these cognitive and affective dimensions. The case study presented in this paper analyses a learning session on children who lived through the Second World War (WWII) that was held in a dedicated exhibition space of *Museon* in The Hague. The session was attended by 22 secondary school students through their history classes. We conducted an in depth analysis of the exhibition, of educational activities and materials used, of the entrance narratives of the school students and of their degrees of engagement with the learning session to study the dialogue between the learning session and the participating students. We will argue that museums can provide fertile ground for stimulating both affective and cognitive dimensions of historical empathy and can in turn create powerful contexts for developing such skills among school students.

Historical empathy

The concept of historical empathy has been developed through history teaching methodology theories. It involves the reconstruction of people's perspectives through the acquisition of knowledge and understanding of the broader historical contexts in which figures have acted and an analysis of the possible motives, beliefs and emotions that guided their actions (Endacott and Brooks 2013). Students contextualise the actions of historical figures by explaining and evaluating their actions and situating them in particular temporal, spatial, and social contexts. In addition, they need to be aware of their own positionality and the distinction between the past and the present (van Drie and van Boxtel 2008; Seixas and Morton 2013; Huijgen et al. 2016). The skill of historical empathy is considered to constitute an important element in the development of students' historical understanding. Historical empathy is a complex undertaking for students, and particularly because at a young age, they are just beginning to master the necessary abstract forms of thought. As historical actors are distanced from students in space, time and experience, historical empathy can be considered to be as unfamiliar to students as taking the perspectives of strangers, which research has shown is very difficult to achieve (Ma-Kellams and Blascovich 2012).

In history education, the notion of empathy has long been associated with imagination as literary invention and fantasy. Scholars have argued that it has been confused with generating sympathy with particular historical figures and have therefore emphasised that historical empathy must be based on historical inquiry and evidence (Lee and Ashby 1987). More recently, some educationalists have responded to this emphasis on cognitive elements of empathy and have stressed that affective engagement is an inseparable aspect of this process. This affective dimension may involve showing interest in historical actors, caring for them, and responding to consequences of events of the past and present (Barton and Levstik 2004).

Together with Barton and Levstik (2004) and Endacott and Brooks (2013), we regard historical empathy as both a cognitive and an affective endeavour. This perspective is in congruence with psychological research that suggests that cognitive and affective aspects of empathy are interdependent, defining it as a process of understanding and emotionally responding to the thoughts and feelings of others (Hoffman 1984). It also resonates with recent insights of museum studies, in which interrelations of reason and emotion and the notion that emotional responses are shaped by people's cultural backgrounds have similarly been emphasised (Watson 2015). Smith's (2011) notion of registers of engagement attempts to give justice to the whole spectrum of ideological and affective visitors' responses as well as to the intensity of their engagement in museums. This process of engagement, like historical

empathy, is coloured by people's own positionality and is informed by knowledge, beliefs and emotions and a willingness to engage with the other (Smith 2011; Endacott and Brooks 2013).

Distance and engagement while learning about history in museums

As historical empathy is both a cognitive and affective endeavour, the extent to which museums can actively foster this process is dependent on the ways in which they construct temporality (the degree of distance or proximity from the past) and engagement in their exhibitions and educational resources, which has been conceptualised through the notion of historical distance (Phillips 2004; Grever, de Bruijn, and van Boxtel 2012). In a study of exhibitions and educational resources on the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, World War II and the Holocaust in the Netherlands and UK (De Bruijn 2014), an analytical framework was developed for studying this configuration of temporality and engagement by integrating theories of history theory, memory and museum studies, and history teaching methodology. This analytical framework allows one to study strategies employed by museums, archives and memorial centres to foster distance, proximity and engagement and can thus be used to analyse the impacts of modes of display and educational approaches on the potential for developing historical empathy.

First, the narrative structure of historical representations affects how people relate to historical events and figures presented in a narrative. Historical narratives can present a synchronic or diachronic approach to the past and can reflect an ideal-typical plotline of progress, decline, zigzag or rhyme (Zerubavel 2003). Second, perspectives embedded within these narrative plots and the narrative mode – tense, perspective, focalisation – impact the configuration of temporality and engagement. Narrating history through a singular perspective, such as that of an individual person, stimulates emotional engagement, allowing people to identify with the thoughts and feelings of historical actors. Providing multiple perspectives, on the other hand, in the form of geographical levels, historiographical viewpoints or the points of view of different historical actors (Stradling 2003; Lorenz 2004) supports a more contextualised approach. Such narratives can be told through external focalisation, whereby the point of view lies with an anonymous agent who is not part of what is being narrated, or through character focalisation, whereby the perspective lies with characters who are participants of the events narrated (Bal 2009). In a museum context, these narrative strategies can not only be introduced through textual interpretations of object labels, text panels or educational materials, but they also stem from spatial arrangements and structures that impact the visitors' experience of the exhibition (Pearce 1998; Basu and Macdonald 2007). Scholars have argued that exhibitions and heritage sites can facilitate an embodied learning experience that, in using all senses, can more easily elicit an affective response and stimulate empathy (Gregory and Witcomb 2007; McRainey and Russick 2010).

Temporality and engagement can also be fostered through mnemonic bridging, which refers to the creation of a link between the past and present. In addition to the narrative bridging strategy of creating an historical analogy, these techniques include the emphasis on same place through time, the use of physical objects, and practices of imitation and replication (Zerubavel 2003). These bridging techniques can take different forms and can be approached in various ways. The 'same place' technique, for instance, can either focus on continuity or changes through time for a particular site and can emphasise how people have related to a place or can merely highlight a place's former function (De Bruijn 2014). Presenting material relics in glass display cases stripped of their contexts and encapsulated in interpretive texts generates more distance than when such objects are presented 'in situ' (Lidchi 1997; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998). The specific use of these bridging techniques determines visitors' experiences of temporality and engagement.

Clearly, the particular register of engagement that these strategies connect with during a museum visit depends to a great extent on the visitors' entrance narratives, the 'internal story' that they bring with them into the museum (Doering and Pekarik 1996; Falk and Dierking 2013). To ensure true engagement with the museum narrative, the design of an exhibition and objects on display must connect to visitors' stories (Schorch 2015). As various researchers have demonstrated, students' entrance narratives and historical understanding are shaped by their socio-cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds and

by their individual identities (Epstein 1998; Peck 2010). Barton and McCully (2012) have noted that students' degrees of affective engagement with a historical topic can limit their understanding or can even lead to a rejection of perspectives other than their own. Particularly regarding sensitive histories such as the history of WWII, students may have difficulties departing from their own perspectives, as these histories may induce negative emotions or strong moral responses (Savenije, van Boxtel, and Grever 2014a). In this way, their emotional engagement may hinder historical empathy. Consider, for example, students who identify with enslaved people and who may hold descendants of slave owners in the present responsible for the actions of their ancestors (Savenije, van Boxtel, and Grever 2014b). On the other hand, a study in the Israeli context has shown that such identification may also work well as a stimulant of historical reasoning (Goldberg 2013). Within the museum context, Spalding (2012) has shown the significant contributions of emotional engagement and empathy to a deep understanding of sensitive histories. Furthermore, neglecting students' emotional responses may lead to superficial learning and missed opportunities in helping students come to grips with histories that are relevant to their society (McCully et al. 2002).

In this paper, we use the concept of historical empathy to discuss whether students develop an emotional connection with historical actors and acquire a contextualised understanding of these people from the past, thus acknowledging their different perspectives. Taking a sociocultural and contextual approach (Falk and Dierking 2013), we integrate this concept into the analytical framework of temporality and engagement. This enables us to examine how the cognitive and affective dimensions of historical empathy complement, interfere with and interact with one another and in what ways the specific contexts of a museum, the strategies it uses, and the entrance narratives of students affect capacities to engage in historical empathy. A case study was considered the most suitable study design (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2011) for this initial empirical exploration of such processes.

Method

Exhibition

Museon is an educational museum located in The Hague that was founded in the early twentieth century and which focuses primarily on issues of culture, nature and the applied sciences. 'Child in War', one of its permanent exhibitions, was developed in 2004 with the primary aim to show that war deeply affects children's lives and that this is still the case today (Museon 2016). The exhibition was partly funded by the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, which in the Netherlands plays a major role in nurturing the commemoration and remembrance of WWII. Motivated by a goal to encourage an awareness of the blessings of living in freedom, the department provides funding for projects that relate the history of WWII to current themes such as freedom, democracy and human rights (Rijksoverheid [national government] 2016). The exhibition at *Museon* explored what it was like to live through WWII as a child through the personal stories of 34 people using objects, documents, pictures and film clips.

The exhibition was located in a small and darkly lit dedicated exhibition space that could be closed off from the rest of the museum with large doors to facilitate workshops with smaller groups. Scattered around the room were black, slightly tilted pillar-shaped display cases, each of which told the stories of specific children by displaying artefacts (including personal belongings) and autobiographical texts on each side of the display. Some of the displays contained film clips of the era, and the first display case presented footage of present-day refugees. To illuminate the displays, visitors needed to step on large black buttons placed at the bottom of each case.

The back of the exhibition space featured a brown wooden archival wall with drawers and closets on the bottom half providing information on various other children living through WWII. The top half of this wall, which could be accessed from two sets of stairs, displayed general objects and information on WWII. Attached to the wall next to the archive was a small memorial listing the names of the 2,061 Jewish, Sinti and Roma children deported from The Hague in 1942.

Learning session

This case study focuses on a learning session entitled 'War Children in Conversation' that was specifically developed for the history and citizenship curriculum of senior high school education. The aim of the session was to help students empathise with children of various cultural and social backgrounds living through WWII and to develop their enquiry and presentation skills (Museon 2016).

In this 90-minute workshop, the students worked in groups to write and act out an imaginary dialogue on the day of the opening of the gallery between a journalist and two persons whose life stories were featured in the exhibition. The educator had paired these persons thematically. The students were allowed to choose a specific theme, but most of them were assigned a pair of life stories to investigate. The students were required to use the exhibition to acquire information, using worksheets that guided them to the relevant objects and display cases. In addition, they received a sheet listing a chronological timeline that they could use to write down events that had occurred in the lives of the persons they were investigating and to relate these events to the general events of WWII. After conducting research on the exhibition, the students presented their imaginary dialogues at the end of the workshop in a plenary session.

The session was developed and led by one of the institute's educators, a white male historian and history teacher, who offered to help the individual groups through the task. He also provided a general introduction and plenary closing session, during which the students sat in a circle on stools in the middle of the exhibition space.

Participants

Participants included the museum educator of *Museon* and 22 fourth- and fifth-year pre-university education students aged 15 to 19 years (most students were 16 to 17 years of age). The student population reflects the broad variety of social, religious and cultural backgrounds found in the urban area in which the school is located. The classes were culturally and ethnically diverse (e.g. student backgrounds included: Moroccan, 35%; Surinamese, 30%; and Turkish, 15%). Although 80% of the students were born in the Netherlands, none of their parents were. A total of 60% of the participating students were female, and 74% identified as Muslim (the remaining students identified as Christian or Hindu). Based on the diversity in their responses to a questionnaire that revealed their different backgrounds, prior knowledge and views on the significance of WWII, 12 students were selected to participate in interviews and to be observed during the session.

Data collection and analysis

Data were collected from 2011 to 2012 by means of a content analysis of the museum's exhibition and learning session, student questionnaires and interviews and observations of the museum educator and students during the learning session.

We photographed the entire exhibition space, collected educational materials used in the learning session and videotaped the session to capture the educators' dialogue. A qualitative scheme of analysis developed through a previous study (De Bruijn 2014) was used to examine the extent to which the museum visit stimulated emotional engagement and contextualisation. We focused on techniques of mnemonic bridging and on narrative references to present-day events or processes other than historical analogies and we conducted a narrative analysis of the various plot structures and perspectives used.

The student questionnaires and interviews were conducted before and after the visit to examine the students' entrance narratives prior to the visit and their degrees of engagement during the visit. The interviewed students were videotaped during the learning session. Responses to the questionnaires and recorded and transcribed student interviews and students' statements made during the visit were analysed via constant comparison using ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software (Miles and Huberman 1994). We examined the entrance narratives to determine the students' degrees of familiarity with

various WWII narratives, their attributions of significance to these narratives and corresponding relationships with their self-reported ethnic identities. Our analysis of student engagement levels during the museum visit focused on students' emotional engagement with historical actors described in the exhibition. Emotional engagement was analysed by studying the students' degrees of interest in, affective responses to and identification with the historical actors. Students' nonverbal behaviours (e.g. movements and facial expressions) were analysed as an indicator of interest and emotional engagement. To examine students' contextualisation, we studied their use of historical knowledge and evidence or of universal and present-day values in understanding the historical actors and their acknowledgement and integration of multiple perspectives.

Findings

Personal belongings as a trigger for emotional engagement

The students' degrees of engagement with the topic prior to the museum visit ranged from emotionally engaged to rather disengaged positioning. For example, one student described her feelings of sadness:

I think it's really, really pitiful for the people who have been killed. WWII is really a black page in history. It's distressing for the people who wanted to live a normal life. I feel sad when I see the images' [student 4].

On the other side of the spectrum, one student wrote: 'I don't feel much when thinking about it because within my family, I've never heard about anyone who lived through the war' [student 22]. Due to their immigrant backgrounds and lack of family memories of the war, none of the students regarded WWII as their heritage. However, 21 of the 22 students considered WWII to be an important topic of history education, a perspective that many of them related to their Dutch identity and to their education from a Dutch school. In general, they attributed significance to the war, and particularly because it had changed the lives of many people and because its legacy is of significance to those who experienced the war and to their children. In this way, the students clearly related WWII to particular groups of people whom they often did not relate to themselves.

As most of the students did not feel emotionally attached to WWII, it is interesting to note that many of them were triggered by the exhibition's focus on personal stories, which primarily relied on methods of character focalisation to recount narratives of WWII through the eyes of those who had directly experienced it (Bal 2009). One student elaborated:

Because you easily forget that it was a personal war as well, an individual war, everyone fending for themselves, and uh, it's like a war with so many millions of deaths [...] Because people have been through it individually and it has affected them personally and if they then show their personal belongings [in the museum], that's so much more beautiful than something more general [student 2].

The museum stimulated such engagement by presenting the various life stories and related artefacts in one open space, offering no fixed walking route. Resembling a synchronic approach to the past, this exhibition design provided a sense of immersion. Most of the text panels and object labels were written in a first-person narrative mode with texts having been paraphrased from oral history interviews. Furthermore, a couple of display cases offered seemingly authentic video footage, family pictures or audio clips of certain children telling a particular anecdote. Some of these audio clips were provided through earpieces, a technique often used by museums to create an intimate atmosphere (Witcomb 2015). Several students were attracted to these earpieces, although in most cases their assignment did not require them to listen to them. In addition to the museum reinforcing a focus on personal stories in various ways, emotional engagement among the students also stemmed from the fact that the exhibition focused specifically on children's perspectives. Half of the interviewed students highlighted the fact that these children were like themselves, showing that they could more easily relate to the experiences of those of their own age. They talked about that the children had to leave their parents or lost them, could not attend school and experienced so much misery at such an early age.

A second stimulant of emotional engagement included the objects in the exhibition. Several students stated that the objects made them realise that ‘it actually happened’ and that ‘it is all real’ or that the objects helped them empathise with the war children.

An analysis of the objects mentioned in the interviews shows that artefacts presented with a specific emotional story attached to them had a particularly strong impact. The students indicated that for these cases, objects acted as triggers that generated interest and that encouraged them to learn about the story behind an artefact. One of these objects, for instance, was a bracelet that an Auschwitz-Birkenau survivor used to obscure the number tattooed on her arm. One student explained:

I read the story about the girl, how she felt at that moment and why that bracelet was so important to her and then I understood why it has been preserved and why it was of so much significance to her and that is just, if you really see that and read, you feel more compassionate [student 5].

The way that the bracelet was displayed against a family picture and personal letter and with a short film explaining the significance of the object contributed to this student’s emotional engagement. Generic objects more typically encountered in exhibitions on WWII and that were not shown as artefacts explicitly related to a specific personal recollection, such as a Star of David and military equipment, did not trigger as much engagement.

The fact that the students were primarily engaged with personal stories attributed to the objects rather than with the artefacts themselves could also be explained by the setup of the learning session, which encouraged the students to study information available to them on text panels and object labels, as they needed this information to reconstruct the biography of two persons featured in the exhibition. Furthermore, activity sheets that *Museon* provided only directed the students to relevant drawers and display cases rather than highlighting specific information on the objects or encouraging the students to engage with them. In the wrap-up session, during which they re-enacted interviews with the children featured in the exhibition, none of the students mentioned the artefacts on display.

Third, the learning session aimed to further reinforce the emotional engagement fostered by the personal stories through imitation and replication by encouraging the students to act out the information that they had gathered as interviews between a journalist and the two persons they had investigated in the exhibition on the day of the exhibition’s opening. The assignment read as follows:

Write a conversation between the two war children you have chosen. Use your creativity, imagination, logical reasoning and knowledge of the Second World War. The conversation should consist of at least 400 words. Use as your first sentence: ‘Where did you live in 1940?’

Six students reported that the interview activity helped them empathise with the children depicted in the exhibition. For example, one student explained that it generated images in his head and that it made him feel like a different person for a short while. The exercise encouraged them to take a first-person perspective and to verbalise the experiences and emotions of children who had lived through WWII. It directed the students to draw on universal human experiences of being children themselves by referring to their ‘creativity, imagination, logical reasoning’ as possible resources for their role-play conversations. In his introduction, the educator altered the assignment slightly by asking the students to write their conversations down as interviews between a journalist and the two children, possibly adding a layer of distance, as journalists apply a more investigative approach in their questioning.

This re-enactment task is in line with current trends to bring the past to life and to allow visitors to sense ‘what it was like’ using sound, images and smell and text panels that ask visitors to imagine what they would have done in a similar situation (McRainey and Russick 2010). The assignment at *Museon* seemed to aim at more than just the experiences of a past world, as the re-enactment task carried a moral message on the disruptive effects of war and encouraged a commitment to actively contribute to preventing conflicts in the present. This was exemplified by the educator at the end of the learning session, who used the bridging technique of historical analogy to draw parallels between the past and present in explaining that there is a common thread across all of the stories featured in the exhibition in the sense that war creates conditions in which it is impossible to act as a child.

So this makes clear, and I'd like to end with this, that War, whether it's the Second World War or if you're in Libya now in the troubled area: war makes it so that you can't be a child anymore. You have to be aware, hunt for food, make sure that you don't get caught up in a fight. You have to hide sometimes, you can't play anymore, you can't go to school, it actually unravels your entire existence.

This analogy was also present in the exhibition through a small video screen showing interviews with present-day refugee children displayed at the entrance of the exhibition. The presence of a memorial listing the 2,061 Jewish, Sinti and Roma children deported from The Hague in 1942 showed the strong significance that is attributed to the history of WWII in Dutch society today while the dark exhibition space with its tilted display cases worked with the students' sense of balance, communicating that WWII was a time of chaos and instability for people in a very embodied manner. The idea of the war's history as a 'terrible gift' (Simon 2006) was strengthened by the fact that the stories and most of the objects shown were in fact gifts from eye witnesses of WWII to *Museon* with the specific wish of educating future generations about the war to prevent it from ever occurring again. For one of the students, the very idea that people had given away their precious personal belongings for them to learn from this experience allowed him to instantly grasp the significance of these objects and their message.

The strategies used by *Museon* to stimulate emotional engagement did not resonate with all of the students. Seven students reported feeling neutral throughout the visit and three students reported feeling neutral and bored. Half of the students on the other hand stated the learning session did not trigger their emotions enough and expressed a dislike of active inquiry, which they thought resembled a school setting. They preferred to watch a movie about the topic. One of them explained:

Then you're just watching and seeing these emotions and now we had to read about it, but I think, yes, it gets you more, you know, it touches you more when you see it through a movie [student 4].

The active engagement that the workshop forced this student into did not sit well with her. She preferred a more passive, although deeply emotional, engagement with the topic. The students' discomfort with the re-enactment exercise as well as their remarks about not feeling emotionally engaged both related to a distanced feeling toward the history of WWII that the students reported before participating in the learning session. In part, the students regarded the 35 persons as strangers of a foreign history, placing high demands on the bridging techniques used in the exhibition and on the learning session. However, another distinctive feature of the exhibition and of the learning session – the explicit use of multiple perspectives – did resonate deeply with the students.

Contextualisation through multiple perspectives

To examine *Museon's* contextualisation strategies, we will discuss: (1) engagement with multiple perspectives and (2) the use of sources and background knowledge to build a context.

(1) The exhibition and learning session presented many different plotlines and perspectives that allowed the students to broaden their narratives of WWII. The exhibition as a whole, the various life stories and contextual information shown through the display cases, the educational activity sheets, and the educator's framing can all be viewed as different narratives interacting with one another and with the students' entrance narratives. These entrance narratives showed a rather uniform account at the beginning of the project that reflected the dominant narrative of WWII used in Dutch society, which focuses on Jewish persecution (including stories of people's lives in hiding and in concentration camps) and on the starvation that people experienced during the Dutch famine of 1944–45.

The different perspectives presented by *Museon* related to various geographical areas, highlighting that WWII affected the entire world. The exhibition covered the experiences of children in, for instance, the Netherlands, Germany and the Dutch East Indies. At the start of the session, the educator also drew attention to the global scale of the conflict by asking students which continents were involved in the war. Furthermore, the children featured in *Museon's* exhibition had different backgrounds and experiences, representing distinct perspectives on the war. Each group of students investigated the story of two children whose experiences bared resemblance thematically. The contrasting set up of these pairs corresponded to the design of the pillar-shaped display cases, wherein for instance a Moroccan

teenager who enlisted as a professional soldier in the French army and a girl who was active in the resistance movement were brought together under the theme of 'courage'. Another display case on 'liberation' described the story of a Jewish girl who ended up in Auschwitz-Birkenau and that of a boy whose parents were members of the National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands.

Many students enjoyed learning about these different geographical and historical perspectives. One student explained how the exhibition, with all of these stories brought together in one room, made clear to him that the whole world was involved in WWII in very different ways. This insight may have been reinforced by the synchronic approach reflected in the exhibition's design. Some of the perspectives presented were completely new to the students and changed their existing understanding of WWII. For example, one student said:

The diversity of stories – I thought that in most cases a child was sent to the camps and was killed immediately, but if you really delve into it, you see that everyone has a different story. One lost her mother, another lost a loved one, those kinds of things [student 6]

Another student reported being surprised about the person she had investigated, as she had not known that another group of people (Sinti) had been repressed as well. Some of the students referred to the educator's introduction, in which he had stressed that the curators 'had searched for as many different stories as possible', and to the end of the session when they presented their stories to one another. The different perspectives *Museon* offered thus provided them with a more diversified account of WWII, broadening their understanding of this historical event.

Museon's choice to include non-traditional perspectives on WWII triggered the students' interest and appealed to them in a way that made them willing to seriously engage with these narratives. For example, the four students who described their identity as partly Moroccan mentioned the story about a Moroccan soldier in the French army as a particularly interesting story from the exhibition. One of them elaborated:

Because that man is of the same descent as I, so yes, I always find it interesting to know how they contributed to the war and if they contributed to it and how they dealt with that and yes how they left their families in their country of origin [student 14].

For these four students, this rarely touched upon perspective shown in the exhibition and the learning session generated a feeling of identification and through this affective engagement helped them develop a more contextualised account of WWII. Interestingly, three other students who did not describe themselves as Moroccan felt connected to this story as well based on identification with their more general immigrant descent. One of them said that because he was an immigrant, he could more easily understand and empathise with this person than with a person who was in hiding, because he had never been in hiding himself.

Although the students did expand their knowledge of WWII by engaging with these multiple perspectives, our results do not indicate that the students made the more difficult move towards integrating these points of view into their existing narratives. The task that should have allowed the students to combine the various perspectives into a multi-perspective narrative did not have this intended effect. Slightly different instructions to the task made by the educator – to write a dialogue between a journalist rather than a conversation between two persons featured in the exhibition – may have allowed the students to divide the tasks and to each dive into only one story. A few students even mentioned that the diverse personal stories presented this history in a way that was too fragmented. One of the students said:

It's really different for every person, so I don't really need to know how one person lived during wartime. That's why I didn't really make any progress [student 5].

This student felt that because the personal and detailed stories did not tell the whole story, she did not learn much about the war at the museum. This remark raises questions concerning how the students used historical contextual knowledge present in the museum to connect the various stories through a contextualised WWII narrative.

(2) The museum provided background information on WWII in the archival wall display and on the timeline activity sheet. The task set by the educator to write an imaginary dialogue between a journalist and two persons featured in the exhibition encouraged the students to review and interpret various primary and secondary sources presented in the exhibition. Our results however indicate that in general, the students did not engage in this process of historical enquiry. They rarely used the timeline activity sheets and although most did examine some closets and drawers on the archival wall, they seldom reflected on this information in the plenary session or in the post-interviews.

This absence of evaluating historical sources and evidence likely stems from the fact that the assignment did not explicitly require the students to use available sources in building their narratives, nor did it encourage them to consider the specific historical contexts of the people that they were investigating to explain and evaluate their actions and motives. The assignment also did not explicitly guide the students into a critical examination of the various layers of interpretation that encapsulated the objects and information shown in the exhibition. As we noted above, however, half of the students also disliked the enquiry-based approach used in the learning session. One student indicated that her group had ignored the displays showing contextual information, as they felt they already knew enough about this information. Our results however show that some students actually did not have sufficient contextual knowledge to understand the perspectives of some historical actors featured in the exhibition and that they did not acquire such information by the end of the learning session. One post-interview for instance shows that one of the students did not fully grasp the context of Jews wearing a Star of David in public during the 1930s and 1940s as a measure taken by the Nazi regime, for which resistance would have had serious consequences.

Yes, I asked [the educator] why as a Jew would you walk on the street with a Jewish badge when that was exactly the danger: you will be banned exactly because you're a Jew or you'll be sent to a camp. Why then would you show that you're a Jew when that is not visible on you? [...]

I will never understand that. Maybe, uhh, yeah, then I try to empathise with it, imagine that the, uhh, that the Muslims would be banned and that something would reveal that I'm a Muslim because I wear a headscarf. Would I then take it off, would I then present myself differently, let's say, by dyeing my hair blonde or whatever? But uhh maybe it's pride or uhh I don't know.

The student thus did not possess the knowledge required to fully understand the historical perspectives of the person she had investigated. Rather than using the information provided by the exhibition, she tried to make sense of it by drawing on her own experiences, which did not prove to be sufficient and which actually distorted her understanding of WWII. Such comparisons may have been stimulated by the exhibition's and educator's emphasis on children's experiences. The analogy of all of the children being victims of the war focused on a universal and timeless view of childhood and may have blurred the unicity of the historical figures. Thus, while serving as a powerful tool for engaging the students, it may also have hindered the students' understanding of the children in their particular historical context.

One student did evaluate the exhibition's sources. He said that he would rather have searched for information on the Internet or through documentaries, relating his preference for such sources to his perception that the various stories shown in the exhibition were prejudiced in the sense that they represented personal perspectives and in general in the sense that they were based on a Western point of view. While the idea that the Internet or documentaries would provide more neutral information can of course be disputed, his assessment that the exhibition provided an overly Western-centred account is accurate in the sense that non-Western perspectives were always framed from a Dutch point of view. The learning session thus caused this student to question the seemingly objective nature of the exhibition, in turn unintentionally stimulating a critical approach toward cultural heritage.

Discussion

This paper investigated interactions between a specific museum exhibition, the strategies it used, the entrance narratives of school students and their abilities to engage in historical empathy. Integrating

theories of historical empathy with an analytical framework on the configuration of temporality and engagement in exhibitions allowed us to reveal the complex and continuous interplays between cognitive and affective dimensions of learning history within the context of a museum visit. This analytical perspective may have limited our study by focusing too heavily on learning processes and on the educational goals of museums, as visitors may have other needs than these and may apply their own attitudes when dealing with cultural heritage. This limitation is reinforced by our focus on the single case of one educational museum. Nevertheless, our analysis provides insight into the processes and interactions that occur during a museum visit that can broaden our understanding of what learning in a museum may entail.

While most of the students did not feel related to WWII prior to their museum visit, the museum managed to engage many of them in various ways. The personal stories shown in the exhibition and artefacts related to these stories acted as a stimulant for emotional engagement for several students. Objects that were explicitly presented in relation to personal stories were especially effective at triggering emotional engagement in congruence with a study on visitor responses to exhibitions on the British slave trade conducted by Smith (2016). Paradoxically, by offering multiple perspectives, a strategy geared towards contextualisation, the exhibition and learning session also helped some students affectively engage with the subject matter through their identification with particular narratives based on a shared cultural background. This finding underscores the interplay between cognitive and affective dimensions of historical empathy, as the feeling of identification fostered by this perspective also allowed these students to develop a broader understanding of WWII.

While in this case the museum positively related to the students' entrance narratives, for many students the exhibition did not meet their expectations, as it did not offer many opportunities to become fully immersed into the past. Their dissatisfaction likely originates from a memory culture of WWII that has a strong tendency towards experience-based forms of representation (Ribbens and Captain 2011). Moreover, some students' prior ideas and experiences interfered with their understanding of historical points of view within their historical contexts. Many students did not contextualise the new perspectives and did not integrate them into their existing narratives of WWII. This can likely be attributed to the structure of the learning session, which did not encourage the students to analyse information and objects shown in the exhibition as historical sources, presenting them as neutral and objective. Another contributing factor, however, was the ways in which the museum communicated an historical analogy and moral message on the impacts of war on children, which limited a multi-perspective approach and may have distracted the students from carrying out thorough evaluations of the different perspectives. In this regard, our study is limited in its focus on a sensitive historical topic, as discourse on WWII in the Netherlands and the global memory of the Holocaust over the last decades have evolved into a specific historical narrative wherein the importance of democratic values is strongly emphasised.

Our findings hence reveal potential means for advancing historical empathy in a museum context through several strategies that can provide unexpected and promising results in stimulating both cognitive and affective dimensions of this skill. The fact that none of the students were able to fully engage in historical empathy however also points to specific challenges of the museum context. Museum exhibitions are often heavily shaped by the given contextual background, aims and mission of a museum but are presented as neutral and objective, supported by the authoritative voice of the institution. To support the development of historical empathy, museums must be aware of the ways in which they implicitly provide various layers of interpretation. Allowing objects and sources to speak for themselves allows visitors to investigate them as evidence and to use them to reconstruct perspectives of historical actors.

While providing a fully multi-perspective narrative can allow for a more inclusive approach, engaging people in actually applying multiple perspectives requires providing a platform for dialogue and debate (Ashley 2005). Facilitating discussion on museum roles in society, on the significance of their presentations and on potential conflicts between people's entrance narratives and a museum's narrative can help guide people's affective engagement and contextualisation of historical perspectives (Gosselin

2011). Reflections on emotions raised and on the notion of museums as present-day manifestations of today's memory culture, especially in dealing with sensitive histories, is necessary to thoroughly support and scaffold processes of historical empathy.

Note

1. The student is referring to images of WWII shown in movies (e.g. movies about Anne Frank and *Schindler's List*). No particular images were included in the questionnaire.

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