

***Empirical Social Epistemology – The Call for a Socio-Psychological Approach***  
**Miika Vähämaa, University of Helsinki**

**Into the Empirical**

To pursue empirical study of social epistemology is an ambitious task. My overall goal in this Collective Vision post is to underline the importance of empirical social epistemology. Such a view is socio-psychological and keeps asking the question: *How* social groups define and influence knowledge in the empirically observable world? The question is broad and a lot of ground would need to be covered to really pinpoint all the essential social influences on knowledge. To lower the bar a little, let me tell you a brief story from my real life concerning ordinary, yet real, people. The following exchange took place just a little while ago:

“So you’re writing some research on knowledge? You mean knowledge like ‘Hey, dude, where are you?’”

“Not exactly that. But yeah, something like that too. More about how people come to believe something is scientifically reliable. In groups, you know.”

Possibly a proper academic answer would have been to toss back the question in Socratic manner. What do you *mean* when you talk about knowledge? In real-life situations (friends asking for help with their homework, a coach explaining what needs to be known about the rules of soccer) and even in specialized academic efforts (scholars in physics studying quarks, say) that revolve around knowledge we typically already have some sort of intuitive or at least satisfactory and in-no-need questionable theory of knowledge *in general*.

Mostly, I think, knowledge is dealt with as life and situations go on and knowledge just as an inherent part of a situation – that is, knowledge is understood as inhering in a situation. For most people, and most situations, this is sufficient. As Herbert Simon would say, we ‘satisfice’ in such situations. But for those with an interest in the conceptual world that surrounds and informs the empirical world and enables us to make sense of the empirical world, these generic and abstract questions remain.

Yet, no matter what approach we take towards epistemic questions we run into social issues surrounding knowledge. Think of Plato and how he understood boundaries of knowledge roughly 400BC: knowledge is *justified true belief*. This idea has since well-penetrated the Western world (arguably the whole world) so thoroughly that it is undoubtedly meaningful, if only for the vast edifice of thought built upon that idea. Philosophy of knowledge, or epistemology, has advanced in great leaps since Plato, and classic philosophy has spawned highly abstract formulations of formal logic to exemplify what “justified true belief” ought to, or does, mean.

Yet, from a socio-psychological viewpoint, “justify,” “belief” and “true” are bound to social reality, and in particular to social groups in which we justify, believe and endorse

and seek truth. For instance, there may be different degrees - as measured by social standards of loyalty - by which we attain to some “truth” or there may be differences across groups in approaches to a given “truth.” Thus, to an empirical social epistemologist the world of knowledge is not entirely conceptual (as it is understood to be in philosophical logic) but neither is it entirely empirical. Thus, as Patrick Reider (2014, 53) puts it broadly, we as social epistemologists are “a group of individuals whose primary focus is the relation between knowledge and society.” To keep that focus calls for a dialogue between observable reality and its conceptualization.

I believe that social groups are the crucial media in the relation between knowledge and society. Thus, a socio-psychological approach is warranted in order to tap into empirical social epistemology. It is necessary since logic is too limited a discipline for empiricism, and since social groups have already been excessively examined in socio-psychological literature.

### **Limits of Logic in Social Epistemology**

Because of symbolic language we are naturally bound to logic. For instance, we categorize things as being of this and that kind, we attempt to avoid contradicting ourselves, and, most of all, we need to tell apart nonsense from syntactically-sensible text (Hamill, 1990). Language, thus, with its hidden but inherent logic, gives the framework for knowledge to rise and a medium in which knowledge can be expressed and preserved. Yet, the logic inherent in linguistic structures is more of a *tool in the processing* of meaning and in the social formation of knowledge than a core *property* of knowledge itself. These core properties, I argue, are studied by social epistemology as it focuses on knowledge in the social reality of life that touches most human beings. Analytic epistemology, on the other hand, with a bend towards formal logic - extrapolated from natural language — is really an epiphenomenon of social epistemology (Vähämäaa and West 2014b, forthcoming).

That said, I have no intention to downplay the achievements of formal logic and its powers. We can easily agree, I believe, that formal propositional logic has its time and place, and it is a swift hand of delivering mathematical deduction when needed. Due to its practical and proven applicability in improving our lives via technical and medical advances, we can see how formal logic has correspondence with the world, and that correspondence enables us to observe and deal with important parts of our natural physical environment. (Fallis 2007, 267-268) It must be added, though, that as a scientific group effort, formal mathematical logic is very social in its own way. Put briefly, there is a large-scale social epistemology surrounding the camp of formal logic, too. For instance, socialization takes place among logicians and in a classroom where logic is taught. Logicians teach and encourage each other to learn to solve formal logical tasks and find trustworthy mentors to do such teaching.

Considering all the social aspects of knowledge and even logic, it appears to be the case that the *notion of “logic” is too little to encapsulate the role of knowledge in the social world*. Most of our meanings in life lie elsewhere — beyond formal logical boundaries.

No matter where we look, it seems, the social bearings of knowledge cannot be ignored when studying epistemology in the empirical social reality. Meanings most dear to humans are typically social, and as such, propositional logic and philosophical analysis is not the ordinary route to knowledge in our social lives.

In conclusion, then, it appears that we are not that “logical,” after all (Vähämaa 2013a, 4). We don’t use the sort of ‘logic’ that an analytic philosopher would prefer. I would go as far as to claim that in general formal propositional logic has hardly any emotional or common group-based significance on day-to-day basis — although it might be otherwise for a few logicians and scientists. But where formulations of sheer logic may lack emotional and social significance, people we know and care for, however, carry both of these attributes.

### **The Importance of Social Groups**

As I write these lines a vigorous and long-lasting debate among liberals and conservatives has just been utterly provoked by the Darren Aronofsky’s Hollywood picture of the Biblical *Noah* in the United States (Niskakangas, *Helsingin Sanomat* 26<sup>th</sup> of April 2014). Two very different kind of social groups feel very differently about the right way to deal with Biblical stories, as well as the correct way to advertise consumer products ethically. The liberal interpretation of the story of Noah annoys the business elite of religious conservatives a great deal, as argued by their think-tank *Faith Driven Consumer*. Simultaneously, the fact that conservatives disapprove of the film annoys the liberals. The basis of the argument, perversely, is about the correct interpretation of the Biblical saga. Some 46 million Americans affiliate themselves as religious and conservative — a group hard to ignore — and many of them believe that the Hollywood version of Noah produces a false understanding of the Bible and its stories. Those who align with a more liberal view disagree. They believe, on the other hand, that an artistic reinterpretation of Noah’s story does no harm to any other interpretation and therefore are annoyed by the arguments made by the *Faith Driven Consumers*.

This is an interesting anecdote, especially if you have seen the movie. But the example of the film *Noah* brings us to the frontier of groups acting as epistemic communities. While feelings and cognitions circulated in one group are well understood by the in-group, the out-group feels and thinks very differently about the exact same subject matter. No resolution with dialogue is possible because the two groups build up their knowledge with very different fundamentals: One group assigns significant epistemic authority to the Bible and particular interpretations of it. The other group assigns equally significant epistemic authority to concepts like “artistic freedom” and “entertainment.” Even *vanity* steps in as an epistemic factor when considering celebrities, Hollywood and our general and powerful curiosity towards other people. There are no doubt multiples of epistemic variables in addition to these that can be grouped around three core epistemic “needs” or “senses” as people form knowledge in groups via a type of epistemic calculus of groups (Vähämaa 2013a, 14):

1. We want to have a sense of ability to choose what we think and to have a sense of being rational.

2. We want to have a sense of being accepted group members.
3. We want have a sense of personal affective stability or a sense that we are on the track of being or becoming happy.

In sum, to achieve these “senses” we need groups, and we *know* we do. I believe the very existence of groups is *a priori* tied to knowledge in a sense that group-formation entails socially comprehensible signaling and communication – in short: social group-formation requires knowledge of the *self*, of *other people* and of their *behavior* (Vähämaa 2013b, 26-27). The importance of knowing the needs of others and the importance of knowing the needs of ourselves is a fact very hard to deny. Overall, we need groups in order to survive and fulfill our various social and biological needs. Abundant literature and research is readily available on these needs and on the behaviors related to our various needs, both biological and social (for instance see biological reviews Maslow 1943, 1954; Bugental 2000; for social needs review Turner 1982; Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood and Sherif 1961; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Postmes and Branscombe 2010).

### **Social Epistemology as a Social Skill**

To gain an understanding of a “concept” or “ontology,” in more philosophical terms, is to create an epistemology around that concept. If I am to write about knowledge, I intend to define and argue for the nature of that concept and by doing so I create the standards by which my argument (at least to some people) becomes “correct,” “true,” and “comprehensible.” In the process, I come to define “knowledge.” In order for my latent definition of “knowledge” to be understandable, I need to communicate enough “correctness” or “comprehensibility” to set out rules by which I come to deliver “correctedness” and “comprehensibility.” Lack of “correctness” or “comprehensibility” may result in ontological dissonance, as Emilie Whitaker (2014, 72) suggests.

In essence, comprehensible communication is like that and a scientific effort is like that as well — only taken to extreme measures. In general, the pursuit and delivery of “correctedness,” “truth,” and “comprehensibility” are the core properties of science despite the domain of study. And, of course, one often aims for projected universal validity and acceptance with “correctedness” and “truth,” sometimes managing to be more convincing to the demanding scientific audience, sometimes not. It takes significant learning and effort to achieve the social rules embedded in science and its communication. If we think for example mathematics (for a detailed discussion see Vähämaa and Härmälä 2011, 69-71) it becomes clear that it takes time to learn the symbolic structures, the rules and meanings attached to the discipline of mathematics.

Yet, the pathways to the acquisition of skills concerning definition of various topics of knowledge such as “mathematics,” “money,” “politics,” or “science” seem to be divergent from one and the other (Vähämaa 2013c). Most of the learning happens via the swift hand of social interaction and groups, our trusted peers, friends and family or even personally unknown authorities and experts whom mediate “knowledge” to us in books and papers. No matter what the media is different sets of *social*, not objective, true or otherwise official, rules apply in the domain of social talk and interaction. Abundant

socio-psychological literature exists that dissects these epistemic social rules, roles and their meaning (Bugental 2000; Turner 1982; Sherif et al. 1961; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Postmes and Branscombe 2010). Often and interestingly, even without clearly expressing it, scholars in social psychology essentially focus on the epistemic function of the language in social groups.

### **No Other Way Than the Way of Groups**

It appears that groups are not only a medium for knowledge, but actually a necessity to the formation of knowledge; humans do not form knowledge outside of social structures. But conversely, groups, in order to exist, must themselves have an epistemic structure. As I write in a response article to Don Fallis and Kay Mathiesen (Vähämaa 2013b, 26):

Very much in the very same way as every written argument must start with a letter, must every group start with an epistemology — at least some sort of lay theory of understandable and nonsense sentences.

Following this train of thought, I go on to argue that in order for any social group to exist there needs to be some sort of group epistemology right at the very genesis of a group.

To fully understand the importance of empirical social epistemology and its socio-psychological bearings we should take seriously the claims made by social psychologists regarding human beings as inescapably social beings that developed to be fundamentally social. From this viewpoint, social epistemology is largely based in elementary social needs and their fulfillments. Yet, social needs require social ends, which in turn involve both cognitive and affective evaluations — they require a *social epistemology*. So, in order to achieve any social ends or goals one needs to have knowledge and, hence, a social epistemology.

To imagine how such an elementary level of epistemic praxis may evolve, we could think of two human beings meeting each other for the first time in order to achieve some shared meanings, to communicate, and to thereby make sense of one another to achieve some joint end. As biological history has it, people have throughout time formed groups and sought out other people to meet individual needs through collective action. Consequentially, as people group together, they at once have some common “language” or signaling system that sets the basic rules of knowing about each other, the ability to approach the joint goals via symbolic interaction, and to recognize the existence of the group in some social terms such as amiable gestures and social bonding of sorts.

This type of a “cave man” epistemology may be a silly example as such, but it does underline the reciprocity of groups and social epistemologies. One cannot have one without the other. A group has an immediate set of some level of epistemic standards in order to exchange any sensible communication, and as the group evolves, it begins immediately to create further social epistemologies about the world “out there.” If we linger a bit more on the image of two paleolithic men or women, we could assume that various “beliefs” or “feelings” would evolve to be communicated about the natural objects that the cave folk encountered. Even in the eras before language in the

contemporary sense, the atomic items of perception - birds, trees, food and dwellings, as well as the presumable “other people” in the perceptible world - would have been given a set of meanings that stem not only from perceptions but from *meanings* within the social reciprocity the group members have. They would not speak merely of “the big house,” we would posit; they would speak of “the big house where the chief lives,” a nomenclature with a social dimension. They would thus be likely to develop mutual trust and a felt sense of belonging together.

All of that, I presume, would result in an elementary “epistemic calculus of groups” that would enable both of our imaginary cave-dwellers to make observations of the world and, through dialogue with the other group member, to develop *social* meanings about the world. The Ur-sprache would, in its most primitive form, have to be social, since it would have to be a joint effort; the Ur-sprache would be a social epistemology as well as a shared discourse.

As far-fetched as such an imaginary exercise may sound, it is actually a modified version of another well-known Western folkloric tale of the genesis of a social epistemology. The Christian Bible goes to some length to describe how early people encountered animals and plants and the like, and in the process of observing them, the First Man (אָדָם) gave them names – the first bits of social knowledge of the world there ever had been thus far. Importantly these bits of knowledge made a clear social reference to “man” on the one hand and the “beast” to the other. Adam, as the religious legend has it, formed a social epistemology with none other than God himself and communicated with God the names of various things he felt like sounded good to him (or, as Genesis 1:27 has it, them; the use of אָדָם there is plural.)

To secularize the Biblical story, with no intention to downplay its religious meaning and status, I think the concept of “God” could be replaced with the idea of an early epistemic community able to exchange ideas about meaningful things and in that way form knowledge. Perhaps the genuine awe about the abundant nature of the world made the early communities feel like they dwelled in a pure sanctuary (קֹדֶשׁ) where the privilege to give names and agree upon them was concomitant with act of talking with God himself. Who knows? The important point, regardless of the historical development of early social epistemologies, persists. Groups arise to form meanings, and in the process, they form social epistemologies. No knowledge, thus, exists without groups and no groups exist without shared knowledge — a shared set of reciprocally — understandable communications.

If the above contentions are correct, it should be possible to conduct empirical socio-psychological research that describes, in a straight-forward manner, statistically significant differences between group epistemologies on attitudinal and cognitive variables as dependent variables, using group membership as independent variable. If that hypothesis really is to hold it should be testable via social science methods. Studies in which I have participated so far have corroborated the view of observable empirical function of social epistemologies. In the field of mathematics (Vähämaa and Härmälä 2011, 77), in the formation of attitudes towards science (Vähämaa and West 2014a, 5-18), and in the field of politics alike (Vähämaa and West 2014b, *forthcoming*) social

epistemologies set groups apart and reveal themselves as the epistemic fluid enabling the groups' social function.

**Contact details: [miika.vahamaa@gmail.com](mailto:miika.vahamaa@gmail.com)**

## References

- Bugental, Daphne B. "Acquisition of the Algorithms of Social Life: A Domain-Based Approach." *Psychological Bulletin* 26 (2000): 187-209.
- Fallis, Don. "Collective Epistemic Goals." *Social Epistemology* 21, no. 3 (2007): 267-80.
- Hamill, James F. *Ethno-logic: The Anthropology of Human Reasoning*. Urbana, OH: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
- Maslow, Abraham H. "A Theory of Human Motivation." *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (1943): 370-96.
- Maslow, Abraham H. *Motivation and personality*. New York, NY: Harper, 1954.
- Niskakangas, Tuomas. "Uusi Yritys Auttaa USA: N Kristittyjä Välttämään Epäsopivia Brändejä." *Helsingin Sanomat* 26 April 2014.
- Postmes, Tom and Nyla R. Branscombe. "Sources of Social Identity." In *Rediscovering Social Identity: Core Sources*, edited by Tom Postmes and Nyla Branscombe, 1-12. Psychology Press, 2010.
- Reider, Patrick J. "Knowledge as a Public Commodity." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 6 (2014): 53-55. <http://wp.me/P1Bfg0-Y9>
- Sherif, Muzafer, O. J. Harvey, B. Jack White, William R. Hood and Carolyn W. Sherif. *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment* (Vol. 10). Norman, OK: University Book Exchange, 1961.
- Tajfel, Henri and John C. Turner. "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour." In *Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, edited by Stephen Worchel and William G. Austin, 7-24. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986.
- Turner, John C. "Towards a Cognitive Redefinition of the Social Group." In *Social Identity and Intergroup Relations*, edited by Henri Tajfel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Vähämaa, Miika and Kennet Härmälä. "Comparing Perceptions of Mathematics: Norwegian and Finnish University Students' Definitions of Mathematics." *Nordic Studies in Mathematics Education* 16, no. 4 (2011): 100-111.
- Vähämaa, Miika. "Groups as Epistemic Communities: Social Forces and Affect as Antecedents to Knowledge." *Social Epistemology* 27, no. 1 (2013a): 3-20.
- Vähämaa, Miika. "A Group Epistemology is a Group Necessity A Reply to Fallis and Mathiesen." *Social Epistemology* 27, no. 1 (2013b): 26-31.
- Vähämaa, Miika. "Secrets, Errors and Mathematics: Reconsidering the Role of Groups in Social Epistemology." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2, no. 9 (2013c): 36-51.
- Vähämaa, Miika and Mark D. West. "The Dilemma of Group Membership in the Internet Age: Public Knowledge as Preferred Misinformation." *Javnost: The Public* 21, no. 1. (2014a): 5-18.
- Vähämaa, Miika and Mark D. West. "They Say One Thing and Mean Another' - An International Comparison of Group Epistemologies." *Nordicom Review*, (2014b) forthcoming.

Whitaker, Emilie. 2014. "Beyond Black and Green: The New Dystopian Plains." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 3, no. 5 (2014): 67-72. <http://wp.me/P1Bfg0-Y9>