

Source: History of Knowledge, April 28, 2021, <https://historyofknowledge.net/2021/04/28/knowledge-as-an-object-of-historical-research/>

Publisher: German Historical Institute Washington DC

# Knowledge as an Object of Historical Research

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Nearly two years ago, Shadi Bartsch tweeted [five tenets](#) for understanding knowledge that now appear on the website of the center she directs at the University of Chicago, namely the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge. These tenets deserve further elucidation and discussion, a process I'd like to begin on this blog, starting at the end:

5. Knowledge at any given time is exactly equal to what people think is true. As such, sub-knowledges, unauthoritative knowledges, and disputed knowledges can all exist simultaneously inasmuch as “people” is a plural concept.

The statement that "knowledge ... is exactly equal to what people think is true" does not represent a radically relativistic stance. It does not suggest that all things held to be true and understood as knowledge are equally valid. Instead, it recognizes that all authentic truth claims are part of the same cluster of mental, social, and cultural processes that we grasp as knowledge, whether said truth claims are objectively correct, false, unprovable, or a combination of these things. At the same time, even inauthentic truth claims, namely outright lies and propaganda, become knowledge for whoever accepts them as valid.

Another way to make this point is simply to say that knowledge is what people know; it is what is true or real to them. From that follows the second part of the same tenet, namely that "'people' is a plural concept" and so knowledge has to be too. This insight informs the tendency among scholars who depart from standard English and use knowledge as a count noun with a plural form, as in "sub-knowledges, unauthoritative knowledges, and disputed knowledges can all exist simultaneously."

Again, this tenet is not a statement of radical relativism. Instead, it amounts to an invitation to see the same operations at work in people who know things, regardless of how they form or obtain this knowledge. They might arrive at certain kinds of knowledge through personal experience or because of testimony that is credible to them. This testimony might involve scientific reputation and the scientific method, or years of practice in an occupation, or the social operations of truth claims in an intimate setting of family and friends, or revelation and faith. Media could figure in here, too, understood as trustworthy or not on the basis of one's other social relationships, whether through directly expressed opinions or the operations of one's habitus in the Bourdieusian sense. If we want to understand people and their knowledge practices, we have to learn to see seemingly mutually exclusive knowledges as part of [a common story](#), if one of differences.

And so we arrive at the beginning of the five tenets:

1. The study of knowledge is the study of claims to knowledge.

In the kind of knowledge studies that these tenets seek to describe, including those informed by history-of-knowledge perspectives, whether and how a thing is objectively knowable is not a primary concern. Instead, historians of knowledge tend to be interested in the claims themselves, in why they are true to the people for whom such truths constitute knowledge.

At the same time, if knowledge is to be a category or perspective that historians in general should take seriously, we have to go further and consider what social, cultural, and other historical effects these knowledges and knowledge claims have.

Take, for instance, Andrew Taylor's tale of Canadian courts and indigenous [land claims](#). The latter were usually based on an oral record "maintained through cultural practices" utterly "alien to a court working in a European legal tradition." Taylor's story is compelling because it lays out different ways of knowing that were at the root of an age-old story of conflict over land. "The law," in his telling, "becomes an epistemological forcing ground. The courts must negotiate conflicting claims to truth even when there are fundamental differences between cultures as to how truth itself is understood." Taylor doesn't discuss knowledges for their own sakes but because they reflect two entirely different ways of apprehending the world over whose real-world consequences Canadian courts have had to decide.

Or what about the silences in certain kinds of literature, such as the official handbook of the Boy Scouts of America? Before World War I, Mischa Honeck argues, the Scouts [rebranded](#) "U.S. global expansion as a playful and honorable masculine adventure," one cleansed, for example, of the devastating guerrilla warfare in the Philippines that followed the U.S. victory over Spain in 1898. This kind of knowledge politics had consequences for Americans' self-understanding, producing knowledge claims at odds with the reality of their country's violent overseas colonial encounters. With time, the consciously fashioned claims to knowledge that underpinned the Scouts' whitewashed narrative reproduced themselves, in part reflexively, but also through human agency.

These examples illustrate why knowledge studies are becoming attractive to scholars of every stripe. At the same time, the examples remind us that researching knowledge or claims to knowledge requires a key insight from historiography: [context matters](#). Hence, the second tenet:

2. All knowledge forms are embedded in a specific context, and are shaped by that context.

Time, place, and other circumstances such as social, cultural, and occupational setting shape knowledge claims and their perceived validity. Again, context does not serve to relativize truth claims since those are not under discussion. Instead, context is necessary for understanding how a certain chunk of knowledge (how "a knowledge," so to speak) forms or emerges to serve as knowledge in a given social, cultural, political, and temporal constellation.

"Rumors" and "gossip" have different meanings and values, depending on the context. They are easy to dismiss in everyday life, especially in the context of our own negative experiences with social media. At the same time, such things can be essential for surviving a crisis in a situation where reliable, well-sourced news is nonexistent, such as during the Russian Civil War. See, for instance, Allison Schmidt's [reflections](#) on Mikhail Bulgakov's *The White Guard*. Or consider the importance of informal sharing in a pandemic in a state that claims a monopoly on all news, whether formally and publicly broadcast or passed along surreptitiously and privately.

Katrin Horn, for her part, [considers gossip](#) in an altogether different way, reading between the lines of personal narratives in order to learn more about the intimate lives of nineteenth-century women in ways that officially produced records would never permit. Transgressive in one context, gossip can be the medium of intimacy in another.

Regardless of the specific historical context, it is important to comprehend knowledge as bound up in human activity, from its formation and use to its re-use and transformation. In other words:

3. Knowledge is processual, not static.

Historiography itself is subject to the dynamics described by this tenet. A key lesson for history students at university has long been that historical accounts of the past are never finished, with all due respect to Ranke's aspiration to recount a story as it actually played out. There is always more research to be done. There are more sources to evaluate, new methods to apply, and different questions to ask as historians come to terms with the changing conditions of their own present, not to mention changing scholarship in other areas. And on it goes. Both product and shaper of human activity, knowledge does not sit still.

Knowledge's embeddedness in human lives and their practices has everything to do with human inquisitiveness and problem-solving:

4. Knowledge occurs in response to particular questions. Unasked questions have produced silence, not knowledge.

This fourth tenet strikes me as important to the self-understanding of any research enterprise in particular. We form knowledge, for better or worse, by asking questions and seeking answers through a variety of methodologies. The assertion that "unasked questions" yield only "silence" speaks to the best possible ethos for much of our research, teaching, and learning. But what about implicit knowledge, the kind one absorbs from one's surroundings and activities without consciously raising any questions? What about the things one learns through rote memorization and drill? Or things we learn through family stories? Or in a situation that requires one to do as one is told?

Maybe the fourth tenet privileges certain kinds of knowledge formation to the exclusion of others, though I doubt that is the intent. At some point, even received knowledge had to have formed somewhere and somewhen in connection with human activity. Of course, we shouldn't fetishize origins, but we can take the existence of such origins, however indeterminate, as a reminder of the central role that humans play in this game. Consequently, we might also keep in mind the third tenet about knowledge's dynamic nature, as it continuously forms and reforms through human action, countless knowledges the result, plural, if not pluralistic.

In the end, I am struck by the large number of posts on this blog that one could use to illustrate various aspects of the "5 Tenets," even though I only reference four of them here. For all the thematic and methodological diversity of *History of Knowledge's* contributors, perhaps more consensus about the history of knowledge's object of study exists than I had realized.