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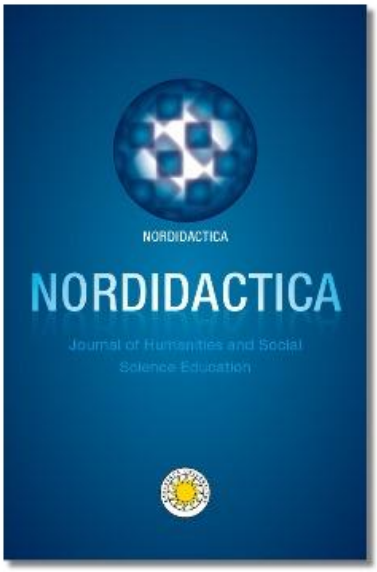

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“A Sense of the Moral Weight of the Past”: Framing Ethical and Affective Significance in Relation to Swedish Middle-School Students and Historical Empathy

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Abstract: Building on a previous study of Swedish middle-school students' perspectives on historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024b), where students expressed a strong moral engagement with the past, this article further explores and defines two tentative criteria: ethical and affective significance. Using thematic analysis of focus-group interviews and relating the findings to historical empathy (Karn, 2023), the study shows that ethical significance involves making moral judgments about history that students care about and wish to change, while affective significance reflects more intuitive emotional responses. The results indicate that students are highly interested in ethically significant history and its implications for the present and future, yet experience the history classroom as largely silent on these issues. Students also express feelings of guilt and responsibility in relation to ethically challenging histories and a desire to engage with these topics in greater depth. The findings point to didactical opportunities for a more inclusive and engaging history education and highlight guilt as an underexplored dimension of historical significance.

KEYWORDS: HISTORICAL THINKING, HISTORY EDUCATION, HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE, ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE, AFFECTIVE SIGNIFICANCE, HISTORICAL EMPATHY, ETHICAL JUDGMENTS, GUILT, ACTION READINESS

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Introduction

Perceptions of historical significance are, according to Barton (2005), at the core of all history and history education, as not everything and everyone from the past can be included. What we choose to highlight are the events, people, or processes in the past that are meaningful for us. In a recent empirical study (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024b), ethical dimensions[1] and affective dimensions[2] were unexpectedly common in the reflections of middle-school students when attributing historical significance. As students intuitively expressed this "sense of the moral weight of the past" (Levstik, 2008, p. 375), they went beyond the boundaries of the analytical framework for historical significance (Lévesque, 2005, 2008) that was used. Two new, tentative criteria, *ethical significance* and *affective significance* were proposed to comprehensively capture and clarify how these Swedish students spontaneously attributed historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024b). In this way, this article focuses specifically on historical significance and the ethical dimension, two of the six historical thinking concepts in The Big Six framework (Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013). The remaining concepts are evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence, and historical perspectives. Ethical judgments in history education have been under-acknowledged and under-researched (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Lévesque, 2008). Specifically, ethical and affective dimensions of historical significance have not been fully conceptualized (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2025), despite being considered in some previous studies (Barton & McCully, 2005; Levstik, 2008). Neither have affective dimensions been fully developed in relation to historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). There is also a lack of attention to the links between historical thinking, ethics, and history education (Milligan, Gibson & Peck, 2018) and how history could serve as a moral guide from a student perspective (Löfström, Ammert, Sharp & Edling, 2020). Thorp & Persson (2020) propose that research on history education should move from today's primary focus on the transferability and operationalization of academic standards and instead include an "intersubjective, unsettled and existential dimension of historical thinking" (Thorp & Persson, 2020, p. 898). This paper attempts to respond to this appeal by exploring the ethical and affective dimensions of the procedural concept of historical significance in relation to students' perspectives.

The aim of this study is therefore to further explore and define the tentative criteria ethical and affective significance. This is done in two distinct steps: first through an in-depth thematic analysis of data generated from focus-group discussions with Swedish middle-school students reflecting on what constitutes important history for them; and

[1] This term should not be confused with *the ethical dimension*, a historical thinking concept (Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013). By *ethical dimensions*, this study refers to ethical values and concepts of morality, including notions of good and bad, as well as right and wrong.

[2] By *affective dimensions*, this study refers to expressions of feelings or emotions in regard to historical content. It is important to note that we do not wish to imply that ethical dimensions have no affective component. However, the term affective dimensions is used here to refer to a more exclusively intuitive expression of feeling or emotion, which does not involve deeper reflection.

second, by examining the findings in relation to a composite framework for historical empathy (Karn, 2023). The following research questions have guided the study:

- How can ethical and affective significance be described and framed based on empirical data?
- What historical content do students perceive as significant in relation to these criteria?
- How can elements of historical empathy (Karn, 2023) contribute to the conceptualization of ethical and affective significance?

Background

This section provides a background to the curriculum for Swedish compulsory school in relation to historical significance, ethical dimensions and historical content.

Curricula in relation to historical content, historical significance, and ethical dimensions

The history curriculum, together with how it is enacted in classrooms, provides an important context for understanding the empirical data; both the historical references students drew on and how they evaluated what they perceived as significant history.

The overarching aim for history education in Swedish compulsory schools, according to the curriculum Lgr11[3], is for students to develop a historical frame of reference and their knowledge of historical consciousness, as well as to reflect on uses of history and practice critical source evaluation (Skolverket, 2019). While five of the six historical thinking concepts (Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013) are explicitly or implicitly included in the history syllabus, there is no explicit mention of historical significance (Skolverket, 2019). In Swedish lower primary school[4], history is studied together with religious education (non-confessional), geography, and civics, and covers history from the Stone Age to the Iron Age, but also includes local history. In middle-school[5], history is a separate subject, covering history relevant to Sweden and the Nordic countries, from early history up until 1850 (Skolverket, 2019). Although students participating in this study were almost at the end of 6th grade, only one school had managed to cover the entire time period outlined in the syllabus, according to follow-up interviews with the teachers.

The curriculum for Swedish compulsory school (Skolverket, 2019) also emphasizes values, democracy, and humanity. It highlights knowledge development alongside key principles such as respect for human rights, objectivity, equality, compassion, democratic principles, and intrinsic human worth. Schools are tasked with promoting

[3] This study was carried out just before the implementation of the new curriculum, Lgr22 (Skolverket, 2022). Both this and the previous curriculum, Lgr11 (Skolverket, 2019), apply to students in Grades 0-9.
[4] Grades 0–3 (ages 6–9).
[5] Grades 4–6 (ages 10–12).

society's shared values in line with "ethics borne by a Christian tradition and Western humanism" (Skolverket, 2018, p. 5). At the same time, teaching must be non-denominational, objective, and free from discrimination. The curriculum also promotes qualities such as justice, generosity, tolerance, and responsibility, fostering individuality, and active societal participation. Teaching in all subjects should incorporate four perspectives: historical, environmental, international, and ethical. The ethical perspective, crucial to this article, aims to foster students' capacity for responsible decision-making. The history syllabus emphasizes the ethical dimension more in lower primary school, while other subjects, such as religious education and civics, also address ethical perspectives (Skolverket, 2019).

Previous research

Cotkin (2008) has proposed that since the beginning of the new millennium, a *moral turn* has been taking place in history, involving the development of a problematizing and productive thinking process rather than a history with ready answers. Despite this moral turn, research on ethical dimensions and historical empathy in relation to historical thinking and historical significance has been relatively scarce.

This section first provides an overview of historical significance as a theoretical concept and then focuses on research exploring ethical dimensions related to historical thinking more broadly, as well as specifically in relation to the concepts of historical significance and historical empathy as used in this study. The chapter also offers an overview of previous conceptualizations of ethical and affective dimensions.

Historical significance as a thinking concept

Historical significance is a thinking concept that focuses on the selection process of what could or should be included in history (Seixas, 1994). Students' preconceptions of historical significance should be emphasized to foster a deeper understanding of history both as a discipline and as a school subject, as well as helping students to orient themselves historically (Barton, 2005; Lévesque, 2008; Lomas, 1990; Seixas, 1997). In one of the earliest articles examining students' perspectives on historical significance, the concept was defined as:

the valuing criterion through which *the historian* assesses which pieces of the entire possible corpus of the past can fit together into a *meaningful and coherent story that is worthwhile* (Seixas, 1994, p. 281, our italics).

This quote by Seixas points to at least four important epistemic aspects of historical significance that also can be seen as important in the development of the concept over time. First, the implicit or explicit methods of the academic discipline formed the basis for the early conceptualizations of historical significance (see for example Danto, 1985; Ellis, 1992; Lomas, 1990; Partington, 1980). Secondly, historical significance is often conceptualized and used in terms of criteria. Early frameworks such as Partington's (1980), primarily focusing on objective criteria, are perhaps among the most referenced (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2025). There are also frameworks for teaching historical

significance, such as the 5R model (Counsell, 2004) and the GREAT model (Phillips, 2002), as well as that of Peck & Seixas (2008) and the Big Six framework (Seixas & Morton, 2013), while others were conceptionalized in relation to research on students' perceptions of historical significance (e.g., Cercadillo, 2000, 2006; Lévesque, 2005, 2008; Seixas, 1994, 1997). Thirdly, what is historically significant must be worthwhile and meaningful to *someone*. Historical significance and its criteria are therefore not inherent in history, but instead lie with those who interpret it, that is, ourselves (Seixas, 1997). Criteria relating to this subjective quality of significance have been added in more recent frameworks (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2025) and research (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a). Finally, Seixas (1994) points out that historical significance helps create larger historical narratives about "us", as historical significance is constantly renegotiated based on different local, global, and national perspectives or based on personal historical positionings such as gender, religion, or ethnicity (Peck, 2009, 2010; Seixas, 2017; VanSledright, 1998).

Historical significance in relation to ethical dimensions and students' perspectives

Previous research on historical significance indicates that students' historical positionings (VanSledright, 1998), understood as the reference frames through which they connect past and present, influence what history they perceive as significant (e.g., Barton, 2005; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Epstein, 2000; Grever, Haydn & Ribbens, 2008; Lévesque, 2005; Levstik & Groth, 2005; Peck, 2009, 2010; Sant, González-Monfort, Santisteban Fernández & Oller Freixa, 2015; Terzian & Yeager, 2007). A previous narrative review paper related to research on students' perspectives on historical significance identified three tenets in recent research, two of which involve connections to ethical dimensions (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a). First, students defined "dark pages" of history as significant (Barton, 2005; Grever et al., 2008; Kim, 2018; Levstik & Groth, 2005; Sant et al., 2015; Sheehan, 2011; Virta, 2016). Second, students in some studies adopted a moral stance when determining historical significance. For instance, students in New Zealand used criteria such as *learning from others*, *teaching the world*, and *fairness* (Levstik, 2008, p. 379), while girls in Northern Ireland focused on *memory*, *justice*, and the importance of *aiding others* when selecting significant history (Barton, 2005). Swedish middle-school students discussed historical significance in relation to learning from "morally good examples" (Bergman, 2020, p. 172). Middle-school students in another Swedish study instinctively employed ethical and affective dimensions, as well as a counter-narrative with ethical dimensions, "the silent and silenced narratives of alternative and ethically questionable histories*",* when attributing and justifying historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024b, p. 18).

Historical thinking: historical empathy, historical perspectives, and the ethical dimension

More research on history education has focused on the ethical dimensions of historical consciousness rather than historical thinking (e.g., Ammert, 2017; Ammert,

Edling, Löfström & Sharp, 2022; Chinnery, 2013; Edling, Sharp, Löfström & Ammert, 2020; Edling, Löfström, Sharp & Ammert, 2022). In research on historical thinking, some studies have recognized the interplay between it and ethical dimensions in history education. Brooks (2011) concludes that historical empathy in history education is both a subjective and an objective endeavor. In this way, historical empathy is seen as an active process embedded in historical method, also involving reflection and understanding of different perspectives in (past) social action relating to ethical questions (Karn, 2023; Milligan, Gibson & Peck, 2018; Yeager, Foster, Maley, Anderson & Morris, 1998). Some studies recognize that critical thinking, historical understanding, and moral judgments are intertwined (Bellino & Selman, 2012; Edling et al., 2020; Nygren, 2016; Perez-Manjarrez, 2017). Research in a Swedish context (Nolgård, 2023) has also highlighted the importance of helping students to recognize and understand the ongoing relevance of historical and moral dimensions, as well as students' responsibility in relation to difficult histories. Nolgård (2023) here argues that connecting the past to present issues, such as human rights, and to the world the students live in, demands a more comprehensive understanding of responsibility.

Research has also problematized the relationship between an ethical dimension and historical thinking. Husbands & Pedry (2012, p. 131) highlight the double challenge for students to understand both the past *and* adult behavior within it, suggesting that historical empathetic thinking and students' "affective understandings" can bridge this gap by contextualizing historical knowledge (Husbands & Pedry, 2012, p. 131). Thorp & Persson (2020) advocate a historical thinking that emphasizes existential meaning-making aspects rather than an academic, analytical method, enabling students to apply and problematize history and develop as socially and politically aware citizens (Thorp & Persson, 2020).

Ethical and affective dimensions in relation to historical thinking

Using ethical and affective dimensions in historical thinking involves emotional connections with historical figures, a process closely connected to different elements of historical empathy (Brooks, 2011; Karn, 2023; Milligan, Gibson & Peck, 2018; Yeager et al., 1998). According to Lee & Shemilt (2011), historical empathy is not a skill to be performed but "a way of *explaining* past forms of life that were different from ours, and a *disposition* to recognize the possibility and importance of making them intelligible" (Lee & Shemilt, 2011, p. 48). Yeager et al. (1998, p. 21) explain it as a way to "understand people within their own historical context and to interpret the past using the best available knowledge".

Historical empathy as a historical thinking concept is often described as a dual-dimensional construct, including distinct and opposite, but related components: one subjective and affective, the other more objective and cognitive (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Brooks, 2011; Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Historical empathy has been explained in different ways. Historical empathy has been categorized into two distinct thinking concepts, the *ethical dimension* and *historical perspectives* (Seixas, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013). Barton & Levstik (2004) define it as comprising two components: *care*

and *perspective recognition.* Endacott & Brooks (2013) suggest three components: *historical contextualization, perspective-taking*, and *affective connection*, as does Lévesque (2008): *imagination, contextualizing,* and *judging the past*. Karn presents a more comprehensive framework involving *evidence and contextualization, informed historical imagination, historical perspectives, ethical judgments,* and *caring* (Karn, 2023).

In order to more precisely situate the theoretical framework used in this study (Karn, 2023, see 'Theoretical framework for analysis' below) as well as the tentative criteria of ethical and affective significance explored in the study, previous conceptualizations of ethical and affective dimensions of historical thinking are presented below.

Previous conceptualizations of ethical and affective dimensions

There are primarily three conceptual frameworks for historical thinking that explicitly have included ethical dimensions: Barton & Levstik's (2004) two tools for *historical empathy*, Lévesque's (2008) framework for *historical empathy,* and Seixas (2017) and Seixas & Morton's (2013) concept *the ethical dimension*. Barton & Levstik (2004) developed six tools that students need to make sense of the past. Two of these involve historical empathy, here described as two conceptually distinct and opposite, but related, facets of the same tool: one revolving around different conceptions of *caring* and one involving cognitive aspects of *perspective recognition* (Barton & Levstik, 2004). The model for historical empathy by Lévesque (2008) consists of three interrelated concepts: first, *imagination,* re-creating what it was like in the historical context, preferably using multiple sources and multiple senses, secondly, *contextualizing* "in space and time and in relation to the evidence" (Lévesque, 2008, p. 165), and lastly, critically, and with self-awareness, *judging the past* in relation to certain moralities. *The ethical dimension* as conceptualized by Seixas (2017) and Seixas & Morton (2013) is described as one of the six historical thinking concepts, the other ones being *historical significance, evidence, continuity and change, cause and consequence,* and *historical perspectives*. The ethical dimension involves the challenging task of making historical interpretations and forming historical and ethical judgments about the past, in this way intertwining questions of heritage, power, and memory in the writing and learning of history (Seixas, 2006, 2017; Seixas & Morton, 2013). There is a close link to the concept of *historical perspectives*, which involves an ability to interpret events within their different historical contexts, or "understanding the 'past as a foreign country'" (Seixas, 2006, p. 2).

Affective dimensions are rarely conceptualized within frameworks of historical thinking and historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2025). Notable exceptions include the "terrifying" criterion for historical significance (Phillips, 2002), and the "affective connection", one of three components of historical empathy (Endacott & Brooks, 2013). Lévesque (2008, pp. 164–165) points to emotional reactions as an important part of historical empathy.

Conceptualizing ethical and affective significance in relation to historical empathy could support the development and further conceptualization of subjective criteria of

historical significance (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2025) and help to "imbue the study of history with meaning" (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 170).

Material and method

The empirical data in this study was generated in five middle schools in and around a large Swedish city during spring and autumn of 2021[6]. The schools included varied settings: semi-rural (H-school), suburban (V-school), suburban and cooperative (K-school), urban private school (P-school), and socio-economically challenged (M-school). The schools were selected to ensure variation in geographical location, school organization, and socio-economic context, rather than for comparative purposes. In the participating classes, all students who had handed in signed informed consent forms were divided into mixed-gender focus groups. A total of 53 students who studied Grade 6 history participated. The research methodology drew inspiration from previous studies (e.g., Barton 2005; Barton & Levstik, 1998; Levstik 2008), employing focus-group interviews using elicitation techniques with pictures (Barton, 2015). The 26 pictures were aimed to stimulate interest, provoke reflections, and aid recollection, and not to provide a "correct answer" to what is officially seen as historically significant. The interactive nature of the method allowed students to engage in dynamic conversations where they discussed, problematized, and assigned historical significance.

In the focus groups, the students collaboratively choose the eight pictures that they considered to be most significant, from 26 historical pictures, for a fictional exhibition representing "important history"". The pictures aligned with the history syllabus (Skolverket, 2019), spanning from ca 8000 BC to the early 20th century, including pictures from local history. A semi-structured group interview followed where students were asked to give reasons for their image choices and to give opinions on others' possible choices. They were also asked to identify "missing" significant history among the pictures, and the different sources of their historical knowledge. The focus groups were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed into Swedish. All quotations from students in this article have been translated into English by the authors.

Methods of analysis

A previous study showed that middle-school students often justified historical significance through ethical and affective reasoning (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024b). Many of these arguments extended beyond Lévesque's (2005, 2008) existing criteria, leading to the identification of ethical and affective significance as distinct analytical dimensions which this present study aims to examine more closely and conceptually clarify. Using the same data, a deeper thematic analysis was conducted, and results were examined through a historical empathy framework. The exploration was conducted in three steps, using NVivo software for the analysis in the first two.

[6] For a more thorough description of the method, implementation of the study and other results, see Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024b.

The transcribed data from the focus groups was first coded inductively, identifying references where students, implicitly or explicitly, expressed either ethical or affective dimensions when talking about significant history. By ethical dimensions, this study refers to ethical values and concepts of morality, including notions of good and bad, as well as right and wrong. By affective dimensions, this study refers to intuitive expressions of feelings or emotions regarding historical content, without deeper reflection.

In the second step, an inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was conducted, chosen for its usefulness in exploring new terrains and concepts (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Initially, the codes identified in the first step were clustered into themes. These themes were then reviewed against the entire data set and each other, leading to the creation of overarching themes for the two dimensions. Within each theme, sub-themes were identified. In this coding process, a single reference could correspond to one or more consecutive sentences on the same topic and could be coded under multiple themes or subthemes. The identified themes can be described as distinct but also interrelated within each dimension. For example, the subtheme "Understanding Past Unfairness and Hardships to Understand Present Privileges" under the broader theme "Fairness" closely relates to the theme "Responsibility". In the sub-theme, students discuss both fairness/unfairness in the past *and* responsibilities in the present day, leading to some overlapping references in these themes.

In a third and final step, the conceptions of ethical and affective significance were explored in relation to historical empathy. This involved repeated close reading of the identified themes and subthemes, alongside the five elements of historical empathy as described by Karn (2023). This framework, as detailed below, was selected for three key reasons: it provides a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates and discusses other relevant theories on historical empathy (e.g., Barton & Levstik, 2004; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Lévesque, 2008; Seixas, 2006; Seixas & Morton, 2013; VanSledright, 2001); it contains cognitive, ethical, and affective elements; and it was specifically designed with students and educators in mind, making it highly suitable for this study. The following section will introduce and describe this framework in more detail.

Theoretical framework for analysis

Karn's (2023) composite framework for historical empathy will be used to discuss the results of the thematic analysis, further exploring and defining the criteria of ethical and affective significance. The elements in this cognitive-affective theoretical framework interact with each other in various ways, so the order of presentation below should not be viewed as a recommended sequence or ranking of importance.

The first element of historical empathy is *evidence and contextualization*, referring to the need to understand different perspectives in relation to a variety of sources when developing historical empathy. Historians do this through analyzing evidence and taking different historical contexts into consideration: the personal (inner) context, the

sociocultural (outer) context, and the contemporary (present-day) context (Lévesque, 2008).

The second element is *informed historical imagination*, tapping into the potential for imagination to increase engagement with and understanding of history. Imagination, paired with disciplinary logic, helps historians to fill in the knowledge gaps when complete evidence is not available. It also plays a role in interpreting the evidence (Karn, 2023).

Thirdly, there is the element of *historical perspectives*, involving "evidence-based inferences about the thoughts and feelings of the characters of history" (Seixas & Morton, 2013, p. 138). It is one of the historical thinking concepts in "The Big Six" (Seixas & Morton, 2013), where it is described as a cognitive act without involving the affective element (Karn, 2023). Also, historical perspectives are one of two facets of Barton & Levstik's (2004) conceptualization of historical empathy, care being the other, affective facet. Karn (2023) emphasizes the plural form of the element, considering the importance of adopting multiple perspectives on the past as this "promotes empathy in the past and present through a combination of thinking and feeling" (Karn, 2023, p. 93).

The fourth element of the framework is *ethical judgments*, defined as "the process of making decisions about an appropriate course of action based on social and personal conceptions of right and wrong" (Karn, 2023, p. 94). Encompassing the forming of ethical judgments about the decisions and perspectives of people in the past, on their own terms, it is closely related to the historical thinking concept "the ethical dimension" (Seixas & Morton, 2013). The challenge regarding this element is for students and historians to avoid ethical judgments on historical events that proceed from contemporary and/or personal views. It is of the essence here to acknowledge and critically consider one's own positionalities (VanSledright, 1998, 2001). Since this element can make visible how students' present-day perspectives shape judgments of the past, it also highlights connections between historical events, current understandings, and future implications (Karn, 2023).

The final element, *caring*, originates in Barton & Levstik's (2004) four conceptions of care:

a) *caring about* people and events in history, wanting and needing to know more about historical content that we feel a connection to; creates engagement;

b) *caring that* certain events happened, reacting ethically to their historical consequences, where the reaction could be affective but also cognitive;

c) *caring for* people who suffered injustices in the past, wanting to help (even though this is impossible); can be emotional and create engagement;

d) *caring to* use the acquired historical knowledge in the present, instigating a change in current beliefs and behaviors; calls for action.

For Karn, the element of *caring* relates to the affective parts of historical empathy. Helping students to care about, acknowledge, and critically engage with a variety of different perspectives might support the development of a more complex and multi-layered understanding of others. According to Karn (2023), this allows for an extended approach to historical thinking, with many new learning outcomes for students, and points to possibilities for a more inclusive historical education (Karn, 2023).

Results

The two criteria resulting from the thematic analysis, associated historical content and underlying themes and subthemes, will be introduced and described below using quotations with references that we considered to be representative of the entire data set[7].

Ethical significance

The coding process identified a total of 54 references where students in different ways employed ethical dimensions when discussing significant history. The thematic analysis revealed three key themes within ethical significance: *Fairness, Responsibility,* and *Guilt*[8]. Although groups from all schools were represented, the suburban and cooperative K-school was notably overrepresented. The references typically arose from deliberations on historical significance related to human and minority rights, gender and HBTQI+ equality, racism, colonialization, and child labor.

In the analysis of ethical significance, no references were found where students explicitly used terms like "ethical", "moral", "fair", or "fairness" in discussing their choices regarding historical significance. However, "right and wrong" was mentioned three times and "right or wrong" once. In some instances, "rights[9]" were referred to.

Themes

When students discussed issues in regard to ethical significance, reflections on ***Fairness***[10], connoting equal treatment for everyone, were most common (37 references). 12 groups from all participating schools in some way related to this ethical concept in connection to historical content such as rights of minorities and women, universal education for all, and the heritage of colonialism, slavery, and racism.

The analysis revealed three underlying subthemes connected to Fairness, the most common being students referring to *Injustices in the past* (18 references). In these references, students address historical injustices without reflecting on or discussing their impact on the present. The injustices they discuss can be categorized as either unresolved or resolved. Resolved injustices reflect on the phenomena of child labor and the introduction of schooling for all in Sweden in the 1900s. The students almost exclusively associate this latter reform with the struggle for equal rights for women. The students also discussed unfair and unresolved historical issues such as racism, colonialism, and minority rights:

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[7] The quotations have been translated to capture the conversational tone and essence of the original Swedish, while keeping interjections and hesitation markers for authenticity.
[8] In Swedish: "rättvisa" "ansvar", and "skuld".
[9] In Swedish: "rättigheter".
[10] The label for this theme has been carefully considered. *Fairness*, connoting neutrality and lack of favoritism, and more situational and subjective reflections on fairness (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) was chosen over *Justice*, which refers more to the quality of conforming to law but also to morals based on ethics, rationality, and equity (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

> *M21[11]: Like with dark-skinned people, you can see it's a pretty big deal […]. Then, I think we should see the same thing with the Roma [M2C: mmmm] because what the Roma have gone through, dark-skinned people or Black people have also gone through. Both have experienced the same thing, the only difference is that Black people were enslaved for 700 years and the Roma for 500 years, I think.*

The second subtheme was *Understanding Past Unfairness and Hardships to Understand Present Privileges* (13 references). In this theme, students connect historical injustices to the present, expressing a desire to learn about, and understand, past injustices, such as those involving religion, minorities, human rights, and racism. Although some students acknowledge that these topics have been covered superficially in class, they say that their history education, so far, has been lacking in opportunities for deeper problematization and meaningful connections to contemporary issues and/or their personal lives. The historical content they consider ethically significant includes topics such as education, poverty versus wealth, and child labor. Some students begin their reflections with their own lives, acknowledging their own privileged contexts:

> *K31: …and children in other countries might not have it so easy either […] And many of us here around us are so well off that we just take it for granted, thinking that this is how it's supposed to be. But back then, children started working when they [K34: Around ten years old] were much younger—like, at our age—they had to work for a long time.*

In the third subtheme, *Respect and Equality for All* (6 references), discussions on ethical significance are explicitly normative. Students express how historical content, such as religion, human and minority rights, and racism should be ethically addressed or avoided:

> *V24: Yeah, it's about… you should respect everyone [V2C: mm], not just different genders, and there's been a lot of pressure against different religions [V2C: mm], and I've learned not to be a part of that.*

In the second most common theme of ethical significance, ***Responsibility*** (28 references), students in eight groups acknowledged historical injustices, linking them to the present and considering how to address them when moving forward. There were two subthemes identified that were connected to Responsibility. In the first of these, *Oppressed Histories* (18 references), students reflect on aspects of history that have been suppressed, repressed, or "silenced", either in society and/or in their history education. These discussions cover ethically significant topics such as minority and women's rights, witch-hunts, religion, colonialism, racism, and both World Wars. Students consider these omitted histories to be significant:

> *K11: It feels suppressed. K1C: What feels suppressed? K11: Slavery. K1C: Yeah. K11: That Sweden doesn't want to show it. K1C: You mean that this knowledge is suppressed? Several K1 students: Yes...*

[11] M stands for the M-school, 2 is the number of the focus group, and 1 is the student. C is the interviewer.

By expressing a desire to further explore and/or actively educate themselves about suppressed content and problematize significant historical or current issues, students demonstrate a sense of responsibility for addressing past injustices:

> *K32: It's not fun to just hear, like, Sweden was great, done, we're finished with history. You want it to be a bit more advanced, you want to understand more, you want to… K31: I want to get that feeling of like… K32: …clarify more, know the truth.*

In the second subtheme, *Wanting to learn more* (11 references) students express a lack of knowledge in various ways, with some expressing a desire to address and learn more about this important content in school:

> *V11: I think so too, like we... we should talk about it [racism] more because it's really something that can affect, like, [V1several: mmm] something that is important, admit it, something that is very important to talk about.*

Another approach students take is to educate themselves in different ways about these significant issues outside of school:

> *K14: I would say one important thing I learned about history, uh... the slave trade, I learned that outside of school! K1C: Yeah, okay, yeah... K14: I went on a website and read about it [K1C: yeah] because I never got to learn about it in school.*

Students also express the need to gain a more complex understanding of history, enabling them to grasp current societal problems and injustices, in this reference to religions and women's rights:

> *V13: We have mostly read about what […] has happened […] what, what has happened before […] but we haven't read about what can help it.*

The third and final theme, ***Guilt*** (7 references), was used by students in four groups. In this theme, students reflect on a complicated past, identifying themselves as part of a collective "we" who were involved in past injustices such as colonialism and racism. They acknowledge both actions and inactions, recognizing our shared guilt in these historical wrongdoings.

> *H41: In a way, I think it's important that we don't make Sweden seem innocent. It's like all the other countries in the world are so bad, but Sweden is like…innocent but that's not true because Sweden has also like done bad things.*

To conclude, the analysis of ethical significance revealed three themes, Fairness, Responsibility, and Guilt, with Fairness being divided into three subthemes and Responsibility divided into two subthemes.

Affective significance

The data was also coded for affective dimensions, resulting in a total of 22 references from three schools where historical significance appeared to arise from feelings or emotions related to the historical content. Two themes related to affective significance were identified: *Interest* and *Excitement*. Students generally did not elaborate on their

reasons for significance, often using verbs such as "like" and "think" in relation to historical content such as, for example, history as a subject, the Dark Ages, skeletons, and witches.

Themes

The most common theme in relation to affective significance was students justifying historical significance with a curious ***Interest*** (7 references). Historical content such as WW2, the Dark Ages, and the Titanic were identified as interesting, stimulating, and sometimes horrible and, as such, sparked their curiosity and desire to learn:

> *K23: [...] I'm quite interested in World War II because I think it was so horrible but, like, […] ... eh so I find it very fascinating to learn about it.*

Sometimes they attribute significance to a topic simply because it was easy or interesting to learn about, whether through a book or a film.

> *H3C: […] how come you consider that to be something especially important?H31: Eh... I thought it was, I think it was really interesting to read about the Middle Ages.*

The next theme, ***Excitement*** (10 references), involves topics such as the Dark Ages, the Stone Age, skeletons, witches, dinosaurs, and tsunamis. In this theme, affective historical significance is driven solely by anticipation or excitement, often due to personal interest, the novelty or antiquity of historical content, or its horrifying aspects. This enthusiastic attribution of significance does not lead to further reflection:

> *P14: the oldest skeleton P1C: yes... the Stone Age. P14: yes, I thought it was very exciting.*

There are also references where students provide brief explanations of why they experience a sense of excitement:

> *H1C: And the time of the dinosaurs, why is that the most important? H11: dinosaurs… H12: it's exciting! H11: ...don't exist now. It's like something new [H1C: ah] that no one has seen! H12: yeah, it's exciting how they know what they look like just from seeing the skeletons.*

To conclude, though less prominent in the material, affective dimensions are described through two themes: *Interest* and *Excitement*.

Ethical and affective significance in relation to elements of historical empathy

This section will explore how the five elements of historical empathy (Karn, 2023), *evidence and contextualization, informed historical imagination, historical perspectives, ethical judgments,* and *caring*, relate to the results of the thematic analysis above. By doing so, it aims to contribute to the conceptualization of ethical and affective significance.

Ethical judgments

In the references relating to ethical significance, ethical judgment is the most apparent of the five elements that students in this study, implicitly or explicitly, display when they evaluate, or judge, historical events based on their social and personal conceptions of right and wrong (Karn, 2023, p. 94). They proceed from contemporary and/or personal views when passing these ethical judgments. In the references coded under affective significance, the element of ethical judgment was not observed.

Caring

Of the four conceptions of caring mentioned earlier, the first two align with all references coded under ethical significance. Students *care about* historically and ethically significant events, or persons, referring to historical content they either have a connection to or want to learn about. They also *care that,* a steppingstone for ethical reactions in relation to the past, in this case either passing moral judgments or wanting to know more. In some references, students also indicated deep emotional engagement with the injustices of the past, *caring for* and empathizing with the experiences of individuals, particularly children and women. They related historical injustices, such as being denied education as a female, having to work as a child, participation in witch-hunts, or being a transgender person, to their own lives:

> *K24: It feels like it was a li... liberation for those children. To stop working [K2C: mmm] even though we think going to school is hard, and we complain so much [K2C: laughs], they had it so much worse.*

When students cared *about,* and sometimes *for*, a historical person or event enough to react, *caring that*, this sometimes served as a foundation for students to *care to* change the present. This desire to address injustices or unfairness in the past pertains to learning more, and in a more complex way, in relation to racism, gender inequality, and disparities in wealth and education, or to challenging and reshaping the perception of Sweden as a "just" and innocent country.

The only conception of caring (and indeed the only aspect of historical empathy overall) that was observed in students' references relating to affective significance was *caring about* different kinds of historical content, showing either an emotional engagement and/or an interest.

Evidence, Contextualization and Historical Perspectives

Barton & Levstik (2004) highlight the daunting challenges of interpreting sources and trying to understand the perspectives of people in the past, a difficult task for historians and even more so for students. Unsurprisingly, the students in this study did not reference historical sourcing when discussing ethical or affective significance, nor did they attempt deeper contextualization of the historical events.

However, they seem to have a desire to acquire the prerequisites for perspective recognition, especially when they, explicitly or sometimes implicitly, express a need to learn more about ethically significant history. In some cases, they attempt to put

themselves in the shoes of historical actors but without contextualizing their actions, leading them to perceive past actions as "strange" or even "stupid". This response suggests *historical sympathy*, where students project their own thoughts and feelings onto people in the past, rather than historical empathy, which involves understanding "the thoughts and feelings of other people from their own perspectives" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 206; Lévesque, 2008).

Informed Historical Imagination

As noted, students in this study do not use disciplinary methods like sourcing or perspective recognition when discussing historical significance. Instead, they rely on *historical imagination* to fill in knowledge gaps. The imagination could instead be described as pragmatic rather than imaginative or fanciful; however, it is not "informed", as it lacks a foundation in disciplinary logic (Karn, 2023).

To conclude, primarily two elements of historical empathy (Karn, 2023) contribute to the conceptualization of ethical significance in this study: students both *judged ethically* and expressed the first two components of *caring*: *caring about* and *caring that*. However, *caring about* is the only element of historical empathy that students use when they relate to significant history with affective significance. Students often have difficulties judging the past on its own terms (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Karn, 2023; Lévesque, 2008). This also holds true in this study when the participating middle-school students passed ethical judgments proceeding from contemporary and/or personal views.

Concluding discussion

This section will summarize the findings of the thematic analysis and the exploration of the two criteria in relation to historical empathy, discussing them in the context of previous research. It will also present didactical and theoretical implications for history education and research in history education.

The results provide key insights into ethical and affective significance from a student perspective. First, the conceptualizations of the two criteria for significance are summarized (see Table 1). Then, three conclusions are presented, aligned to the research questions.

First, ethical significance is defined here as *making moral judgments regarding significant history that students care about, care that, and care to change*. Ethical considerations were recurring as students engaged with significant history, making the criterion ethical significance essential for understanding how these Swedish middle-school students relate to history that is important to them.

TABLE 1

Descriptions of ethical and affective significance. Table by the authors.

CONCEPTION OF SIGNIFICANCE	THEMES	IN RELATION TO	DEFINED AS
ETHICAL SIGNIFICANCE	**Fairness**	people in the past, today and tomorrow	making moral judgments regarding significant history that students care about, that (and to)
	Responsibility	oppressed histories & future learning	
	Guilt	actions taken and neglected actions	
AFFECTIVE SIGNIFICANCE	**Interest**	a spark of curiosity and a desire to know more	intuitive emotional response when *caring about* significant history
	Excitement	excitement, due to personal likes or dislikes/horror	

The thematic analysis revealed primarily three themes: *Fairness* was introduced from different temporal and normative perspectives when students recognized morally difficult and often dark aspects of history and attempted to handle them. In the theme *Responsibility*, students acknowledged oppressed histories and expressed a desire to learn more and to gain a more complex understanding as a way to take responsibility for silenced parts of Swedish history. In the third theme, *Guilt*, students expressed a sense of collective culpability in relation to actions and inactions in an ethically complicated past. It is perhaps interesting to note that no references were made to climate or environmental questions in relation to these three themes. Variations of Fairness and Responsibility had been used by students in a few prior studies on historical significance (Barton, 2005; Barton & McCully, 2005; Levstik, 2008) while Guilt has not been noted in previous research (Sjölund Åhsberg, 2024a; Sjölund Åhsberg, 2025).

The criteria affective significance is described here as *an intuitive emotional response when caring about significant history*. This response can be expressed in terms of excitement or a spark of interest or curiosity without further reflection. It can also relate to either positive or negative emotions. While most historical content related to this criterion, such as for example wars and the Dark Ages, aligns with the syllabus (Skolverket, 2019), other content, such as dinosaurs, the Titanic and tsunamis, does not. To sum up, affective significance can be framed as purely affective, spontaneous, and subjective, lacking connections to objective and discipline-based undertakings in history education (Brooks, 2011; Endacott & Brooks, 2013). As such, it should be seen as a description of how some students relate to significant history, where the student's response lacks complexity and depth, not even reaching the first level of Cercadillo's (2006) progression model for historical significance.

Secondly, students do not associate ethical significance with historical content covered in their education. They refer to history learned outside of school, concerning topics like oppression, equality, and minority rights, when discussing ethical

significance. The classroom is instead described as a silent arena for discussions concerning history with ethical dimensions. This leads to important didactical reflections. The result may indicate "silent historiographies" (Nolgård, 2023, p. 113) or teachers practicing "the Code of Silence", avoiding histories that could potentially discomfort students and/or their parents, and the teachers themselves (Levstik, 2000). The perception of history in the classroom as less morally complex may depend on strong selective traditions with recurring national narratives (Danielsson Malmros, 2012; Olofsson, Samuelsson, Stolare & Wendell, 2017; Stolare, 2014). Although students' reflections on ethically significant history align with the curriculum's comprehensive aims, emphasizing values, democracy, and humanity, they could also be influenced by other social studies subjects that address ethical issues, such as religious education and civics (Skolverket, 2019). Additionally, students' prior education may play a role, as social studies teachers in primary school focus on fostering democratic values and norms (Lilliestam, Holmqvist Lidh & Osbeck, 2020).

Thirdly, students in this study, feeling "the moral weight of the past" (Levstik, 2008, p. 375), put a strong emphasis on the subjective elements of historical empathy, caring and ethical judgments, and not at all on the disciplinary and objective elements such as evidence, contextualization, or historical perspectives (see also Brooks, 2011; Endacott & Brooks, 2013; Karn, 2023). Due to their subjective nature, we suggest that ethical and affective significance should be conceptualized as a part of *memory significance* (Lévesque, 2005, 2008). In this study, students filled their knowledge gaps by contextualizing historical knowledge with a pragmatic historical imagination, historical empathetic thinking and "affective understandings", and a strong desire for deeper, more complex learning (Husbands & Pedry, 2012). We interpret this as a steppingstone for making perspective recognition possible in the future, something that has critical didactical implications, as ethical significance can here be seen as a "discursive linkage between personal moral stances and historical understanding" (Perez-Manjarrez, 2017, p. 11). By students acknowledging their lack of knowledge, wanting to learn more, they also express an *action readiness* (Grice & Franck, 2017), a willingness and a preparedness to learn more about history that is ethically and affectively significant to them and their lives. The students' potential action readiness could indicate them wanting to become active, participating, and potentially democratic citizens, aligning with the aspirations of Biesta (2003), Barton & Levstik (2004), Tuana (2007), and Zagzebski (2013). Including the dimensions of ethical and affective significance in history education could also offer opportunities to engage students and challenge their experiences as human beings (Thorp & Persson, 2020).

Confirming and developing a moral turn in history?

"Responding morally […] is an inescapable part of our encounter with the past" (Barton & Levstik, 2004, p. 106). This also holds true for the middle-school students participating in this focus-group study. For example, Löfström (2011), Nolgård (2023), and Zembylas (2018) argue that history education can help students understand their responsibility in relation to difficult histories. The results of this study suggest that

students already experience guilt and responsibility regarding difficult histories, but they need opportunities to deepen their knowledge, engage in discussions, and use disciplinary tools to add complexity and context. The results correspond to both Cotkin's (2008) discussion of a moral turn in history, and the idea "that ethical judgments are central to the discipline" (Milligan, Gibson & Peck, 2018, p. 451). Shedding light on ethical and affective significance in relation to historical empathy can also contribute to moving towards a more existential dimension of historical thinking (Thorp & Persson, 2020). By framing these dimensions as initial points of engagement, we can see how students' emotional and moral responses serve as gateways into deeper historical reasoning. In this way, this study shows that ethical and affective significance should not be understood as alternatives to historical thinking, but as entry points into it. Students' emotional and moral responses often initiate engagement, which can develop into more critical forms of historical reasoning when connected to context, evidence, and perspective-taking. The findings thus contribute to historical thinking research by demonstrating how ethical and affective dimensions can function as bridges between students' lived experiences and disciplinary historical understanding, rather than as signs of its absence.

This study, aimed at exploring and defining additional criteria for historical significance, presents both opportunities and limitations. As findings originate from a small-scale study, they are inherently contextually unique to Swedish middle schools and the design of the study, making them less readily applicable to other national contexts or to students of other ages. However, as the analysis focuses on instances where students spontaneously incorporate ethical and affective dimensions into discussions of significant historical events, the unforeseen scope of the ethical dimension in the data provides valuable insights that must be put in contrast to studies that elicit ethical responses (see for example Lilja & Osbeck; 2020, Löfström et al, 2020).

Exploring the ethical and affective dimensions of students' historical thinking has uncovered valuable connections that warrant further examination. Future research could benefit from gaining new theoretical insights into the connection between ethics and historical significance by applying the ethical competencies framework (Osbeck, Franck, Lilja & Sporre, 2018) used in religious education research, or the concept action readiness (Grice & Franck, 2017). The results also have important didactical implications. As guilt may be seen to have "educational value" (Zembylas, 2018, p. 404), exploring students' sense of guilt and responsibility might provide further insights into historical narratives (Wertsch, 2002) but also into students' historical consciousness (Löfström, 2011). Students in this study express a genuine desire for future dialogues in the history classroom about ethically significant history and its present-day implications (Milligan, Gibson & Peck, 2018; Nolgård, 2023). This calls for history education to (1) reconsider which histories are included, (2) engage in discussions of moral responsibility for difficult pasts, and (3) provide opportunities to introduce and employ discipline-specific methods in relation to ethically significant histories. This approach can help students more deeply contextualize ethically significant history while considering their own and others' perspectives in relation to a

contested past, the present, and envisioned futures (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Karn, 2023; Lévesque, 2008). In this way, this paper serves as both an inspiration and a provocation for further didactical, methodological, and theoretical explorations into the ethical and affective dimensions of historical significance.

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