Developing Community Epistemic Capacities
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I enjoyed reading Itai Bavli and Daniel Steel’s application of the community epistemic capacities framework to an interesting pair of novel cases, and their use of that application to develop the concept further.¹ Community epistemic capacities is an important yet overlooked part of interactions between expert and non-expert groups, and one in need of further thought both practically and theoretically. I take Bavli and Steel to be making two main arguments. One is that informed consent is limiting as a motivation for developing epistemic capacities in a community. To illustrate this point, they use their case studies to propose a second motivation for developing community epistemic capacities, namely the motive of overcoming mistrust of scientific experts by communities.

Their other argument is that growing a community’s epistemic capacities requires knowing what a community in the relevant sense is. To that end, they propose a working definition as well as some relevant characteristics. They argue that when candidate groups do not possess these relevant characteristics, developing community epistemic capacities is not an appropriate route, and illustrate this point with contrasting examples. In what follows, I will speak briefly to both arguments, but overall I am in agreement with the authors’ larger position, which I take to be that in order to be applied in practical cases, the details of a community epistemic capacities approach must be further developed.

Motivating Community Epistemic Capacities

In the original article, I employed a model of informed consent to motivate policymakers’ responsibility to encourage the development of epistemic capacities in communities with which they work. I took this approach because many organizations require or recommend participation with communities likely to be affected by some change, but what that participation should look like is often undertheorized.² I argued that this leads many to focus too much on whether chances to participate are made available to the community, and not enough on whether communities have the capacities to make those chances into meaningful possibilities. What theorizing there is often uses the analogy of informed consent from a medical context and applies it to community participation, and I argued that this also argues for increasing a community’s epistemic capacities.³

Bavli and Steel argue correctly that there are other times when community epistemic capacities are useful, and other times when people or groups have an obligation to encourage their development. They point out that community epistemic capacities may well be useful when communities have very little trust in scientific experts. I think they are right that this is another motivation for community epistemic capacities. Indeed, their

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¹ Itai Bavli and Daniel Steel 2015.
³ Ian Werkheiser 2015.
point can be seen as an expansion of the argument I made in the original article under the heading “The Necessity of Capacity” – a better understanding of the science and scientists involved may ameliorate distrust and allow communities to benefit from available expertise, and to the extent that the distrust is due to harms to the community by experts, there is a justice-based demand that they pursue this course. Bavli and Steel are right that this holds as a separate motive from informed consent for developing community epistemic capacities.

I further think there are other efficacy-based reasons for developing community epistemic capacities which have not yet been discussed. To pick just a few examples, communities with a high degree of epistemic capacities are presumably less dependent on external support, and so developing community epistemic capacities around health care or food production might be important parts of public health or food security programs, particularly for emergency preparedness. This increased resiliency from community epistemic capacities is also a motivation for marginalized communities to develop such capacities on their own when they face problems to their food systems or local environment, and are unlikely to be helped by dominant social institutions. The same could be said for response to climate change and other examples of community resiliency. Additionally, communities with epistemic capacities are presumably better partners with experts, making those epistemic capacities an important part of science drawing on community participation.

There are also other justice-based reasons which should be explored. Again, to pick only a few possible examples, developing community epistemic capacities might be a requirement for governments even when they are not about to consult a community on a project. This is because, as Gould has argued, full agency for individuals requires the capacity to engage in long-term, complex projects, including community projects. Presumably, communities with a high degree of epistemic capacities would be better at achieving these communal goals. To the extent that governments have a prima facie duty to support the freedom and agency of its citizens, then developing community epistemic capacities is an important part of that charge. Further, many people are heavily invested in the flourishing of a community to which they belong. Community epistemic capacities are presumably an important part of that flourishing, both inherently and instrumentally. Thus to the extent that governments have a prima facie duty to support their citizens pursuing goals in line with their conception of the good, allowing and perhaps facilitating the development of community epistemic capacities is a way to support that widely shared goal. Given the importance and usefulness of community epistemic capacities, it seems clear that there are different motivations for developing those capacities for different actors and in different contexts. More work on this clearly needs to be done, and Bavli and Steel’s discussion here is a good beginning.

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4 Werkheiser 2015, 9-11.
5 See Werkheiser 2014 for the beginnings of such a discussion.
6 Carol Gould 2014, 16.
7 See Werkheiser forthcoming for a first attempt to think through these obligations.
A Working Definition of Communities

Bavli and Steel say that in order to apply community epistemic capacities, policymakers and experts need a working definition of a community, and I agree that this is helpful. Are they missing key groups of people who ought to be included in the community for efficacy or justice reasons? Are they including two or three communities into one, perhaps dooming the project of capacity building to failure or the injustice of misrecognition? Is the group too nascent a community for capacity building to be effective, and effort should be spent instead on forging the community in the first place? These questions and more complicate any project to build capacity. I also agree with Bavli and Steel that an important part of a definition for the purposes of policy is whether those community epistemic capacities could be developed in a given group. The benefits of community epistemic capacities for communities suggest that they should be pursued when possible. I would just add here that we must be a little cautious. Presumably their suggestion is operating within something like an implied “all-affected” principle for membership in the candidate community. Without a principle like this, there would be a risk of developing epistemic capacities only for a favored subgroup within the affected population, in a way that might distort the community. Bavli and Steel propose two characteristics for groups which make it more likely that they will be able to develop community epistemic capacities: geographic proximity of the members of the candidate group, and a shared history and culture. I agree that these characteristics are relevant, but I believe they are particular instantiations of more general characteristics, which I will discuss below.

The characteristic of geographic proximity seems to me to be a specific example of the more general characteristic of connection – that there is a collection of individuals affected by many of the same issues. Shared issues provide a drive for developing a community and its epistemic capacities in order to support one-another and to collectively address the issues. For people living in the same geographical area, many of these issues will be environmental, from the daily weather to pollution to invasive species. There are other sorts of issues which can affect a community as well, such as laws targeting a particular group, or dependence on a particular industry, or a shared harm from a powerful social institution, and many of these issues are not dependent on proximity. It is true that without geographic proximity, communication between members of the community becomes more difficult, but not impossible. In the examples of the two groups affected by radiation poisoning, the Israeli Sephardim were affected by a wide variety of shared issues arising from social marginalization in addition to the X-ray treatments. This makes them much better candidates for community epistemic capacities than the middle-class, white American victims of the same poisoning. The latter group do share the issues affecting all middle-class, white Americans, but this is a much larger group than those affected by the X-rays. This is not to say that the single shared experience is not enough of a connection to make the American victims a community in the relevant sense, as we will see below. However it does make them a less obvious candidate.

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I also believe that Bavli and Steel’s characteristic of a shared culture and history is useful, but it is picking out a particular instantiation of two other, more general group characteristics. These are affiliation – that there is the existence of a group of individuals who consider themselves to be and consider others to be members of a certain community, and this belief is an important and valued part of their identity – and cooperation – that members of the group have a tendency to help other members with individual projects, and that there are many overlapping collective projects that either persist or are regularly formed. Affiliation and cooperation make it much easier for a group to develop the kinds of trust networks that are essential to community epistemic capacities, and make those capacities useful. I suspect these two characteristics were present for the Sephardim victims in ways they were not for the white, middle-class American victims. Again, this difference makes it more likely that community epistemic capacities can be developed in the first group than the second, but it is not entirely determinative.

A shared culture and history make it likely a group will have affiliation and cooperation (especially when combined with geographic proximity), but this is not the only way those can be developed. Another way raises a concern for Bavli and Steel’s account. Consider epistemic communities which have in fact formed around a shared medical issue. Perhaps most famously this happened during the early days of the AIDS epidemic, but this is an increasingly common phenomenon in the age of social media connecting sufferers. In these cases, there were no pre-existing reasons to think they would be able to develop community epistemic capacities – they were not geographically proximate, and did not share any particular culture or history not shared with many other, non-affected people in their society. Yet people affected by these issues sought each other out, began cooperating on various projects and sharing information with one-another, slowly built up an affinity community, and began building up that community’s epistemic capacities. These capacities allowed those communities to better engage with experts, self-generate research and treatment possibilities, and advocate for themselves in policy.

These and similar examples should give us pause before dismissing a group as not being able to benefit from community epistemic capacities. Perhaps a few energetic organizers in Bavli and Steel’s American example, either among those affected by radiation poisoning or a doctor external to the group, could have brought victims together and built a community based on their shared affectedness, particularly if they had access to the internet. Bavli and Steel are right that absent some kind of nascent community, attempts to build community epistemic capacities with a group will not be successful, but it is not clear whether this means organizations are absolved in those cases from working on those capacities, or whether this places a further burden on them to try to build the community in the first place. Again, more work in this area is required, and I think Bavli and Steel’s developments are promising ones.

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9 Steven Epstein 1995.
10 Madeline Akrich 2010.
References


Farm Bill Stakeholder Listening Sessions. fas.usda.gov/newsroom/farm-bill-stakeholder-listening-session.


