# Part 1

# Knowledge and the knower

# Chapter 1
# Who is the knower?

## LEARNING INTENTIONS

In this chapter, you will explore how you, as a knower, bring your own unique perspective to everything that you know.

You will:

- analyse the relationship between personal identity, knowledge and experience
- become aware of some of the communities who contribute to your personal identity as a knower
- understand the difference between subjectivity and objectivity
- develop skills and a method for evaluating information
- build your analytical skills to help you evaluate ideas and arguments
- foster reflective skills that will help you to appreciate the importance of ethical knowledge, and develop your understanding of ethics.

BEFORE YOU START

1 In what ways are you the same person today that you were ten years ago, and in what ways are you different?

2 What things make you who you are today? What influences your perspectives as a knower?

3 What matters to you, and where do your values come from?

4 What things do you know that nobody else could know?

# 1.1 Introduction

It may seem strange to start a book on knowledge with the question, *'Who is the knower?'*. However, knowledge cannot exist without some **sentient being** doing the knowing. A sentient being who *knows* anything, knows it within their own particular environmental, social, cultural and intellectual framework.

The act of knowing might be thought of as a relationship between the knower and what is known. Every time you learn, absorb or produce new knowledge, you are changed by it, and you flavour everything you know with your unique perspective on it.

One of the tasks of TOK is to encourage you to reflect on yourself as a knower and the knowledge communities you belong to, so that you are aware of what you add to the process of knowing, and the responsibilities and dangers that come with the knowledge relationship.

KEY TERM

**sentient being:** a creature with the faculty of sensation, with the ability to suffer and feel pain, as well as the power to perceive and possibly reason. The term is usually used for complex animals including humans

# 1.2 Personal identity

Your personal identity is the idea you have about yourself which develops throughout your life. Your identity may feature elements such as your nationality, ethnicity, religion, education or political views; it can also include your interests, hobbies and whatever matters most to you. You might see these features as the things that make you who you are.

Personal identity in this sense is **contingent** and **transient**. Some of the ways you identify yourself now might be different from the ways in which you have identified yourself in the past, and will probably be different from the ways in which you will identify yourself in the future. You might currently identify as an IB Diploma Programme student, but in years to come, you may identify yourself in multiple different ways, for example, as a parent and/or a professional person and/or an artist. Other ways in which you identify yourself may be more consistent. For example, you may be passionate about issues of social justice now and in the future, and your nationality may figure strongly in your personal identity throughout your life.

While we have focused on personal identity as the changing ways in which you identify yourself, it is also possible that others may identify changes in us that we are not even aware of ourselves.

KEY TERMS

**contingent:** subject to chance; dependent on circumstances

**transient:** temporary, not long-lasting

**personal knowledge:** the knowledge we have through our own experiences and personal involvement

## Personal knowledge, identity and experience

**Personal knowledge** sometimes acts as a bridge between our personal experiences and our personal identity. As your experiences broaden, so your knowledge grows and your

personal identity develops. This sets up a dynamic personal identity knowledge cycle because just as your knowledge and experiences shape your personal identity, so your personal identity will help to shape the experiences you have and the knowledge you acquire and develop. As your personal identity is involved in judgements you make about how to evaluate and use knowledge, and even whether to regard some things as knowledge at all, all knowing could therefore be construed as personal.

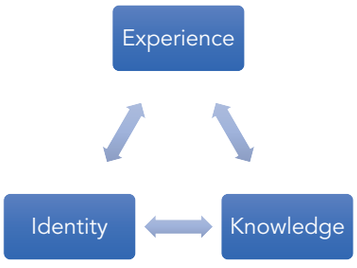


**Figure 1.1:** Identity, experience and knowledge all directly influence each other

From the time we are born, and arguably even before we are born, much of what we learn is gained through personal experience as we explore our environment. Basic knowledge such as what is food and what is not, who our care-givers are and how we can manipulate objects with our hands, are all learned through our early experiences of the world. It is only when we master language through listening and speaking and later, in particular, when we learn to read, that we are able to learn more extensively from the experiences of others. The experiences of the books that we read and the people we listen to help to shape the people we become.

### TASK: THINK ABOUT 1.1

Can you identify a person, book or experience in your life that has helped to shape your identity in some way? How might you be different if you had never met that person, read that book or had that experience?

Personal experience can give us a depth of knowledge that is not always attainable through the experiences of others. No amount of reading about hunger will enable you to fully know what hunger feels like; you can only truly know what it feels like if you have experienced the gnawing sensation yourself. Similarly, if you say you know Ariana Grande's *No tears left to cry*, you mean that you are familiar with the music, the lyrics or both. If you have merely heard of the song, you may say you *know of* it, but you would not be able to say that you *know* it in any **experiential** sense. However, having personal experience of something does not necessarily mean you have a deep understanding of it. It is possible, for example, that you may visit another country on a holiday, but having visited does not mean that you really know the country, its people and institutions, nor its cultural and religious practices in any deep sense. The same can be true of books we read and music we hear.

**KEY TERM**

**experiential:** based on or related to experience

### TASK: THINK ABOUT 1.2

What does it mean to *know* a person or place?

# Tribalism and knowledge communities

Knowledge communities are groups of people with common interests and shared knowledge. They can include your school, your TOK class and any clubs or associations you may belong to, but they do not need to be formal organisations. For example, your family could be considered a knowledge community in that only members of your family know what it is to be a member of that family.

As a knower, you will belong to many different groups. The groups that you identify with most strongly are often known as your *tribes*. Your tribes need not be cultural groups; they can be a football team, a fan club or even a small clique of friends. What is significant is that your loyalty to and dependence on your tribes often has a strong influence on your perspectives and the ways in which you think. For example, if you identify strongly with a football team, and a member of the team you support commits a foul against the opposing team, your response to that foul is likely to be very different to your response if a member of the opposing team commits a foul against your team. You may even be *blind* to foul play by your team, but very angry about foul play against your team. This inherent bias towards the groups we identify with is a feature of **tribalism**.

Knowledge communities and tribes often overlap. For example, if you are participating in interschool sports or competitions, you might identify strongly with your school, and adopt a *tribal* attitude. You may similarly support members of your family to an extent that others may find unreasonable, such as by taking the side of a family member in a dispute even when you know that family member is in the wrong.

**KEY TERM**

**tribalism:** the behaviours and attitudes that arise out of membership of or loyalty to a particular group

**TASK: ACTIVITY 1.1**

In pairs or small groups, try to come up with an example of when you might take a tribal position and defend a member of your tribe who is in the wrong. Each group should role play the situation to the rest of the class. What do you notice about the nature of the arguments?

Discuss: Is loyalty to your tribe a valid justification for taking the side of a friend in a dispute when you *know* that friend is in the wrong? Or is bias unethical?

**CROSS REFERENCE**

You can read more about the relationship between knowledge, personal identity and knowledge communities in Chapter 1 of the Course Guide.

**TASK: ACTIVITY 1.2**

Create a mind-map that shows some of the tribes and knowledge communities you belong to. Try to identify (i) those that play the strongest roles in shaping your identity and perspectives and (ii) those that have the greatest effect on your emotions. Is there a correlation between the two groups?

When you are a member of a tribe or knowledge community, social pressure will often encourage you to conform to the attitudes, values and behaviours of the group you belong to. It is sometimes very difficult to think differently from others in the group, or to speak out in disagreement with them. TOK can help you to develop analytical skills that will enable you to think more independently and cultivate a clearer perspective on complex issues.

## REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.1

In 1951, Solomon Asch (1907–1996) ran some psychology experiments in which participants had to compare line lengths. In each group of eight participants, seven had been instructed which answer to give. Only one participant was a real participant. The seven pretend-participants had been instructed to give wrong answers in 12 of the 18 trials. Over the 12 critical trials, only 25% of the real participants always gave the correct answer. Instead, most of the real participants conformed with the majority in their group, even though they knew the majority were wrong. They preferred to conform with the group rather than give what they could see to be the correct answers.

1 Why might the participants have chosen to conform rather than give the correct answer?

2 In further trials, if the pretend-participants did not unanimously give a wrong answer, the participant was less likely to conform. Why might that be?

3 To what extent do our thoughts and ideas reflect the thoughts and ideas of those around us? How do we decide when we need to 'swim against the tide'?

One of the things we can learn from the Solomon Asch study is that just because a majority agrees, it does not necessarily guarantee that their view is true or objective. The truth of knowledge claims cannot be decided purely on the basis of the consensus of a majority. Therefore, the role of individuals in challenging prevailing views is potentially very important.

## TOK IN YOUR LIFE

Can you think of times when you have held back giving your own opinion or viewpoint because you knew that your friends did not agree? Or perhaps a time when you did not even try to come up with your own point of view and simply accepted the view of others? Similarly, can you think of times when you have spoken up against the consensus of others? Reflect on why you might or might not have chosen to conform or let others think for you.

## REAL-LIFE SITUATION 1.2

The world champion American boxer, Muhammad Ali (1942–2016), refused to join the US army to fight in the Vietnam War when he was called up for military service in 1966, because, as a devout Muslim, he believed war was against the teachings of the Qur'an. As a result, in 1967 Ali was convicted of evading the draft (compulsory military service) and fined $10,000, as well as sentenced to five years in prison. He was also stripped of his boxing titles by the professional boxing commission. The US Supreme Court eventually overturned his conviction in 1971, but he had lost nearly four years while at his peak as an athlete. In the face of growing opposition, the USA ended the draft in 1973.

**CONTINUED**

Standing up against the state to be a **conscientious objector** can take a huge amount of courage, and in the past, many conscientious objectors around the world have been subjected to social **ostracism**, abuse, jail and even the death penalty.

Think about how confident you would need to be about your beliefs to be willing to stand up to the state. Would you feel more confident if you were one of many making a stand than if you were standing as an individual?

**TASK: ACTIVITY 1.3**

Try to find some examples of initially unpopular or rejected ideas that subsequently changed the world in some way.

## 1.3 Subjective and objective perspectives

When we consider **knowledge claims** as individual knowers, our perspective is **subjective**, which means that it is **susceptible to** personal bias. If I were to claim that my dog is the most beautiful dog in the world, I am expressing a subjective opinion. He may be the most beautiful dog in the world *through my eyes*, but most other people might think differently.

**Figure 1.2:** Could it be objective to say that Zachary is the most beautiful dog in the world?

**KEY TERMS**

**conscientious objector:** a person who refuses to serve in the armed forces or perform military service on the grounds of philosophical or religious beliefs

**ostracism:** exclusion, isolation

**TOP TIP**

It is useful to create a bank of examples that come from your own experience. When building an argument, using examples from your own experience will demonstrate your understanding and original thought far more than if you resort to using famous examples that have become cliché.

**KEY TERMS**

**knowledge claim:** a statement in which we claim to *know* something (knowledge claims will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 2)

**subjective:** a personal view influenced by the knower's feelings, opinions or emotions

**susceptible to:** likely to be affected by

Generally speaking, people like to believe that knowledge is **objective**. In other words, its truth can be agreed by a wide range of people who do not have a clear emotional attachment to the **veracity** of the knowledge. For example, the claim *'Avocados and bananas are rich sources of potassium'* is held to be objectively true whether or not you like avocados and/or bananas, whether you profit from them in any way, or even whether you agree.

However, in 1958, Michael Polanyi (1891–1976), a medical doctor, distinguished physical chemist and social scientist, published his book *Personal Knowledge* in which he showed that all knowledge claims rely on personal judgements to some extent. As knowers, we cannot take an entirely objective view of the world in which we live, and we are dependent upon the beliefs and **assumptions** of the culture and era in which we live. For example, it used to be assumed that women would react to medications in the same way that men do, and as a result, nearly 80% of scientific subjects involved in studies carried out on humans and animals have been males. It is only in recent years that scientists have begun to question this assumption and discover that females react differently to males in numerous ways.

If we return to our earlier example of a knowledge claim, *'Avocados and bananas are rich sources of potassium'*, this may be true for most humans. However there may be some people who, for one reason or another, are not able to digest bananas and/or avocados, and for whom this knowledge claim would not be true. Avocados and bananas would still contain potassium, but they would not be a *source* of potassium for such people. The knowledge claim is only true from the perspective of those who are able to eat and digest avocados and bananas. Therefore, in a sense, it is subjective.

Knowledge depends on perspective and assumptions, therefore some people have attempted to eliminate these influences in order to 'purify' knowledge and produce knowledge absolutely free from all assumptions, including tribal, cultural and linguistic traditions. These attempts are sometimes called the search for a *view from nowhere*.

### KEY TERMS

**objective:** referring to a detached view that focuses on facts in a way largely independent of the knower's personal perspective, and that expects to be corroborated (validated or shown) by a knowledge community

**veracity:** truth, accuracy, authenticity

**assumption:** supposition, something taken for granted

### TASK: THINK ABOUT 1.3

1. Why can there never be a *view from nowhere* devoid of *all* assumptions and specific perspectives?
2. To what extent might we be able to get closer to such a view?
3. Why might it be desirable to have this view?

### KEY POINT

There is no such thing as a *view from nowhere*. All knowledge is contextual, and dependent upon knowers who have certain assumptions and perspectives.

### TOK LINK: LANGUAGE

There was a time when students were taught to write in the third-person and eliminate the first-person, so as to appear objective. For example, you would be told to write, *A bird was seen* rather than, *I saw a bird*. Nowadays, there is a growing trend towards writing in the first-person in some academic disciplines to explicitly acknowledge, and hopefully be more aware of, the role of the knower.

**TASK: THINK ABOUT 1.4**

1 To what extent is *appearing* more objective the same as *being* more objective?

2 If knowledge depends on tribes and communities, should we write in terms of *we* rather than *I*?

# 1.4 Methods and tools for acquiring knowledge

We have already seen that knowledge is acquired through experience, whether through our own personal experience or through the experiences of others that we can access in multiple ways. But when we listen to others, read books, blogs and journals, watch videos and so forth, we need to consider how we might judge the reliability of the information and knowledge we are given access to.

In the 21st century, we are bombarded with information on social media as well as mainstream media. There are few checks and balances on published material except when it comes from reputable publishing companies such as Cambridge University Press. Any person or organisation can set up a blog or YouTube™ channel, or distribute posts that can potentially fill your world with information, **propaganda**, **misinformation** and **disinformation**, which is sometimes called '**fake news**'.

It has long been known that people tend to search for and believe information that confirms what they already think is true – this is known as confirmation bias. Studies have shown that people are less sceptical about information they find on social media because this information usually comes from friends and family members (members of their *tribes*), as well as pages they have *liked* to reflect their interests and identity.

An important aspect of TOK is to equip you, as a knower, with skills, methods and tools that will help you to discern useful information which will contribute to your wealth of knowledge, and enable you to recognise and dismiss misinformation and disinformation without being fooled.

**KEY TERMS**

**propaganda:** advertising that promotes specific ideas and perspectives that are usually political

**misinformation:** information that is distorted or only partly true

**disinformation:** false information deliberately designed to mislead or confuse

**fake news:** fabricated stories that are presented as genuine news items

## Evaluating information

If you were to accept every piece of information that you came across as knowledge, you would soon find yourself struggling in a sea of contradictory material. If, instead, you were to only accept information that supported what you already believe or know, you would be in danger of finding yourself deeply entrenched in very limited or false ideas. If you are to try to make sense of the world in an honest and truthful way, you need to be willing to engage with ideas and information that challenge your beliefs and current knowledge, and be prepared to change your beliefs and knowledge if those ideas and information are sufficiently compelling. This means that you have to be prepared to be open to, and evaluate, new ideas and information.

When evaluating new information, it is important to ask a series of questions:

1 Who wrote or produced the information? Is the author or producer sufficiently qualified and unprejudiced?

2 What kind of information is it? The evidence you will need to consider to determine the truth of any new information will depend on the type of information you are looking at. For example, if you are shown experimental results or polls, are you told in detail how the experiment or poll was set up and conducted? Is a political article clear about who is funding it? Does an academic report have references that enable you to access the source material?

3 Where did you find the information? Did it pop up in your news feed or did you go looking for it? Does it come from a reputable publisher or a legitimate and reputable website?

4 When was the information produced? Is it up-to-date or out-dated? Is it old but relevant and/or authoritative?

5 Why was the information published? Is it aimed at a particular audience? Does it offer an argument that tries to persuade you of anything? Is it balanced?

**KEY POINT**

Before using any new information that you find in any of your academic work, particularly your extended essay, you should try to verify it by cross-checking with an independent source, and always cite your sources.

**TOP TIP**

Snopes is an excellent website for checking disinformation and urban legends that come up on social media. The Big Project is a very good website for finding media outlets from around the world if you would like to compare different accounts of a news event.

## Evaluating ideas and arguments

As well as evaluating information, it is perhaps even more important for knowledge that you evaluate new ideas and arguments. This involves making a judgement about the suitability of an idea for a particular purpose and in a particular context.

When you are evaluating ideas and arguments, it is important first to be clear about what the ideas and arguments you are evaluating are actually saying. It is sometimes too easy to misinterpret a position and then argue against it. You should also give other viewpoints for comparison, and weigh up the different alternatives.

Questions you could ask to evaluate any idea or argument include:

1 Does the author make any explicit or hidden assumptions? Are those assumptions reasonable?

2 Does the author display any **bias**?

3 Is the author knowledgeable about the issue that the idea or argument addresses?

4 Does the author give enough **corroborated** evidence to support any arguments, and is that evidence reliable?

5 Has the author considered alternative viewpoints in a fair and balanced way?

6 Has the author considered possible outcomes and consequences of the ideas presented?

7 What are the ethical dimensions of any assumptions, actions and/or consequences related to the idea or argument?

**KEY TERMS**

**bias:** prejudice, one-sided preference

**corroborated:** verified, confirmed or supported

**TASK: THINK ABOUT 1.5**

For the questions above, how would you decide whether the author is sufficiently qualified and/or knowledgeable about the issue being addressed?