

Research Proposal:

Humans rely heavily on their ability to make sense of multiple and discrepant knowledge claims. Epistemic thinking, which refers to people's understanding about the nature of knowledge and knowing, has been a growing subfield in developmental psychology. It focuses on how people understand and coordinate objective vs. subjective aspects of knowing.¹ General models of epistemic thinking suggest a developmental progression that begins with a view that knowledge is objective and absolute, to a view that knowledge is extremely subjective and uncertain, then moving to a view that knowledge has sources that are both objective and subjective and that require evaluation and interpretation.¹ Of particular interest to me is whether such models apply universally across cultures that vary in social ecologies.

Research has shown that contact with a diverse environment promotes a shift from beliefs in absolute, objective knowledge, to beliefs that knowledge is relative to the knower and to context.² The extent to which exposure to diversity occurs within a culture depends on its practices and social ecology.³ Such findings suggest that particular practices, which may vary between cultures, promote epistemic development.

The following proposed study is to investigate whether there are: (i) cross-generational differences, and (ii) cross-cultural differences in epistemic thinking. While previous research has focused on particular age groups of people, we will be assessing three different generations in Romania.^{2,4} In the last three decades, Romania underwent a rapid economic reform as it politically shifted from communism to a unitary semi-presidential republic. This was supported by urbanization, which is highly associated with a shift from homogeneous to heterogeneous social environments, and educational expansion, characteristic of a main trend in globalized social change.³ I hypothesize that this sociocultural shift will lead to differences in epistemic thinking between different recent generations in urban communities Romania. Namely, as new generations experience greater access to technology and global exposure, there will be a shift from objectivist thinking to subjectivist thinking as generations progress.

Method and Study Design:

I will be focusing on three different age ranges (18-30; 45-59; and 65+) in order to capture differences between the oldest participants, who were adults during the political shift and who might not have adapted to the new opportunities (e.g., traveling, media use, etc.) life after 1989 offered, and the youngest participants, who were born after 1989 and grew up with similar lifestyles and opportunities as people today. Based on a power analysis using Cohen's f of .35, the study will have a sample size of 132 subjects; 44 per age group.

The study will consist of three parts: an evaluation of epistemic thinking through various dilemmas followed by questions regarding each one, sociodemographic questions, and questions regarding the participants' experiences with social change. The epistemic dilemmas concern matters such as judgments of personal taste, aesthetic judgments, value judgments, judgments of truth about the social world, and judgments of truth about the physical world. Each category of dilemmas contains an abstract dilemma (e.g., "*Josh believes one book's explanation of how the brain works. George believes another book's explanation of how the brain works*") and a concrete dilemma (e.g., "*Andrew thinks that walking around with wet hair during wintertime causes colds. Patrick believes that only viruses can cause colds*"). The dilemmas will be followed by questions such as "*Is X right? Is Y right? Or could both of them be right? If so, why?*" I will examine the differences in epistemic responses between generations, and the associations between those responses and participants' exposure to diversity (through reported

levels of traveling, media use, and education), as well as their reports of changes in terms of sources of information that they have experienced as a result of sociocultural change.

I hypothesize that (i) as new generations experience greater access to technology and global exposure, there will be a shift from absolutist thinking to multiplist and evaluativist thinking, (ii) there will be associations between epistemic patterns and participants' level of education, amount of traveling, and general exposure to different opinions either within or outside of educational settings, and (iii) the oldest generation will report a rise of opinions among the middle and youngest generation, and there will be an association between epistemic patterns and the reported level of opinions for each generation. Additionally, the middle generation will resemble the youngest generation in terms of diverse exposures to travel and technology (qualitatively), but will resemble the oldest generation in terms of epistemic patterns (quantitatively).

Broader Impacts:

In recent years, the national discourse has frequently focused on how people disregard views and evidence that do not align with their own worldview. Examples are myriad: from discussions of “fake news,” to public opinion of research supporting vaccines, to political discussion of the existence of climate change. Investigating how people determine “rightness” when presented with divergent points of view regarding topics both concrete and abstract will give insight into how willing people are to consider arguments that support beliefs that are different from their own. Additionally, this work will further elucidate how access to technology and exposure to a diverse environment supports the ability to make sense of subjective and objective knowledge claims. By elucidating the factors involved in epistemological development, we can later examine ways in which we can successfully improve it.

Feasibility:

Data collection in Romania will be feasible through an established collaboration with Dr. Alin Gavrelic, who is a professor at the University of Timisoara in Timisoara, Romania. Dr. Gavrelic and his research team have agreed to aid with data collection for this study. In order to coordinate data collection and discuss project details while the Covid-19 crisis persists, we will be communicating via video chat. Additionally, this fellowship will provide funding for me to travel to Romania in Summer 2021 and meet with Dr. Gavrelic and his research team.

Research program and academic background:

My research career goal is to combine elements of cognitive, developmental, and cultural psychology to explore a line of research that examines the acquisition and development of beliefs and epistemological understanding across the lifespan and different cultures. This research project is my first research endeavor at UCLA and serves as my Master's thesis.

In order to learn more about conducting research in other cultures, I took two core courses in Developmental Psychology (Social and Emotional Development and Language and Cognitive Development), as well as Dr. Patricia Greenfield's Culture and Human Development graduate seminar, which has greatly prepared me for this project. The most crucial thing that Dr. Greenfield's course prepared me for is how to conduct mixed-methods research. Therefore, I feel prepared to continue this project and to eventually write it for publication given the expertise that I have gained from her seminar.