

# EPISTEMIC TRUST: A KEYWORD FOR CONTEMPORARY CLINICAL PRACTICE AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

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## SUMMARY

*The increasing integration of eclectic knowledge from fields not directly related to clinical psychology is coherent with a current tendency to employ alternative ideas to investigate psychopathology in the light of a more phenomenological perspective. The concept of epistemic trust may provide the gateway to alternative causal models for personality psychopathology that links poor mentalizing environment to a more general lack of social support. People who have been denied the ability to trust the information circulating in their more proximate environment may showcase a remarkable disadvantage in terms of social adjustment that relate to early insecure attachment experiences. Research assumes that patients who have been suffering an epistemic deficient environment in infancy could be trapped into a vicious cycle of suffering, loneliness and inability to seek or accept help.*

*Although most contributors cited in this brief article deal with epistemic trust as potential tool for social learning from a theoretical point of view, the recent introduction of systematic measures of epistemic trust as a dimensional personality variable outlines a likely future increase in the use of new questionnaires and protocols for clinical assessment and treatment monitoring expressively focused on epistemic trust.*

*The benefits of adopting such a holistic etiological paradigm in personality pathology are outlined, as proposed by the many works that advocate a more equitable clinical practice that assume individual development in the context of an unequal social world, that is believed to determine the child's evolutionary trajectory from the very first stages of life. In the same vein, the importance of fostering an authentic relationship of trust between patient and therapist as a fundamental element of the therapeutic alliance, as well as a driving force for salutogenesis at the community level, is vividly highlighted.*

**Key words:** epistemic trust – mentalization - personality pathology - social learning - resilience

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## EPISTEMIC TRUST: A KEYWORD FOR CONTEMPORARY CLINICAL PRACTICE AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY

Epistemic trust is defined as the ability to view new information conveyed by another person as trustworthy, relevant to oneself, and generalizable to other situations (Fonagy & Allison 2014). Developed from the direct clinical experience of Fonagy and colleagues (Duschinsky & Foster 2021), the theorization of epistemic trust is a psychological adaptation of the ethological hypothesis of a natural pedagogy (Gergely & Csibra 2009) that does not deny the basic assumptions of attachment theory (Fonagy et al. 2023, Luyten et al. 2021) nor psychoanalytic conjectures (Fonagy & Allison 2023). Attachment and psychoanalysis, which have always been fundamental reference for the work of the group, have devoted considerable space to the relationship between the inner and outer world of the child, and to the study of the unconscious strategies that intervene to mediate the demands coming from each side. Both perspectives are still discernible in the recent etiopathogenetic model proposed for personality disorders that is centered on the lack of epistemic trust as a social communication fallacy (Fonagy et al. 2017).

## THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ADVANCE ON EPISTEMIC TRUST

The theorization of a trans-diagnostic construct determining psychopathological vulnerability such as epistemic trust (Li et al. 2023) does not replace the importance of previous formulations on mentalization. Even today, measures of mentalization are excellent predictors of psychiatric conditions (Johnson 2022). Nevertheless, the psychological literature on epistemic trust is currently in an upward phase, expanding from research on the maturation of inferential processes in children (Bhatti et al. 2024, Talia et al. 2024) - now made even more complex by the introduction of human-robot interaction protocols (Di Dio et al. 2020) - to many other areas of application, including clinical implications for adolescence (Boldrini et al. 2020, Parolin et al. 2023, Tanzilli et al. 2020, 2021) and adulthood (Luyten et al. 2024). Epistemic trust has also been approached through clinical illustrations (Bo et al. 2017) and specific tools conceptualized for its assessment, such as the Epistemic Trust, Mistrust, Credulity Questionnaire (ETMCQ, Campbell et al. 2021, translated and adapted in non-anglophonic countries by Liotti et al. 2023, Asgarizadeh & Ghanbari

2024) the Epistemic Trust Questionnaire (QET, Knapen et al. 2024) and an experimental paradigm known as Epistemic Trust Assessment (ETA, Schröder-Pfeifer et al. 2022). As well as this, the notion of epistemic trust is reaching non-clinical fields of application, such as social work that revolves around foster care and adoption (Sprecher et al. 2022). Many recent papers also consider how this construct interacts with other variables relevant for the therapeutic processes, for example the characteristics of the clinical setting (how online psychotherapy may differ from face-to-face psychotherapy, Fisher et al. 2021) the features of other specific interventions alternative to mentalization-based treatment (Tzarzas et al. 2023), and the construct of mentalized affectivity (Brasini et al. 2020, Liotti et al. 2023, Jurist et al. 2023).

The clinical role claimed for epistemic trust is to facilitate individuals' reflective capacity and thus mediate the transmission of culture from older to younger generations within secure attachment relationships (Fonagy et al. 2022). In the long run, distortions of the appropriate epistemic stance (referred to as credulity or mistrust) can degrade people's ability to engage with their immediate social environment (social learning) and thus undermine their resilience (Fonagy et al. 2017). The adjective 'epistemic', which qualifies the concept of 'trust' serves to specify that the other can provide useful information for our convenience. Also, because of his or her persuasiveness, the other person is represented in one's internal experience as an honest and authoritative source of information from which one can draw reliable support. The latter aspect is closely related to the theory of mentalization and to its clinical developments - especially regarding borderline personality disorder, due to its prototypical epistemic petrification (a severe compromise of the epistemic stance that prevents borderline patients from relating adequately in terms of interpersonal functioning, Fonagy et al. 2015). Epistemic trust has to do with the spontaneous capacity with which everyone can attribute to his or her interlocutor correct inferences regarding his communicative intentions. This faculty is connected to the ability to judge, for example, whether the speaker's intentions are benevolent or malevolent, and to critically assess whether the content he or she conveys is true or false; moreover, it determines the person's openness to grasping the nuances of mental states that might interfere with communication processes to the point of distorting the message conveyed. In other words, epistemic trust is a measure of the ability to determine the state of reality concerning communications, based on a capacity for judgement that is shaped by previously internalized experiences of social interaction. These, of course, may vary considerably in perceived reliability. Hence, studies investigating the interaction between epistemic trust and early adverse and/or traumatic

experiences are of crucial importance (Kamplung et al. 2022). In the present globalized context, characterized by an overwhelming amount of sometimes false and misleading information, as well as social and cultural inequities (Campbell & Allison 2022), counting on a proper epistemic stance can play a protective role for the fact that it could guarantee an evolutionary advantage derived from improved mentalization skills (Schwarzer et al. 2024). Conversely, poor mentalizing, which is associated with a worse epistemic stance, may significantly impair social learning and favor the emergence of disadvantageous responses, as demonstrated by the recent pandemic (Tanzilli et al. 2022, Nimbi et al. 2023). Conflicts and uncertainty amplify a widespread sense of alarm and may promote a defensive bias, thus fostering a non-mentalizing mindset (Locati et al. 2023) and increasing the incidence of conspiratorial beliefs that seem to be associated with epistemic distortions (Fiorini Bincoletto et al. 2023, Kamplung et al. 2024).

## EPISTEMIC TRUST AND EMOTION REGULATION

At the level of internal experience, exhausting contexts might induce recourse to immature defense mechanisms that produce split representations (i.e., others are arbitrarily seen as friends/enemies; good/bad) in an attempt to cope with states of deep distress and isolation that leave no room for reflective functioning (Di Giuseppe et al. 2022, Brauner et al. 2023). From clinical experience we know that for some people the preferential recourse to these mechanisms is established from early childhood as a strategic response to regulate emotional distress, due to a traumatic climate that may lead to distorted images of others by means of extreme idealizations or devaluations (Conversano et al. 2023, Fiorentino et al. 2024, Messina et al. 2023). These means may be initially reassuring and preserving for self-esteem, but are usually ineffective in the long term and they also interfere with therapeutic processes (Di Giuseppe & Lingardi 2023, Euler et al. 2024). In the case of complex traumatic developments that culminate in the establishment of a borderline personality, the first disastrous effects are clearly seen in adolescence, when non-integrated internal representations imply the use of primitive defensive mechanisms signifying a general deterioration in personality functioning (Di Giuseppe et al. 2024, Galli et al. 2019, Lingardi & Giovanardi 2017). Distortions of such sorts in the interpretation of social reality, whether expressed through epistemic mistrust/credulity, or through an altered defensive functionality that conveys an opaque image of others, are particularly valuable informative elements for clinical work. Despite their challenging nature, they allow the clinician to manage in advance the relational dynamics that could emerge during treatment. To

address this issue, MBT and similar treatment protocols aim at restoring a better chance for social learning (Nolte et al. 2023) through the guided identification of experienced affects, which focuses on what agitates the individual's internal experience. At the same time, they encourage a realistic interpretation of the interpersonal contexts in which these states usually reappear. The acquisition of advanced skills in interpreting social reality is particularly prognostic in adolescence (Li et al. 2022), when the individual leaves the confines of the family unit to embark on a path of self-individuation that will soon define his or her core identity in the broader society (Luyten et al. 2020). For this reason, it seems essential to enable the adolescent to profitably cultivate trusting relationships within and outside of the usual therapeutic contexts (Fonagy et al. 2019). To achieve such ambitious therapeutic goals, in place of previously missed evolutionary goals, it is essential to gradually acquire a coherent, integrated and realistic self-image, as well as increasingly mature coping strategies (Di Giuseppe et al. 2021, Rossi et al. 2022). This requires a transition from the defensive levels of acting out and denial that characterize the borderline personality to more hierarchically 'evolved' self-regulation techniques (Di Giuseppe & Perry 2021, Prout et al. 2022), such as affiliation and self-observation. These strategies are easily exercised in group settings that provide opportunities for mirroring, sharing and cooperating.

## **EPISTEMIC TRUST AND PERSONALITY FUNCTIONING**

In this regard, it is interesting to note that what was newly proposed by Fonagy and Campbell (2021) for the treatment of personality disorders is a restoration of epistemic trust through the reintegration of patients into their "Umwelt", that is, the broader social sphere understood as a hyper-extended interpersonal context that guarantees a great availability of resources for social learning - and thus, full autonomy for growth (Fonagy et al. 2019). Basically, this therapeutic project, based on the restoration of epistemic trust, motivates the patient to abandon a posture of defensive closure to adopt a trusting openness towards the outside world (first and foremost, the social world of his peers) and urges him to use the available resources with a critical spirit - a step that requires reaching a certain level of affective and cognitive maturity. This is particularly important because the severity of psychopathology increases the risk of social isolation, which feeds a vicious circle that can exacerbate psychiatric pathologies and make it even more difficult to access available support networks (Bellido-Zanin et al. 2015). The growing empirical evidence in these areas therefore encourages new etiopathogenetic conceptualizations to limit the social damage of maladaptive drifts that stem

from the fundamental socio-communicative deficit represented by the lack of proper epistemic trust. Recently, Talia and colleagues have proposed a new interpretation of conduct disorders positing aggression as the child's desperate attempt to communicate in the context of a dyadic communication fallacy (Talia et al. 2021). As also pointed out by other authors, the distortions of epistemic confidence underlying impaired personality could be related to the hypothesis of a retrospective 'p factor' (a hypothetical explanatory factor across all psychopathologies, Caspi & Moffit 2018, Caspi et al. 2024), able to account for the frequent psychopathological comorbidities found in clinical practice. As partially argued by Del Giudice and Haltigan (2019), psychopathology appears to be undergoing a theoretical shift away from the consolidated DSM approach (APA 2022) based on the compartmentalized observation of symptomatic clusters, preferring rather an integrated developmental perspective that focuses on etiological processes. The theorization of epistemic trust as a fallacious socio-communicative mechanism underlying personality disorders seems to be one of the many starting points for a new psychopathology that combines the value of the evidence-based approach with the richness of clinical reasoning informed by fruitful multidisciplinary interpenetration. This new era of research, which focuses on non-diagnosis-specific constructs but rather on elements that have trans-diagnostic value, such as the growing strand of studies on defense mechanisms, represents an attempt to understand individual functioning in a holistic sense (Békés et al. 2023, Martino et al. 2023). An evolutionary approach to psychopathology might be of great use for designing early interventions and stem the unfavorable outcomes of a multi-finality that is known to be characteristic of the developmental age (PDM-2, Lingiardi & McWilliams 2017). These studies could explain the mechanisms behind mental suffering from a dual and dynamic perspective and stimulate a spontaneous cooperation potential that is inherent in human nature (Tomasello 2014) - although for some, it may have been deactivated as a survival strategy during early upbringing in dangerous or neglectful environments. Understanding personality disorders as an interruption in the social learning process due to a miscommunication between two subjects is beneficial not only for understanding what happened in the past, but also for identifying a starting point with which to approach current treatment. In this respect, one paper by Cirasola and colleagues (2024) highlights the need to re-evaluate certain conventional choices, such as the use of therapeutic opacity, in the psychodynamic treatment of adolescents. Unpleasant outcomes, including dropout, could benefit from the use of more frequent self-disclosures to establish a greater relationship of trust based on the recognition of a shared human nature.



## CONCLUSION

Finally, recent conceptualizations of epistemic trust and their implications for clinical practice suggest that patients' experience of the social world as a space that can be not only safe but also enriching should be encouraged. The ultimate aim of treatments that focus on restoring epistemic trust is to help the adolescent not to perceive the external world as deceiving as they may think and avoid turning to oversimplified interpretations of reality to regulate complex emotion and manage social distress (Hauschild et al. 2023). Rather, treatment should help the individual to experience social interaction as an opportunity for growth and community life as a source of support, or even a learning environment (Fonagy et al. 2019). Framing social support as a vehicle of culture in the context of psychodynamic therapy allows for intervention on those fallacious representational mechanisms that, if not addressed early, could prevent deep and lasting change, or worse lead to future resistance to treatment. Overall, recent literature seems to emphasize the importance of attuning clinical interventions to the epistemic stance of the patient to reach beyond the immediate scope of the therapeutic relationship (Fischer et al. 2023, Svernell & Dwyer Hall 2024). This in turn could re-establish a virtuous circle of salutogenesis that extends from the individual to the community level.

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### Contribution of individual authors:

Ginevra Protopapa & Maria Rosaria Nappa conceived the idea of this study.

Guido Giovanardi & Mariagrazia Di Giuseppe contributed to the conceptualization and project administration.

Ginevra Protopapa & Luigi Juli wrote the first draft of the study.

All authors reviewed and edited the final manuscript.

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