

# Dutch students' perspectives on national history

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## DUTCH STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON NATIONAL HISTORY

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# Dutch students' perspectives on national history

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RESEARCH SEMINAR

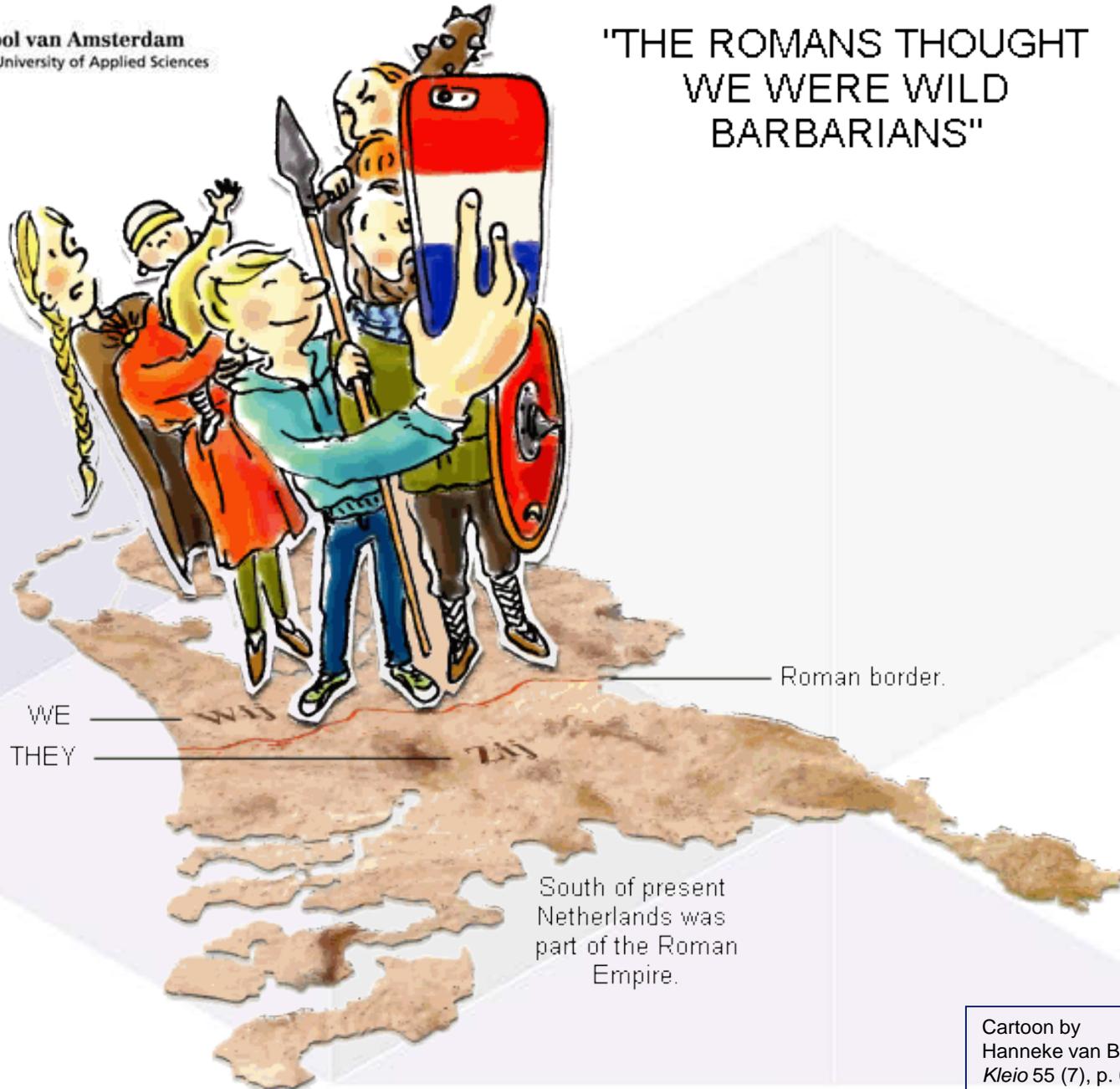
*YOUNG PEOPLE, NATIONAL NARRATIVES AND HISTORY EDUCATION*

UCL London, December 1st, 2015

AMUAS  
School of Education



# "THE ROMANS THOUGHT WE WERE WILD BARBARIANS"



## Two studies

1 What do students know about Dutch history at the end of secondary education?

*Quantitative survey, 293 participants*

2 Which perspectives do students choose when writing and talking about Dutch history?

*Mixed methods study, 31 participants*

## Reasons for conducting the studies

1 Frequent assumptions in the media about what is taught in schools, what is relatively well-known and relatively unknown.

E.g.: “The slavery past and colonialism are ‘black pages’ in ‘our history’ which we tend to avoid and cover up. They need more attention.”

2 Findings and assertions in the international literature that the ‘we-perspective’ is chosen in cases of national pride, while it is avoided in cases of national shame.

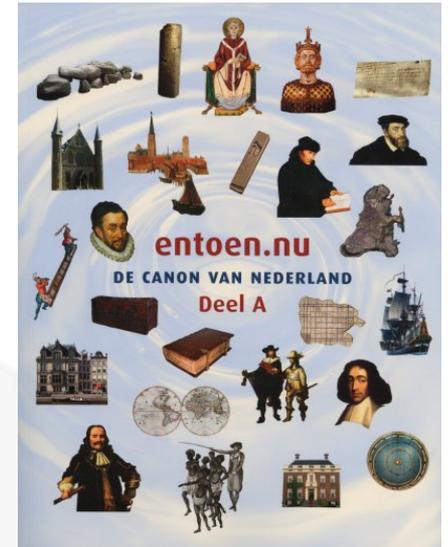
## Method of study 1

We did not choose for the option of essay writing: having students compose an account of their national narrative (like Foster, Ashby, Lee & Howson, 2008; or Kropman, Van Boxtel & Van Drie, 2015).

Reason: It is a very difficult assignment. Results may be poor and might not be representative of what students actually know.

Neither did we choose interviews (like Carretero, 2011).

Reason: The influence of the interviewer is rather directive.



## Method of study 1

We formulated 50 sentences about historical events, phenomena, persons.

The items were taken from the Dutch 'Canon of National History' which consists of 50 such items.

Examples of sentences:

- Erasmus was an important humanist scholar who criticized the medieval version of Christianity.
- In 1839 the first Dutch railway was constructed between Amsterdam and Haarlem.
- In the 17th and 18th centuries Dutch merchants were actively taking part in the slave trade.

## Method of study 1

The questionnaire asked the participants

- to rate their own knowledge of the content represented by each sentence on a scale of 1 tot 10 (1 meaning: *'It means totally nothing to me – never heard of it'* – and 10 meaning: *'I know quite a lot about this, I could easily tell and explain what this is about'*).
- to answer the question: 'I remember having been taught one or more lesson(s) about this' with YES or NO.

Administered to 293 students of teacher training universities who just started their first year; 84 of them were prospective history teachers, the other 209 were prospective primary school teachers.

## Testing reliability

Cronbach's Alpha of the 50 'knowledge' items: 0.94.

If the results of this survey are reliable, it can be hypothesized:

- that the students of the history teacher track will outperform the others.
- that the correlation between the self-estimated knowledge and remembering having been taught about an item will be stronger if an item is less generally known from sources outside school.
- that males will significantly outperform females on items that are usually preferred by males (kings, admirals, heroes).

# Testing reliability

Hypothesis 1:

*Students of the history teacher track will outperform the others.*

We calculated a mean total knowledge score for 50 items for each student and then calculated the means for the history and non-history group.

Results:

History teachers track

6.12

Track of primary school teachers

5.81

(the difference is statistically significant,  $p < 0.05$ )

# Testing reliability

Hypothesis 2:

*The correlation between the self-estimated knowledge and remembering having been taught about an item will be stronger if an item is less generally known from sources outside school.*

Items with (very) low correlations:

Anne Frank (0.071)  
The German occupation (\*)  
The Dutch East India Company VOC (0.178)  
First World War (0.210)  
William of Orange (0.310)

Items with relatively high correlations:

The Hanseatic League (0.562)  
Spinoza the philosopher (0.596)  
Novel Max Havelaar (0.675)  
Prime Minister Drees (0.721)  
The oldest Dutch phrase (0.726)

# Testing reliability

Hypothesis 3:

*Males will significantly outperform females on items that are usually preferred by males (kings, admirals, heroes).*

Items with better male performance:

Napoleon (+ 1.44\*)  
Michiel de Ruyter (+ 1.40\*)  
The Romans in NL (+ 1.16\*)  
King William I (+ 1.14\*)

Items with better female performance:

*De Stijl* (Mondrian, modern art) (+ 1.23\*)  
Musical author Schmidt (+ 0.88)  
Child labour (+ 0.26)  
Feminist Aletta Jacobs (+ 0.21)

(\* difference is statistically significant,  $p < 0.05$ )

## Outcomes

### Best and least known items of Dutch history

#### Highest scores:

1 Anne Frank	9.04
2 German occupation	8.96
3 VOC	7.90
4 First World War	7.79
5 William of Orange	7.67
6 Iconoclasm 1566	7.66
7 Rembrandt	7.44
8 Colonial War Indonesia	7.36
9 Aletta Jacobs	7.15
10 Vincent van Gogh	6.99
11 Slave trade	6.98

#### Lowest scores:

50 Eisinga's Planetarium	2.24
49 Rich river-mansions	2.34
48 Oldest Dutch phrase	3.36
47 Count Florence V killed	3.58
46 The Estates' Bible	3.63
45 Hugo Grotius	3.77
44 Blaeu's Atlas	4.10
43 Srebrenica (Bosnia, UN)	4.17
42 Willibrord, 1st archbishop	4.40
41 Spinoza, philosopher	4.43
40 First railway	4.45

# Outcomes

## National heroes 7.15

William of Orange	7.67
Rembrandt	7.44
Aletta Jacobs	7.15
Vincent van Gogh	6.98
Thorbecke	6.87
Michiel de Ruyter	6.69

## Political development 6.31

Thorbecke	6.87
The Republic	6.50
Charles V	6.49
Napoleon	6.35
European Union	6.41
Patriots	5.03

## Economy 6.07

VOC	7.90
Crisis thirties	6.70
Rotterdam harbour	6.40
Natural gas	5.68
Hanseatic League	5.09
First railway	4.45

## Culture and science 4.63

Schmidt musical author	6.50
Erasmus	6.21
Max Havelaar novel	5.50
De Stijl / Mondrian	5.08
Huygens	4.78
Spinoza	4.43
Blaeu's Atlas	4.10
Grotius	3.77
Estates Bible	3.63
Eisinga's Planetarium	2.43

## Conclusions

Periods of 'shame' like colonial war and slave trade belong to the best known items of Dutch history (perhaps the VOC and German occupation should be included here).

Among the best remembered national heroes are two painters, one feminist and one 'traditional hero' (William of Orange) – next to Anne Frank who is at the top of the list.

National heroes and political developments are better remembered than economic phenomena. The sector of culture and science – though well represented in the Canon – is not well remembered.

## Method of study 2

Stage 1: Essay assignment with 31 students.

Stage 2: Interviews with 10 students.

Age group: 16-17.

Participants/essays: Students in their last year of pre-university secondary education, 22 females, 9 males, 20 taking history for their final examination, 11 not taking history.

Participants/interviews: 5 male students (3 taking history, 2 not taking history), 5 female students (3 taking history, 2 not taking history), randomly selected from their respective sub-groups.

## Method of study 2

### Essay assignment

Students had to write an essay about Dutch history, including in their writing eight topics which were selected using the criteria 'long ago' or 'recent' and 'negative' or 'positive' for Dutch people:

- Alva punishes the perpetrators of the iconoclasm (1566) – neg., long ago
- Dutch win the war of independence against Spain (1648) – pos., long ago
- The Dutch Golden Age in the 17th century – pos., long ago
- The Dutch slave trade 17th and 18th century – neg., long ago
- General suffrage for men and women (1919) – pos., recent
- The German occupation of the Netherlands – neg., recent
- The Liberation of the Netherlands in May 1945 – pos., recent
- The colonial war in Indonesia (1945-1949) – neg., recent

Objective: find out where in their writing students use 'we' and where they use 'they'.

# Method of study 2

## Interviews

Structure:

Phase 1: Talk about historical themes (Golden Age, slavery, German occupation, Liberation).

Phase 2: Confront them with what they have written in their essays; point out where they have used 'we' and where they have used 'they'. Ask their reaction to those choices: were they made deliberately? What do they think about it with hindsight?

Phase 3: Ask their opinion about whether the 'we'-perspective should be used at all in history.

Objective: Find out where in their talking students use 'we' and where they use 'they'.

Find out whether they make deliberate choices in their writing and talking.

Find out what their explicit opinion is about choosing perspectives.

# Outcomes

## Essays

In six out of 31 essays the we-perspective was used:

- in five cases in one sentence.
- in one case in four sentences: 'our country' (e.g.: 'Philip II was ruling our country').
- in the five other cases, two were also about 'our country'.
- the three other cases were:
  - *'Our special position during the Golden Age.'*
  - *'We did not have an army that was up to the Germans.'*
  - *'We were governed by a Spanish king.'*

Conclusion: The 'we'-perspective was used extremely little and not connected with national pride or shame.

# Outcomes Interviews part 1

Topics discussed	Guus	Joep	Charlotte	Esther	Sophie	Jelka	Stef	Jirinne	Annika	Victor	NR 'we'
	M	M	F	F	F	M	M	F	F	M	
Power of NL during Golden Age	they	we	they	N	we	N	N	N	they	N	2
Trade of NL during Golden Age	they	N	they	they	we	they	they	they	they	they	1
Affluence during Golden Age	they	they	they	they	we	N	they	N	they	they	1
Political leaders during Golden Age	they	they	N	N	they	they	N	N	N	N	0
Artists during Golden Age	they	they	they	they	N	they	they	they	they	they	0
Average people during Golden Age	they	they	they	they	they	they	they	they	they	N	0
Liberties of NL attract migrants	N	N	N	N	we	we	N	they	they	they	2
Dutch start to develop enlightened ways of thinking	N	N	N	N	they	they	we	N	they	they	1
The Dutch slave trade	we	we	we	they	we	they	we	we	they	they	6
Dutch colonies	we	N	they	they	we	N	we	N	N	N	3
Slavery on plantations in Dutch colonies	they	we	they	they	N	N	we	we	they	they	3
Abolition of slavery by Dutch	N	N	N	they	they	they	N	N	N	N	0
NL neutral during World War I	they	N	N	N	N	they	they	N	N	they	0
NL tries to be neutral again in WW II	we	N	N	N	N	they	they	they	N	they	1
Germany attacks NL	they	we	they	we	N	they	we	we	they	they	4
NR 'we'	3	4	1	1	6	1	5	3	0	0	

# Outcomes

## Interviews part 2

Six students said they had deliberately chosen a perspective during writing the essay.

Two of these had used the ‘we’-perspective and thought with hindsight that this was strange; they thought they wouldn’t do such a thing:

*‘I cannot imagine that I wrote ‘our country’ because I never do things like that.’*

# Outcomes

## Interviews part 3

One of the ten students said she was conscious of her perspective choice when speaking during the first part of the interview; the others were not conscious of their choices during speaking.

The one student said about the German attack in 1940:  
*‘Yes, and we were not prepared. Because yes, we wanted... Well I’m talking about ‘we’, but that was of course not... The Netherlands wanted to stay neutral.’*

# Outcomes

## Interviews part 4

What according to the students influenced their perspective choice for 'we'?

- Feeling of attachment to what happened (3x).
- Time distance: more recent events (3x).
- Positive events (2x).

So why 'we' for the history of slavery?

- No good explanation.
- One student: *'Perhaps because you feel partly responsible? Unconsciously, like, it is our country after all. That you are carrying with you what your ancestors have done.'*

# Outcomes

## Interviews part 5

What were the principal views of students about using the ‘we’-perspective in history?

Eight out of ten thought very straightforwardly that the ‘we’-perspective should not be used.

One student thought that ‘we’ is allowed, *‘because one’s history is something with which to distinguish oneself’*.

Another student thought that ‘we’ can be useful to accentuate that something from history also counts for you: *‘Like “me too”, so to say’*.

## Over-all conclusions

Issues of national shame are prominent in the Dutch national narrative.

The slavery past and colonial wars are not the forgotten black pages of Dutch history.

National heroes are partly not the traditional ones, but people like Anne Frank, Aletta Jacobs and Rembrandt.

The we-perspective is used rarely in writing, but much more so in talking about history.

The we-perspective might be something that befalls people – in which case it would be an issue of deliberate education to avoid it.

## Discussion

All of this is rather different from the case of Spain (or Argentina) as studied by Carretero, the case of the US as studied by Barton and Levstik and the case of the UK as studied by Lee and Howson.

Barton and Levstik (2004): Taking the 'identification stance' is *'arguably one of the most common historical activities.'* (p. 57).

Lee and Howson (2009) quote these words from a Year 10 student: *'When the Roman empire fell, we were open to attacks from the barbaric Vikings and were raided frequently over the next few centuries. ...we was invaded by Normandy, a region of France and was defeated.'* (p. 232).

Is this a matter of the Dutch history curriculum or is it due to national character?

Thank you for your attention.

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