

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*Part I*

Introduction

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)

# 1 Knowledge, morality and affiliation in social interaction

---

*Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig*

## Introduction

In everyday social interaction, knowledge displays and negotiations are ubiquitous. At issue is whether we have epistemic *access* to some state of affairs, but also how *certain* we are about what we know, our relative *authority* and our differential *rights and responsibilities* with respect to this knowledge. Implicit in this conceptualization is that knowledge is dynamic, graded and multi-dimensional and that our deployment of and reliance on epistemic resources are normatively organized. As Drew puts it, there is a “conventional ascription of warrantable rights or entitlements over the possession and use of certain kinds of knowledge” (1991: 45). As in any normatively organized system, we can and do hold one another accountable for justifiably asserting our rights and fulfilling our obligations with respect to knowledge. It is in this way that we see the epistemic domain as morally ordered.

This orientation to and monitoring of the moral order might seem completely different from the moral reasoning used in tasks requiring judgements of whether a given scenario (e.g., about sharing resources or unintentionally killing someone) is morally acceptable or not (e.g., Hauser 2006; Henrich *et al.* 2004). However, the micro-level moral order can be understood as cut from the same cloth as other forms of moral reasoning. And these micro-interactional moral calibrations have critical consequences for our social relations, most directly through our moment-by-moment alignments and affiliations with others.

Although there is a longstanding interest in knowledge asymmetries in social interaction, since the turn of this century there has been a rapid escalation in work on epistemic primacy in conversation. One reason is that it has become clear that if we are to understand how interactants manage

Thank you to all the contributors who helped to shape this introduction through the workshops we participated in together, our conversations about these topics and comments on earlier versions of this chapter. Thanks especially to Nick Enfield, Kaoru Hayano and John Heritage for coming into the intellectual trenches with us in the final stages of writing.

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada, Jakob Steensig*

issues of agreement/disagreement and affiliation/disaffiliation, something critical to cooperation and pro-sociality in human behavior, we need a better understanding of the contribution of epistemic stance. This book gathers work by several of the scholars who pushed this domain of inquiry forward early on and adds to it work by scholars new to the domain. We consider asymmetries of knowledge at the micro-interactional level, examining a variety of different conversational practices for managing these epistemic dimensions with an eye toward the moment-by-moment moral and affiliational implications of these practices.

The volume is organized into two main sections with a final section that works toward a theory of the domain. The first set of chapters takes epistemic resources as a point of departure and studies the consequences of their use for affiliation and alignment in the ongoing social interaction. The second set of chapters starts with affiliation processes or problems and studies how epistemic resources are used in dealing with them. This introduction has three main sections. In the first section, we review relevant strands of research on knowledge. In the second section we discuss key notions in the study of knowledge in social interaction. In the third section we outline how knowledge is moral and exemplify our conceptualization of alignment and affiliation.

### Background

A concern with the nature of knowledge goes back to at least Plato in his dialogue *Theaetetus* and spans the fields of philosophy, psychology, history, anthropology, sociology, communication and linguistics. This introduction attempts to situate our interest in the intersection between knowledge and morality in social interaction rather than provide a comprehensive overview.

In the cognitive sciences, an interest in knowledge is dominated by a concern with the individual mind. Shannon and Weaver's (1949) well-known communication theory, for instance, takes as its point of departure the "communication model," according to which an "information source" sends a message that is ultimately received by a "destination." The theory looks at how information can be transmitted (typically in a technical system) with as little loss of information as possible and has been expanded to cover human-human interaction. In this light, knowledge can be seen as information that comes from one mind, is encoded into a message in a language and sent via a channel to be decoded by another mind, which is then trying to recover the original message, or intention (see also Levelt 1989).

Cognitive scientists have been pushed to acknowledge the social context of knowledge through the rise of concepts such as social cognition (e.g.,

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Fiske and Taylor 1984; Forgas 1981; Showers and Cantor 1985; Wyer and Srull 1984) and distributed cognition (e.g., Hutchins 1995; Lave 1988). Lave's term "situated cognition" emphasizes that knowledge should be conceptualized as "stretched across mind, body, activity and setting" (1988: 18). For instance, math skills that are readily deployed in everyday contexts of shopping or weight management are not necessarily replicable in a classroom setting (Lave 1988). Similarly, Hutchins speaks of "cognition in the wild" (1995) referring to the native habitat of cognition, which is naturally occurring culturally constituted human activity – contrasting with the experimental laboratory where cognition is studied "in captivity" (see also Goodwin 2000). While from these perspectives what one individual knows is shaped by the social context, such a focus on cognition still does not address the processes through which knowledge is managed socially.

Sociologists' interest in knowledge has been with how knowledge is constructed and represented, on the one hand, and how it can be "owned," on the other. The sociology of knowledge tradition has argued that "society's influence extends into the structures of human experience in the form of ideas, concepts and systems of thought" (McCarthy 1996: 1). Although knowledge in this tradition was initially viewed, following Marx, as determined by social conditions (Mannheim 1936, and, for overviews, see McCarthy 1996; Stark 1991[1958]), Schütz argued that knowledge is socially constructed, derived from people's life experiences and must be communicated in order to become a reality (1962). Although this latter view was somewhat suppressed by behaviorist orthodoxy, the notion bloomed in the 1960s in the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann (1966). Relatedly, Moscovici's introduction of "social representations" argues for the idea of a reality by consensus (1981, 1990, 2000). Currently, there is debate over whether knowledge can or should be separated from culture or whether it should be subsumed under it (Barth 2002; McCarthy 1996; Sidnell 2005).

This move away from social determinism was taken still farther by Garfinkel. In his move toward understanding everyday social behavior, he viewed such behavior as a matter of "accountable moral choice" (Heritage 1984b: 76). Thus, whereas classical views of society saw social norms as a behavioral constraint (Durkheim 1997 [1893]) or as a form of regulation (Parsons 1937), Garfinkel (1967) joined elements of Schütz's phenomenological, social constructionist view with elements of Parsons's voluntaristic theory of action and showed that everyday knowledge is sustained through the joint use of a variety of ad hoc practices (such as letting various discrepancies pass) (p. 21). Through these ad hoc practices, both normative and epistemic departures from the fabric of social constructs were waved

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada, Jakob Steensig*

through, becoming insignificant from the point of view of the maintenance of the fabric itself (Heritage 1984b).

Garfinkel's ethnomethodological methods have since been brought to bear in scientific and work settings where knowledge is explicitly constructed and debated (Garfinkel, Lynch and Livingston 1981; Luff, Hindmarsh and Heath 2000; Lynch 1985; Middleton and Engeström 1996; Mondada 2005; Roth 2005). For instance, Lynch (1985) studied the way in which agreements and disagreements are ordinarily achieved within shop work and shop talk in a neurosciences laboratory. And, Garfinkel *et al.* (1981) describe the progressive discovery of a pulsar on the basis of the tape recordings of a night of observation within an astronomy team, and its transformation from an unknown object to a "Galilean" epistemic construct.

Finally, as noted by Heritage, this volume, sociologists have been concerned with territories of knowledge and their maintenance since Durkheim's (1915: 415–447) identification of the limits of society with the limits of its collective representations. Thus, knowledge has been viewed as a domain that groups or even individuals can have primary rights over. For instance, Holzner's (1968) notion of "epistemic communities" (see also Holzner and Marx 1979) separates groups of individuals who share privileged epistemic authority over some domain (see also Sharrock 1974). On a more individual level, Goffman's work on territorial preserves asserts that individuals have territories over which they have primary rights, including "information preserves" (1971a: 38). Included in this preserve are "facts about himself to which an individual expects to control access while in the presence of others" (pp. 38–39). He goes on to include, in a list, "biographical facts about the individual over the divulgence of which he expects to maintain control" (p. 39). Goffman thus implies that one's knowledge, particularly personal knowledge, falls within one's own information preserve, and that "territorial offenses" can thus occur with respect to knowledge just as they can with respect to possessed objects.

While sociologists have primarily attended to the social construction of knowledge and to knowledge as a norm-governed domain, outside of the conversation analytic tradition there has been little sociological attention paid to knowledge in communication. In contrast, within the language sciences there has been a broad concern with how knowledge is shaped by language and managed by the speaker vis-à-vis his/her interlocutors, but relatively little concern with the domain as norm-governed.

Studies of information structure, for instance (Halliday 1967; Krifka 2007; Lambrecht 1994; Schwabe and Winkler 2007), are concerned with how speakers take into account the communicative needs of their interlocutors (Chafe 1976). The field has largely focused on distinctions in topic

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)

(Jacobs 2001; Li and Thompson 1976; Reinhart 1981), focus (Jackendoff 1972; Rooth 1985) and givenness of information (Schwarzschild 1999). In all of these cases, though, the concern is with how information is packaged differently depending on the status of the information relative to the interlocutor.

Linguists have also paid considerable attention to epistemic stance (Biber *et al.* 1999; Chafe 1986; Lyons 1977). This work focuses on issues of certainty (Givón 1982, 1989), reliability (Chafe 1986) and particularly evidentiality. Evidentiality is grammaticalized with moderate frequency across languages. According to *The World Atlas of Language Structures* (de Haan 2008), 57 percent of the 418 languages surveyed exhibit grammaticalized evidentials for at least indirect evidentials – marking the relevant knowledge as indirect or inferred rather than observed first-hand (see also Aikenvald 2004; Johanson and Utas 2000; Willett 1988). According to Fox “all languages – including ‘nonexotic’ languages like English – make use of evidential marking” (2001: 168).

Although, as mentioned, there is relatively little work in the language sciences that addresses knowledge as a moral domain, there were some notable front-runners in this respect. First, Hill and Irvine’s edited collection discussed what role giving evidence might play in epistemic authority, responsibility and entitlement in discourse (1993). Second, some of the most comprehensive work on epistemic stance is Akio Kamio’s on “territories of information” (1994, 1995, 1997). Although he did not rely on spontaneous naturally occurring talk, his work advanced our conceptualization of knowledge by considering it in relative terms such that information can belong to one individual either exclusively or to a greater extent, relative to his/her interlocutor. The model not only deals with the relationship between what the speaker believes about her/his own information state and that of the hearer, it also includes consideration of social/cultural norms about who should properly know what.

### *Knowledge in social interaction*

Two main strands of research have addressed how knowledge is managed in and through social interaction (see Sidnell 2005: 19–51, for an overview). The first strand of research has primarily been carried out by discursive psychologists who have examined how knowledge, cognition, the mind and other psychological constructs are dealt with as topics by participants in interaction (Edwards 1997; Edwards and Potter 1992; Potter and Wetherell 1987; te Molder and Potter 2005; van Dijk 2006).

The second strand of research is located primarily within conversation analysis and has focused not on the content of what is said but on

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada, Jakob Steensig*

epistemic positions taken through language and embodied action. This strand attempts to join sociology's interest in knowledge as a norm-governed domain and the intricate practices of language usage. This strand also represents the intellectual heritage of this volume. Some conversation analytic studies have involved institutional settings where epistemic asymmetries can be expected to color the interaction (in various ways and to varying degrees). These conversation analytic studies focus on interaction practices rather than the setting, though they do so in a social context where epistemic asymmetries are salient due to the fact that lay people seek professional services precisely because they lack epistemic access to the relevant domain (e.g., legal knowledge, medical knowledge, tax knowledge, psychological knowledge) (Drew 1991).

Two institutional sites in particular serve as illustrations of how these confrontations between different epistemic cultures and practices are achieved within social interaction: courtroom interactions and medical interactions. Courtrooms are places where "what has really happened" is constructed through various versions, often incongruent and disjunctive (Pollner 1987), often relating to different kinds of evidence and authority: direct versus indirect access, first-hand versus second-hand knowledge (Drew 1992; Komter 1995, 1998). Similarly, in medical consultations, although patients have superior knowledge of their illness experience, physicians have superior medical knowledge to diagnose and the authority to prescribe (Heritage 2006; Heritage and Robinson 2006; Peräkylä 1998, 2002). Highlighting one or the other type of knowledge and authority can be a resource to negotiate diagnoses and treatments. For instance, physicians routinely articulate their findings from the physical examination, to which patients otherwise have no epistemic access, using "online comments" (Heritage and Stivers 1999; Mangione-Smith *et al.* 2003). These online comments serve as a resource for securing patient agreement to subsequent diagnosis and treatment. Conversely, parents may highlight their knowledge of their children in order to negotiate for prescription treatment (Stivers 2002).

### **Key notions in the study of knowledge in social interaction**

Epistemic asymmetries in such lay–professional contexts are transparent in comparison with asymmetries in everyday interaction. However, as Linell and Luckman (1991) warn, the lack of epistemic asymmetry that is so characteristic of institutional interaction does not in any way suggest that ordinary conversation is epistemically symmetrical. Moreover, in contrast to institutional contexts, in the mundane context evaluative and epistemic stances are more tightly intertwined (Ochs 1996). This volume takes

Table 1.1 *Dimensions of knowledge in conversation*

Dimension	Description
Epistemic access	Knowing vs. not knowing Degree of certainty Knowledge source Directness of knowledge
Epistemic primacy	Relative rights to know Relative rights to claim Relative authority of knowledge
Epistemic responsibility	Type of knowable (Type 1 vs. Type 2) Recipient design of actions Recipient design of turns

epistemic asymmetry in conversation as its focus and examines a range of interactional practices that are involved across a variety of languages. As summarized in Table 1.1, there are three primary dimensions of knowledge that interactants treat as salient in and for conversation, particularly with respect to asymmetries: (1) epistemic access, (2) epistemic primacy and (3) epistemic responsibility.

As indicated early on in this chapter, epistemic access, primacy and responsibility are governed by social norms which influence, and are influenced by, social alignment and affiliation. In conversation, interactants show themselves to be accountable for what they know, their level of certainty, their relative authority, and the degree to which they exercise their rights and fulfill their responsibilities. As Drew put it, “When speakers orient to their asymmetrical position as regards some knowledge, they orient to the normatively organized social distributions of authoritative access to bodies or types of knowledge” (1991: 45). Thus, interactants treat knowledge as a moral domain with clear implications for their relationships with co-interactants. In this section we discuss each of the three epistemic dimensions and then go on to discuss the morality of the domain in the following section.

### *Epistemic access*

Epistemic access has long been of interest in studies of social interaction. In contrast with the approach taken in research on information structure which takes for granted that speakers know which information another has access to and which s/he does not, conversation analytic studies of interaction explore the practices for establishing another’s access as well

Cambridge University Press

9780-521-19454-9 - The Morality of Knowledge in Conversation

Edited by Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada and Jakob Steensig

Excerpt

[More information](#)10 *Tanya Stivers, Lorenza Mondada, Jakob Steensig*

as interactional resources used to manage presuppositions of access, elicit access, claim access and qualify claims of access. This section discusses each of these areas in turn.

With respect to epistemic access, at least two related social norms exist: speakers should not inform already knowing recipients about some state of affairs (Goodwin 1979; Sacks 1992: 441); and, relatedly, speakers should avoid making claims for which they have an insufficient degree of access (Heritage and Raymond 2005). The latter claim is similar to Grice's second sub-maxim of quality which asserts "Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice 1975: 41).

It follows that interactants generally have good command over who in their social world has, or could be expected to have, prior access to particular news or events, even very young children (Kidwell and Zimmerman 2006). A speaker's assessment of his/her recipient's access is typically reflected in the presuppositions of the relevant turn: by offering a news announcement, the speaker treats his/her recipient as unknowing (e.g., "I got a raise today"); conversely, by requesting information, the speaker treats the recipient as knowing (e.g., "What did you buy?").

Moreover, conversationalists adeptly juggle knowing and unknowing interlocutors as Goodwin (1979) has famously shown in the course of a single turn constructional unit (TCU). In the utterance on which Goodwin focuses, "I gave up smoking cigarettes one week ago today actually", although the speaker's wife, a knowing recipient, is not the original target of the speaker's news announcement, when the speaker finds himself gazing at his wife during this turn's production, he transforms his utterance from an announcement that he has quit smoking into the remembering of an anniversary of his quitting smoking. Thus the epistemic access of the various participants – knowing and unknowing – is taken into account.

A vast majority of the time, interactants' presuppositions about their interlocutors' access are on target – recipients of news announcements typically do *not* have prior epistemic access, and recipients of requests for information typically *do*. This can be conceptualized as one form of epistemic congruence, "epistemic access congruence" – specifically, interactants agree on who has, and who does not have, access. However, speakers do not always achieve epistemic access congruence. In Extract 1, Tara begins to tell Kristina about an event that happened the night before. As a news announcement, a relevant and aligned response would treat the announcement as news (e.g., with a newsmark such as *Oh really?* or a change of state token such as *Oh* in English [Heritage 1984a], *A* in Japanese [Saft 2001] or *Ou* in Mandarin [Wu 2004]). By contrast, at possible completion of the first TCU, Kristina claims prior access (also citing that she was in fact with Tara when this event happened).