

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Blame and our relations as knowers

By Cameron Boulton, PhD



Why this research is important

Mutual expectations of informational trustworthiness enable the kind of co-ordination and knowledge acquisition that make many of the best features of our lives possible. They also embody a recognition of our capacities as intellectual agents. In light of this, epistemic relationships are among the most important we have. So, in addition to understanding what they are, it's also important to understand how epistemic relationships can be impaired and how we should respond to those impairments. How should we respond when people aren't as informationally trustworthy as they should be or fail to assign others the credibility they deserve? Should we simply notice the fact and move on? Should we ever blame people for these impairments? Our answers to these questions have implications for a wide range of practical and theoretical issues, including testimonial injustice, decolonizing epistemic practices, and the foundations of epistemic normativity.

What you need to know

We stand in all kinds of relationships, from friendships and romantic partnerships to parental and collegial ones. In addition to these personal kinds of relationships, we also stand in epistemic relationships—or relations in our capacity as knowers. One way this takes shape is through reciprocal expectations of informational trustworthiness: when all goes well, we tend to expect that basic information others freely offer will be trustworthy. We also expect that others will treat our own knowledgeable assertions as trustworthy (“Do you know where room 212 is?” - “It’s down the hall and to the left!”). Importantly, sometimes things don’t go well. For example, sometimes people (politicians, companies, our friends) are less informationally trustworthy than they should be. And sometimes, we fail to assign others the credibility their statements deserve (marginalized persons). This project examines these and other ‘impairments’ to our epistemic relations, the significance they have, and the kinds of responses they make fitting.

How the research was conducted

The research employed widely endorsed methods of analytic philosophy, such as conceptual analysis, thought experiments, and reflective equilibrium—methods particularly appropriate for theorizing about normative concepts such as accountability, blameworthiness, and trustworthiness. The research was primarily conducted

during a recent sabbatical, which included a research visit to the COGITO Centre for Epistemology, University of Glasgow.

What the researcher found

A rich tradition in moral philosophy understands ‘blame’ as deeply bound up with our relationships. According to this framework, rather than being an inherently heated or angry emotion, sometimes blame just is a way of modifying our relations with one another (say, by deciding to hang out less with someone while seeing them in a new light). We can apply these ideas to epistemic relationships. Sometimes, we fittingly modify our epistemic relationships in response to impairments—for example, by adjusting our levels of trust. As a way of modifying a distinctive kind of relationship, this may be a special kind of blame response unique to our intellectual lives. Despite the negative connotations that often come with blame, this response may also have distinctive value. One way it could have value is by functioning as a vehicle for holding people in positions of power to account for impairing epistemic relations (making false assertions, engaging in reckless inquiry). The basic upshot is that our epistemic relationships comprise a unique domain of accountability—one that interacts with, but is distinct from, other realms of accountability, such as morality and law.

How this research can be used

If our relations as knowers can be impaired, and we sometimes blame others for these impairments, there is important work to do around repairing these relations. One context where this is especially important is when marginalized voices have been silenced or villainized, or when entire knowledge systems have been displaced or disrespected as a result of colonization. Theorizing the dynamics of epistemic relationships—how they can be impaired, how we should respond—can put structure on the intersection between foundational epistemology and social and political activism. Importantly, it is a site for foundational epistemology to gain insights from silenced

voices and members of groups whose knowledge systems have been marginalized.

About the researcher

Cameron Boulton is an associate professor in the Department of Philosophy at Brandon University, and a research associate at the University of Johannesburg. He is also a member of the Epistemic Reparations Global Working Group, which focuses on repairing epistemic relations in contexts of gross human rights violations. His first monograph, *Epistemic Blame: The Nature and Norms of Epistemic Relationships*, will be published by Oxford University Press in 2024. Boulton@brandonu.ca

Keywords

Relationships, trust, blame, reparations, testimonial injustice, responsibility

Publications based on this research

- Boulton, C. (in press). *Epistemic blame: The nature and norms of epistemic relationships*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boulton, C. (2023). The significance of epistemic blame. *Erkenntnis*, 88(2), 807–828.
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