



# Social epistemology (SE)

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# 1. Introduction: We should be proud!



## 1. Introduction: We should be proud!

- The term SE was first used by library and information (LIS) scientist Jesse Shera in 1951 in an article about classification.
- This presentation argues that we should be very proud to be in the field, which has introduced this philosophical term, because its influence today is rapidly growing in philosophy, in sociology as well as many other disciplines.
- The best part is, however, that Shera not just coined the term, but that his understanding of SE seems to be more fruitful compared to the ones currently dominating research using this term.
- However, Shera's view was not influential at that time, and later the term has mainly been associated with two programs outside LIS, but it is now time for us to reclaim this concept.

## 1. Introduction: We should be proud!

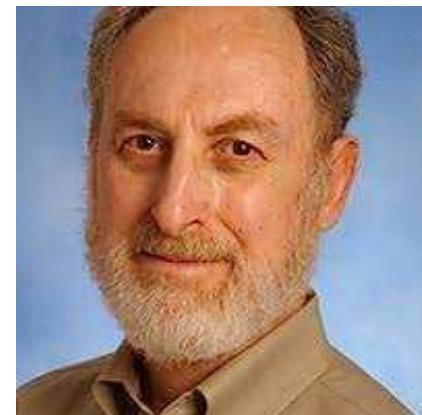
- Epistemology is about how to obtain knowledge. It provides methodological prescriptions about doing research or inquiry.
- SE is often confused with the sociology of knowledge, even by Shera himself. Already the next year, Egan and Shera (1952) published a new paper using the term SE, but this time not about classification, and in a sociological rather than an epistemological meaning. This 1952 article is far the most cited, and, although well received, has provided some confusion about the meaning of the term SE.
- The main aim of this presentation is to argue that Shera's 1951 contribution contains the seeds for the most fruitful understanding of SE.

## 2. Two contemporary schools of SE

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One of the texts about SE is *The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology* (Fricker et al. eds., 2020). On the one hand, this book contains claim that there are two roots and branches of SE, Goldman's and Fuller's, but on the other hand, it also contains chapters on, e.g., feminist epistemology and Kuhn's (1962) theory of paradigms, and thus understands SE broader than just Goldman and Fuller. I share this broader view, as we shall see in Section 3. However, these other views, although they represent forms of SE, mostly use other terms about themselves. Therefore, we have to consider the two schools, in order to characterize Shera's approach with the dominant use of the term SE today.

## 2.1 Alvin Goldman's analytic social epistemology



## 2.1 Alvin Goldman's analytic social epistemology

- Goldman and O'Connor (2021) emphasized that SE must be understood in opposition to individual/individualistic epistemology. As examples of individualist epistemologies, they presented the rationalist philosopher René Descartes and the empiricist philosopher John Locke.
- Goldman and O'Connor (2021) presented their alternative to individual epistemology this way:

“By contrast social epistemology is, in the first instance, an enterprise concerned with how people can best pursue the truth (whichever truth is in question) with the help of, or in the face of, others. It is also concerned with truth acquisition by groups, or collective agents.”

## 2.1 Alvin Goldman's analytic social epistemology

- Goldman and O'Connor (2021; emphasis in original) also wrote:

"In contrast with the individualistic orientations of Descartes and Locke, social epistemology proceeds on the commonsensical idea that information can often be acquired from others. To be sure, this step cannot be taken unless the primary investigator has already determined that there *are* such people, a determination that presumably requires the use of individual resources (hearing, seeing, language, etc.) Social epistemology should thus not be understood as a wholly distinct and independent form of epistemology, but one that rests on individual epistemology."

## 2.1 Alvin Goldman's analytic social epistemology

This quote reveals an understanding of the difference between individual epistemology and SE that has been criticized by other researchers. Kusch (2001, 188), referring to Goldman (1999) emphasized that Goldman's and others' idea of individual knowledge as being primary, and social knowledge as being secondary is a problematic assumption.

Perhaps you are questioning Kusch's view and considering it to be nonsense. If so, the following thought experiment may help understanding Kusch's idea: Think of a person (e.g., yourself) in an isolated position (e.g., on the toilet). Whatever you are thinking about in that situation, you use concepts, acquired during your upbringing. It is therefore not a mad idea to consider individual knowledge as secondary to the social and cultural context in which you have been socialized.

## 2.1 Alvin Goldman's analytic social epistemology

The implication of Kusch's view is that SE cannot just be considered a supplement, itself based on individual epistemology, as claimed by Goldman and followers. Supporters of authors such as Kusch (2002), will argue contrary: that it is rather the individual epistemology, that rests on SE.

As Albert Einstein said: "[It is the theory which decides what we can observe](#)" (cited from Heisenberg 1989, p. 40). This quote is a key to understanding SE. It is opposed to the empiricists (incl. logical positivists) belief in the objectivity of knowledge derived from individual observational reports. In the positivist view, theory is derived from and tested by observations, and *theory and knowledge are assumed to be free of cultural and social factors, and from the observers' theoretical assumptions*. SE is different.

## 2.1 Alvin Goldman's analytic social epistemology

As emphasized by Kusch (2001, 188) Goldman and follower's approach to SE does not recognize this problem related to individual epistemology. According to the definitions above, Goldman's view represents an individualist rather than a social epistemology, but it is a research program focusing on second-hand knowledge (i.e., knowledge obtained from others, such as testimony). It is of course a legitimate area of research to study forms of biases in knowledge obtained from different kinds of testimony (and, by the way, the information scientist Patrick Wilson made, before Goldman, a major study of this concept).

We shall not here go further into second-hand knowledge, which has for a long time been dealt with in many disciplines, for example, in source criticism in history.

## 2.1 Alvin Goldman's analytic social epistemology

- Alternatively to Goldman, the contrast between individual epistemology and SE can therefore be formulated this way:
  - Individual epistemology: The individual's observations are pure and direct (i.e., representing reality free of social, cultural, and theoretical influences).
  - Social epistemology: The individual's observations are influenced by social issues including the individual's orientations and views.

My conclusion about Goldman's SE is, in addition to its individualist tendency, that its results developing methodological prescriptions for inquiry are disappointing.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology



## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

Steven Fuller's SE (e.g., 2016, 2017) was by Collin (2020) called "critical social epistemology. It is somewhat difficult to describe, as Collin (2020, 27) wrote: "[Fuller's work resists simple summary because of his somewhat unsystematic style of writing.](#)" Fuller (2017, 4197) however, provided an important statement about his position:

["Social epistemology' literally means the social theory or social science of knowledge. That simple definition already says a lot. It implies that knowledge is not normally seen as intrinsically social; hence, 'social' needs to be added to specify the field of inquiry. This point is worth noting because \[it\] \[...\] rests on a particular reading of the history of philosophy that is dominant only in the English-speaking world."](#)

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

We see, that in opposition to Goldman's position, Fuller expresses a view of knowledge, that is genuine social: "**knowledge is 'always already' social in both its constitution and import**" [what makes up knowledge and how knowledge is obtained]. This is an important insight, but it does not say what Fuller's epistemological position is. What are his normative guidelines for inquiry?

In addition, it is a strange claim that the basis for constructing such normative guidelines is the same as "social science of knowledge"? Social sciences are empirical sciences influenced by conflicting epistemologies. They need epistemological clarifications; they do not themselves constitute an epistemology.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

It seems difficult to find a clear answer about Fuller's epistemology, although Fuller (2016, 2) indicates an answer: "[An important precursor of social epistemology is 'critical rationalism,' a philosophy associated with Karl Popper, in which the two words that constitute the name should be taken equally seriously.](#)"

However, Popper's "critical rationalism" is not a social epistemology. To demonstrate this point, we shall contrast it with the philosophy of Thomas Kuhn.

Fuller does not like Kuhn, whom he sees as rather conservative, while he considers Popper a critical philosopher.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

The motto "be critical" is probably closer related to Popper's philosophy than to Kuhn's. But the motto "be critical" is insufficient as a methodological prescription if not followed by further guidelines about how to be critical, which means how to examine the theories.

Popper's well-known answer to this problem is "falsificationism:" researchers shall try to falsify theories. By implication, a criterion for being scientific for Popper is that a theory is formulated in such a way that it is possible to deduce its implications and thereby to test it. According to Popper, the theory "**all swans are white**" can never be confirmed no matter how many white swans have been observed. It can be falsified, however, if just one black swan is observed.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

Popper's view is, however, based on some problematic assumptions. The most important one is that whereas Popper accepts that observations are theory-dependent, and acknowledges that this makes confirmation of theories impossible, he ignores this when it comes to falsification—and therefore he fails to see that falsification is also inconclusive.

Another problem is that research does not start with clear concepts, but concepts are typically made more precise as science progresses. Therefore, the demand of clearly formulated concepts is in some instances problematic and harmful.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

When claiming that one observation of a black swan falsifies the theory that all swans are white, it is assumed that "swan" is an unproblematic concept, that can be identified with certainty. Recent research based on DNA analysis have, however, problematized many former definitions and classification of species of birds (see Fjeldså 2013).

Thus, concepts are not just "given", but are developed and modified by research, again implicating a social perspective, which was missed by Popper.

Fuller's preference for Popper is strange, because Popper is much more related to logical positivism compared to Fuller's own critical view.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

Kuhn's philosophy, contrary to Popper's, is genuine "social." Scientists are trained under the influence of a paradigm, often in an indirect way, influenced not just by textbooks and theories, but also by the apparatus used, the kind of research questions raised etc. Theories are not just falsified, but they may be left when newer generations of researchers take over, and may later be taken up again.

It is widely recognized that Kuhn was a primary force in the historicist turn in the philosophy of science in the 20th century, and it is almost definitional that historicism implies a social point of view, as it implies the historicity of knowledge and cognition.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

Fuller's SE developed comments on more traditional epistemological issues such as the Popper-Kuhn controversy but is not a position that he clearly developed and defended. If anything, Fuller's discussion of Popper and Kuhn seems to contradict his ambition of providing a social epistemology.

Kusch (2002, 2) suggested to name Fuller's school "[the science policy programme](#)." Probably it is in this suggestion, rather than in its contribution to epistemology, we should search for its core contributions.

## 2.2 Steve Fuller's "critical" social epistemology

Kusch (2002, 2) wrote:

"The science policy programme seeks to determine ways of making science more democratic and accountable to the public. It also hopes to increase our ability to choose between the development of different kinds of knowledge. This hope is based on the assumption that one can influence the collective production of scientific knowledge by manipulating the social organization of scientific communities. Changing social organization leads to a different type of knowledge."

However, Fullers concrete suggestions are not convincing, for example, he suggested to replace scientists with bureaucrats for the government of science and universities. This seems to contradict research made in the field.

### 3. The broader view on SE



### 3. The broader view on SE

We have seen that in the two dominant schools of SE, Goldman's school is not properly social, and Fuller's is not properly epistemological!

In slide 11, we defined:

- Social epistemology: The individual's observations are influenced by social issues including the individual's orientations and views.

Epistemologies based on this view are much older than Goldman's and Fuller's positions. As Kusch (2011, 873) wrote:

"Many contributors to Pragmatism, Marxism, Critical Theory or Hermeneutics also qualify [as being parts of SE]." (And we can add Feminist epistemology, among others)

### 3. The broader view on SE

How, for example, is feminist epistemology social? According to Code (1998): **The impact of feminism on epistemology has been to move the question 'Whose knowledge are we talking about?' to a central place in epistemological inquiry.** Hence feminist epistemologists are producing conceptions of knowledge that are quite specifically contextualized and situated, and of socially responsible epistemic agency.

What Code is talking about is that women have some common experiences, which provide them with alternative perspectives, which, if they are taken into account, provides knowledge, which is more objective, compared to the knowledge that ignores this perspective. Feminist epistemology, says Code, "**retain a realist commitment to empirical evidence, while denying that facts or experiences 'speak for themselves'.**"

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge



## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

Shera (1951) coined the term SE in the context of classification research. He found that formerly all theory of the organization of knowledge, from Plato to Henry Bliss, has been founded on four basic assumptions (1951, 72-73):

- “First that there exists a universal ‘order of nature’ that, when discovered, will reveal a permanent conceptual framework of the entirety of human knowledge;
- second, that the schematization of that order is a hierarchy of genus and species, class and sub-class, that progresses downward from general to specific, from terms of maximal extension to those of maximum intension;

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

- third, that the principle of differentiation that operates throughout the hierarchy is derived from the likeness or unlikeness of the properties or attributes of the component units of the classification; and
- fourth, that these properties or attributes partake of the substantive nature or physical properties of the units being classified: an intrinsic part of the unit itself, permanent and unchanging, an essence, an essence that resists alteration by the external

Shera provided a criticism of these assumptions and suggested alternatives. It was in this context, he introduced the term SE (1951, 77; italics added):

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

"Even a cursory examination of the history of classification of the sciences emphasized the extent to which any attempt to organize knowledge is conditioned by *the social epistemology* of the age in which it was produced. This dependency of classification theory upon the state of the sociology of knowledge will doubtless be even more strongly confirmed in the future. Here, then, is an implicit denial of Bliss' faith in the existence of a 'fundamental order of nature,' a rejection of the belief that there is a single, universal, logically divided classification of knowledge."

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

The meaning of “social epistemology of the age” is —at least partly— revealed in the following quote (Shera, 1951, 77):

“If one may learn anything from such a cursory examination of the history of classification it is that every scheme is conditioned by the intellectual environment of its age or time; that there is not, and can never be, a universal and permanent classification that will be all things to all men; and that each generation may build upon the work of its predecessors, but must create its own classification from the materials that it has at hand and in accordance with its own peculiar needs.”

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

This quote states:

- (1) that a classification cannot be universal, serving all purposes for everybody
- (2) that a classification cannot be permanent
- (3) that classificationists build on their predecessors, making classifications developmental and dynamic
- (4) classifications are based on “the materials at hand,” i.e., based on the knowledge and concepts of its time, and
- (5) that classifications are designed to serve specific needs.

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

Shera's expression "the intellectual environment of its age" may be translated to the dominant worldview, paradigm, epistemology, or metatheory.

What is important is that the classifier (and the resulting classification) is influenced by views represented in a broader social, cultural, and domain-specific context. This is a clear social epistemological position that denies the possibility of constructing classifications based on the isolated individual's observation and cognition.

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

Shera demonstrated the close connection between pragmatism and social epistemology (1951, 83-84; italics in original):

The pragmatic approach to classification through meaningful units of knowledge must be based on recognition of the obvious truth that any single unit may be meaningful in any number of different relationships depending on the immediate purpose. *Thus, it is the external relations, the environment, of the concept that are all-important in the act of classifying.* A tree is an organism to the botanist, an esthetic entity to the landscape architect, a manifestation of Divine benevolence to the theologian, a source of potential income to the lumberman.

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

Pragmatic classification, then, denies the existence of the “essence” of tree, for each of these relationships owes its existence to different properties of the tree. Relationship is not a universal, but a specific fact unique to the things related, and just as these relations reveal the nature of the relata, so the relata determine the character of the relationship.”

Shera (1951) emphasized how different domains may consider the same term (e.g., tree) differently and thus describe different attributes and put it into different conceptual structures, thereby predating my domain analytic point of view (cf. Hjørland, 2017) for about half a century. This is also clear in Shera’s emphasis on the necessity of subject knowledge of the classifier, and by his priority of subject-specific classifications rather than universal ones.

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

Given this description of social epistemology, it seems not to be as unclear, as others and Shera (1971, 79) himself later assumed. The position is epistemological in that it claims that different paradigmatic views (by the classifier) produce different classifications. The position is social in that different groups of people with differing perspectives and interests produces different classifications. Shera failed, however, to provide more specific methodological principles for classification based on SE. He realized that subject knowledge is important, but did not develop this view.

Shera's problem was that in 1951 the world had yet to encounter a revolution in philosophy best known from Kuhn (1962), which introduced the concepts "paradigm" and "paradigm shift," and which itself is associated with both SE and pragmatism.

## 4. Shera, SE and the classification of knowledge

In relation to SE this approach to classification came, as already said, with introduction of the domain-analytic approach, with the claim that different “paradigms” implies different classifications. This indicates that the design of a classification presupposes the deciding of the “paradigm” on which should it be based. Ørom (2003) may be considered a model.

## 5. Epistemologies in general

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Today, there seems to be an unmanageable number of theoretical positions in epistemology, both in elementary textbooks and in the research literature. The situation seems overall not to be a healthy one.

Some of the many suggested positions in epistemology seem to this author to be sound, but of a too narrow application. This is the case with, for example, the feminist “standpoint theory” and “critical race theory,” which probably are very fruitful for tackling problems related to equality in, respectively, gender and race/ethnicity.

## 5. Epistemologies in general

However more general courses in research methodology need to be based on broader epistemological principles, which can be taught in courses and applied to a field (e.g., LIS) as a whole. We should ask ourselves: What are the main epistemologies in use (explicitly or implicitly), how should they be evaluated, and what is the general learning for us?

As a first step it may be suggested that “standpoint theory” and “critical race theory” form parts of a more general “critical theory”, which opposes individualist epistemologies like empiricism, rationalism, and positivism by denying the neutrality of research and knowledge.

## 5. Epistemologies in general

Based on such a need for a generalized classification of epistemologies, I have suggested the following classification:

- **Rationalism:** emphasis on logical and rational principles, a priori knowledge, and the deductive method. Rationalism consider itself an ahistorical and neutral epistemology, not influenced by social issues (a view, which is considered impossible by historicism and pragmatism, but nevertheless has a strong position in parts of the literature).
- **Empiricism:** emphasis on observations, which are not influenced by the observers social-cultural or theoretical context or orientation. (This view is also considered impossible by historicism and pragmatism, but nevertheless also has a strong position in parts of the literature).

Rationalism and empiricism represent individualist epistemologies.

## 5. Epistemologies in general

- **Historicism:** emphasis on the social, cultural, and paradigmatic context of the observers. Any knowledge claim must defend the broader theoretical basis on which it is based.
- **Pragmatism:** emphasis on the non-neutrality of knowledge claims. Any knowledge claim must state which interests are served and provide arguments that the claim supports the stated interests.

Historicism and pragmatism represent social epistemologies.

In various papers, including the full version of this speech, I have exemplified how these four positions can be found in classification research and argued in favor of the social epistemologies, and in particular of pragmatism.

## 6. Conclusion

## 6. Conclusion

Epistemology is important for all science because defending and arguing properly for any knowledge-claim in the end involves arguments about epistemology. In this presentation I have also argued, contrary to Goldman, that individualist epistemologies are not tenable. The realization of this is mainly due to the collapse of logical positivism and the flourishing of historically, socially, and pragmatically oriented epistemologies such as Kuhn's theory of scientific paradigms.

All problems are not solved, of course. Shera's views on classification is more easily defended in some areas than in others and fails to consider Mill's (1872, 498) distinction between narrow technical or artificial classifications versus properly scientific or "natural" classifications.

## 6. Conclusion

Shera rejected essentialism, which is much in line with contemporary thinking. It may, however, be that case that some properties are essential in relation to a theoretical point of view. Therefore, only an absolutist essentialism should be rejected, not essentialism in relation to a given paradigm or theory.

It is important that we examine, if Sera's principles are generally defensible. *The periodic table of physics and chemistry* is often hailed as the most successful of all classifications. It is important that we examine if Sera's SE can be defended even here.

## Notes

A fuller version, including all bibliographic references is published in the proceedings of this conference. Some semantic issues related to the word "social" as well as some often confused dichotomies could not find place in this presentation (or the version in the proceedings). Please see the *ISKO Encyclopedia of Knowledge Organization* (IEKO) under the term "social":  
<https://www.isko.org/cyclo/social>

**Thanks for your attention!**



# Questions & comments?

## Added reference

Code, Lorraine. 1998. "Feminist Epistemology." In *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig. London: Routledge, 3: 597-602

Mill, John Stuart. 1872. *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive: Being a Connected View of the Principles of Evidence and the Methods of Scientific Investigation* vol. 1-2, 8<sup>th</sup> ed.. London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer.