

On the complexity and limitations of the concept “Multiperspectivity”

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Abstract

Multiperspectivity has become a widely used concept in history education, but also in other subjects, such as geography (e.g., Bedford & Barnes, 2024; Efimova & Nygren, 2026; Körber, 2001; Rowan & Wansink, 2025). It seems to have become a buzzword that is presented as a solution to all kinds of problems in our increasingly diverse, yet also polarized Western societies (Damhuis & Wansink, 2024). At the same time, the concept is facing growing criticism (see, among others, Hartendorp et al., 2023; Merry, 2025). In this miniature, I provide a definition of the term “multiperspectivity,” and examine its origins. I will argue that multiperspectivity is an important and indispensable concept for educators, but it can create epistemological, moral, constitutional, psychological, and practical challenges that can lead to different forms of relativism. Therefore, these challenges should be further explored in both theory and practice.

Keywords

Multiperspectivity, history education, epistemology, morality, practical challenges

1 What is Multiperspectivity?

In general, multiperspectivity is always present because every human being is uniquely situated in time and context. From this position, individuals construct their own view of the world. Moreover, we live in a constantly changing world, where ongoing processes lead to both small and large transformations over time. Since we are all situated as persons in specific times and places within this dynamic world, it is important to ontologically synchronize our perspectives (Akkerman et al., 2021). Ontological synchronization in this article refers to the continuous process of attuning and coordinating our differently experienced “realities” with one another over time (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981; Linell, 2003).

For conceptual reasons, it is important to distinguish between perspective-making and perspective-taking. Perspective-making is the process by which a person constructs meaning or makes sense of a particular issue (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011). Multiperspectivity therefore involves multiple people making sense of the same issue. Perspective-taking refers to understanding and articulating the perspective of another person (real or imagined), for example by considering what that person might say about the issue (Gehlbach et al., 2012).

Within history education, multiperspectivity can be conceptualized as the idea that history is not univocal or objective, but open to interpretation. Multiple, coexisting narratives about his-

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torical events exist alongside one another, rather than a single “closed” narrative that objectively represents the past (Wansink et al., 2018). Traditionally, history education was strongly associated with memorizing facts that formed fixed national narratives that were presented as “objective facts” (Klein, 2010; Wilschut, 2010). These narratives often served to legitimize the existence of a particular nation-state and contributed to the cohesion and identity of the national community.

After the Second World War, this nationalist form of history education came increasingly under fire in Europe. Had this kind of education not helped fuel nationalism and thereby contributed to the First and Second World Wars? Under the influence of developments in the discipline of history, such as postmodernism, a different view of history emerged: history as an interpretative science. As the past is not directly observable; historians study the traces the past has left in the present. This leads to an interpretative gap between the past and the observer: each historian constructs their own narrative based on sources and research (e.g., Southgate, 1996). As a result, education began to pay more attention to historical thinking skills and to the ways historians construct history. Consequently, an epistemological tension emerged in relation to educational goals of history education (Wansink et al., 2016). On the one hand, teaching students national narratives that contribute to a shared identity aligns with a more absolutist epistemology. On the other hand, encouraging students to critically deconstruct those same narratives reflects a more evaluative epistemology (Carretero & Bermudez, 2012; Zanazanian & Moisan, 2012). This tension remains palpable today in Western history curricula, but for example also in debates about a national canon for history education in the Netherlands and Belgium (Grever, 2007; Smets et al., 2023; Van Nieuwenhuysen et al., 2023).

1.1 The history of Multiperspectivity

The concept of multiperspectivity (“Multiperspektivität” in German) originated, at least as far as I know, primarily in West Germany where a debate emerged in the late 1970s about the aims of history education (Bergmann, 2000; Hackmann, 2020; Nygren et al., 2017; Parra & Wansink, 2022). According to Martin Lücke (2012), Klaus Bergmann in 1979 was the first to introduce the concept into West German discourse of history didactics. Multiperspectivity was his response to traditional history education with a focus on single-perspectives and an absolute epistemology (Bergmann, 2000). Later Bodo von Borries (1983) and Klaus Bergmann (2007) distinguished the concept “multiperspectivity” into three forms of expression: First, multiperspectivity as a principle of historical learning, which guides teachers in selecting past sources that represent different perspectives in terms of past social positions (e.g., sources from fabric owner and employees). Later Martin Lücke (2012) expanded on this view, arguing that, in addition to class, race and gender should also be considered when selecting sources based on different historical perspectives. Second, “controversiality” as a principle to help teachers select different histories of the past (accounts) that contradict each other in their interpretation of the same events. The third concept, “plurality”, aims to guide teachers to make space for diverse present student perspectives, interpretations, and judgments based on the aforementioned sources and accounts from different social points of view. Later, the concept was further developed by Robert Stradling (2003). His work is in line with that of Klaus Bergmann (1979) and Bodo von Borries (2001), but Robert Stradling highlighted that a multiperspective approach not only requires historical events and developments to be viewed through a variety of historical accounts and interpretations, but he encouraged to also seek accounts produced in different historical periods.

It is Robert Stradling’s book that has been most widely disseminated by organizations such as EuroClio and the Council of Europe. His book, *Multiperspectivity in History Teaching: A Guide for Teachers*, has been translated into 19 languages, including Russian and Armenian. Former head of Euroclio (European Association of History Educators) Joke de Leeuw-Roord told me that the spread and popularization of the concept “multiperspectivity” is closely tied to the context of communist Eastern Europe, where there was little room for alternative perspectives on the past. Multiperspectivity was intended to help break through the one-sided conception of history (van der Leeuw-Roord, 2008). The concept thus gained not only a historiographical but also an emancipatory meaning: creating space for voices and perspectives that had previously been absent from the curriculum. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War, there was hope that multiperspectivity would take on a structural role in various educational programs. However, the concept is now under pressure worldwide, as is the emancipatory ideal tied to it.

A striking example of how history is used for political purposes is Russia, where history education is strongly influenced by the vision of Putin and his supporters on how Russian history should be told (De Graaf & Drost, 2026; Fish, 2017). Teachers there face significant pressure to endorse this vision, and fact, fiction, and propaganda often become intertwined. In the Ukrainian

territories occupied by Russia, Russian textbooks and pro-Russian teachers follow soon after the soldiers arrive (Hyde, 2023). History education becomes the second front, one whose consequences will be felt for a long time. Populations can be deeply influenced through history education. This is not a blunt or superficial tool, as the history of the Third Reich has demonstrated (Blackburn, 1985). In a country like China, education has been politically shaped for decades, and in the United States the pressure on education is increasing as well. Trump's ideas about history are nationalistic and patriotic (Fischer, 2025). His vision is at odds with a more emancipatory, multiperspectival history education. Unfortunately, countries in which teachers are free to discuss different perspectives seem to decrease worldwide, a phenomenon we all should worry about. However, even in countries where curricula emphasize multiperspectivity, tensions remain (Kropman et al., 2020). For example, in the Netherlands, curricula do not clearly specify which perspectives teachers should include on particular topics. While this allows for teacher autonomy, it may also lead to arbitrariness or bias in the selection of perspectives presented (Wansink et al., 2017). There is also an ongoing debate about whether the Dutch curriculum remains colonial in nature and insufficiently includes the perspectives of marginalized groups (e.g., Weiner, 2016). Similarly, textbooks in England and Germany have been criticized for lacking multiple perspectives and for being Eurocentric (Nagré, 2025; Barsch, 2024).

I believe there are many reasons to support and value the historiographical and emancipatory aspects of multiperspectivity. At the same time, it is necessary to critically examine it. Its application faces epistemological, moral, constitutional, psychological, and practical challenges. Considering the increasing polarization and diversification of Western societies I propose that the challenges lie at the intersection of relativistic multiperspectivity and more absolutist approaches, both of which can pose a threat to history education and democracy, as I will explain further.

1.2 Epistemological challenges

A first challenge is epistemological in nature: the risk of relativism. Multiperspectivity originated as a response to more absolute epistemologies and the promotion of single, often nationalistic, narratives. However, multiperspectivity does not mean that all narratives or viewpoints are equally reliable (Stradling, 2003). This criticism echoes early debates about postmodernism as this philosophical school of thought was also criticized for relativism. We need a framework to evaluate different perspectives for trustworthiness and plausibility (e.g., Maggioni et al., 2009; Stoel et al., 2022). Source criticism, historical facts, and the author's intention and background play an essential role here (Kropman et al., 2020; Wansink et al., 2018). In education, we use the epistemic aspects of the "historical-scientific method" to scrutinize historical sources and scholars have conceptualized this method as historical reasoning or thinking (e.g., Van Drie & Van Boxtel, 2008; Seixas & Morton, 2012; Wineburg, 2010). On the one hand we must teach the critique of sources and accounts in terms of multiperspectivity and controversiality (i.e. de-construction), on the other hand we also need to teach students how to reconstruct and accept histories and embedded facts if they are well-reasoned.

A common epistemological pitfall when it comes to multiperspectivity, especially in the media, is the so-called *false balance*: two positions are presented as equally valid even when the facts, scientific evidence, or credibility diverge widely. Well-known examples include reporting on climate change or vaccinations, in which scientific consensus and denial receive equal attention. Another theoretical epistemological challenge is that people can reason from different knowledge systems, for example religious or spiritual belief systems, and can also combine these. Research shows that religious individuals may consider certain sources "true" based on faith, while simultaneously evaluating other sources critically (Gottlieb & Wineburg, 2012). In classroom discussions where religion plays a role, it is important to be clear about the premise and beliefs system from which a claim is being made. We need to take into account that students can have multiple identities (or are multi-voiced) and can shift between different epistemological frameworks.

1.3 Moral Challenges

In an educational and democratic context, not all perspectives are morally desirable. What is considered morally acceptable varies by time and context and is a subject of debate. In our current society, international human rights and children's rights provide important benchmarks in my view. But simultaneously these basic rights are under pressure in many countries.

For example, a moral risk of multiperspectivity is that perpetration and victimhood can become blurred (Hartendorp et al., 2023). Moreover, seen from a social justice perspective, multiperspectivity is not always desirable because the emphasis should instead lie on empowering oppressed voices. In my view, power plays only a limited role in many English-language academic articles on multiperspectivity. I believe this is because the concept originates from a European intercultural tradition that focuses primarily on dialogue and connection, while paying less attention to power relations (Tarozzi & Torres, 2016). Social justice theories, by contrast, are explicitly political and aim for socially just societal change (e.g., Hawkey, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). From that angle, multiperspectivity can be seen as overly focused on harmony and maintaining the existing status quo and thus serves the elites. In European education, multiperspectivity is often used for de-polarization: the goal is to create space for perspectives, dialogue, and understanding, not social change. At the same time, it must be acknowledged that Lücke's (2012) view on multiperspectivity does include sensitivity for power relations and selecting sources based on social positions. However, because it is written in German, it seems to be less well known in other countries.

1.4 Constitutional Challenges

Multiperspectivity can also be challenged from a constitutional democratic perspective. Not every perspective is acceptable within a democratic constitutional state; some forms of expression are simply criminal offenses. It is essential to understand and safeguard these democratic boundaries. I draw on the example of the Netherlands, where fortunately discrimination is prohibited by our constitution. In a world marked by growing populism and polarization, we as educators have a responsibility to protect minorities from discriminatory populist parties. However, as a researcher investigating history education in non-democratic or conflict affected countries, I have seen firsthand how difficult this can be for teachers, especially when their own safety is at risk. In such countries the constitution might not protect you as a teacher taking a stance for marginalized minorities or even peaceful cooperation.

1.5 Psychological Challenges

It is generally easier to identify and discuss multiple perspectives in the classroom when the topic does not threaten one's own identity or group (Wansink et al., 2023). When, for example, one's own survival is at stake, as in conflict or war zones, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain this meta-perspective. Taking and illuminating different perspectives is often easier from a privileged standpoint, when the issue does not affect you personally. In war-affected countries, I've personally seen people who normally advocate for multiple perspectives shift into holding a single perspective because of the necessity of self-defense. Although the concept multiperspectivity is in several cases received as helpful for peacebuilding (e.g., Rowan & Wansink, 2025), it also is criticized. First, we need to recognize that the concept multiperspectivity has a Western and European origin, this means that one should be careful to use this concept in other contexts without re-contextualizing it. Bringing this Western concept to other context without taking the local context into account might even be seen as a form of neo-colonialism. Moreover, scholars warn us that teaching different perspectives in areas of conflict can also de-stabilize and might even increase violence than stopping it (Bentrovato, 2017; Skårås & Bentrovato, 2025). One can question to what extent it is wise to teach different perspectives on the past directly after or during conflict. Still, I think a hopeful note is that some teachers and scholars under pressure also can uphold this ideal (see Kuppens & Nfundiko, 2025). It is these teachers and scholars that need our support.

1.6 Practical Challenges

Finally, multiperspectivity often proves difficult to implement in educational practice. Teachers cite various reasons why the concept does not fully come into its own in the classroom. They describe pressure from the curriculum, an overload of content, and a lack of time to approach all topics from multiple perspectives. Moreover, teaching multiperspectivity requires knowledge of different perspectives, which teachers may not always possess (Wansink et al., 2017). Teachers also point out that students should first acquire some basic historical knowledge before being introduced to multiple perspectives. In addition, it also appears easier to apply multiperspectivity to more societal and historical dichotomized topics, such as the Cold War, where Soviet and American perspectives are commonly contrasted, although this too remains a historical simplification. Furthermore, for some historical topics teachers are struggling to find conflicting

sources to use in lesson activities. For example, it is relatively easy to find contrasting sources about the Cold War, whereas for lesser-known events this is more difficult (Wansink et al., 2017). Another challenge, in my perspective concerns assessment. There is an ongoing discussion in the Netherlands that history tests must be valid and reliable because examinations play an important role in our educational system. However, for exam makers, it is proven to be difficult to create trustful test items that incorporate multiple perspectives and allow for answers that are open to interpretation. Finally, there can be resistance from parents and community groups when new perspectives are introduced. This is especially the case when teaching sensitive topics from multiple perspectives, such as currently Israel/Palestine, populism, migration, and right-wing politics (e.g., Wansink et al., 2023; Henrichs et al., 2026; Waddington et al., 2026).

1.7 Conclusion

Multiperspectivity is a valuable but complex concept. It offers students the opportunity to view history in a critical and inclusive way. It can serve as an antidote to more absolutist epistemological views and to the misuse of history for nationalist and populist purposes. At the same time, relativist multiperspectivity can also pose a challenge, as it may epistemologically and morally suggest that “anything goes.” However, I argue that we need intersubjective standards for evaluating knowledge claims, as well as agreement on moral boundaries. These are necessary to coordinate our perspectives to deal constructively with differences and conflict. Ultimately, we are required to make ideological choices: what counts as trustworthy knowledge, how to construct our historical narratives, and how to organize our democracy. We need to learn to see the friction that occurs due to conflicting perspectives not as a problem, but as an opportunity for democratic learning (Parra et al., 2021).

I would like to briefly discuss two dimensions that we must balance when engaging with multiperspectivity. First, there is an ongoing tension between unity and diversity (e.g., Akkerman & Bakker, 2011; Akkerman et al., 2012). On the one hand, shared understanding is necessary because people need to agree on certain matters to attune and live together. On the other hand, diversity is equally important, as it allows for the inclusion of different perspectives and helps prevent exclusion and marginalization. The challenge lies in sustaining continuous coordination and dialogue to find common ground (i.e., unity) across differing perspectives (i.e., diversity).

The second dimension and challenge lie in balancing continuity and discontinuity. In a world in motion people have a psychological and organizational need for a certain degree of continuity and predictability, such as shared agreements about how we should live together morally and what counts as trustworthy knowledge. At the same time, we must remain open to discontinuity, ongoing change in what counts as “normal”. I have no simple solutions on how to balance both dimensions in relation to multiperspectivity, but I think it is helpful to discuss these challenges with other teachers. Both dimensions are not only related to how we construct historical narratives, but also in how we organize our classrooms and broader society. For these reasons, it is important not only to defend the concept of multiperspectivity, but also to continually question and deepen it. Only then can we strive for history education that does justice to the diversity and complexity of both the past and the present.

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This research did not require ethical approval because no empirical data is used. The author used ChatGPT (OpenAI) exclusively for language proofreading and improvement of grammar. The authors reviewed and approved all revisions and are fully responsible for the final content of the manuscript.

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