Epistemic Projects: What Are They and What is Their Value for Sociology?

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Abstract: This essay puts forward the sociological concept of epistemic projects for helping scholars grasp how ontological claims start to circulate and order human life in the digital age. The theory of epistemic projects gives primacy to semiosis and to an understanding of ideas as signs. The essay begins with a declaration of what epistemic projects entail and the use of this concept in the past. I then proceed to discuss how the concept relates to and departs from the sibling concepts of epistemic community, epistemic governance, and epistemic work. In the last chapter I position the epistemic project in view of sociological constructs of systems, assemblages, and dispositifs. I conclude by arguing that the main contribution of the epistemic projects theory is the potency of focusing on idea world setups and leaving aside questions of truth value and actors' positions.

Keywords: epistemic projects; semiosis; signs

1. Introduction

Online platforms have paved the way for people to make truth claims with their own spins and twists and turns. Conceptualizations of the world are ordered into streams of semiosis that constitute and connect new social spaces. Scholarly analysis of these social formations is most typically concerned with some organizational or actor network component, with the aim of finding out how social movements are organized and how they become influential. In this essay I take a different perspective: I want to argue that

social and cultural movements can be approached and studied as cultural structures or belief systems, without having to give primacy to organizational or actor components. The theory of epistemic projects captures this circumstance by recognizing that constructs and claims about ontological relations can have a life of their own. Like myths, they are signification logics that entail certain ideas.

Semiotic sociology is concerned with understanding meaning and how meaning contributes to the constitution of society (see e.g. Binder 2018). Thus far it has mainly been concerned with theoretically unfolding itself as an intellectual path in view of semiotic traditions and larger sociological streams (see e.g. Heiskala 2021; Heiskala 2014). In this text my ambitions are more aligned with applied social semiotics: I want to present an empirical unit for sociological investigation. My aim is to introduce the concept of epistemic project (EP) as a tool that can help researchers study the meaning-making logics that impose social order in contemporary times.

In today's online-driven late capitalism – sometimes referred to as *the digital age* – social phenomena and processes control themselves as self-referential systems (see Guy 2018). "Questions" and "agendas" can arise in ways that make it impossible for researchers to identify the main actors or to reconstruct the sequences in which events have unfolded. In an instant, the masses can reframe, rewrite, and build alternative narratives about any major concept or event. Everything from democracy, freedom of speech and the progression of pandemics has been reframed in online-based social movements whose organizational features remain largely unknown to us. How we produce, distribute, and communicate is no longer confined to any particular society, industry, or organization.

Entangled with knowledge and belief claims, an epistemic project can concern more or less any topic or notion propelled into its signification system. For example, the American QAnon conspiracy theory that the US Democratic Party runs a paedophile ring or the view that Ukraine belongs to Russia can both be approached as epistemic projects. The soundness and validity of the claimed ontological relations are communicated in terms of what is plausible, reliable, credible, true, accurate, or factual – regardless of their actual truth value. Humans invest identities, emotions, ideals, norms – their whole lives! – in these projects of signification.

In this text I will loosely follow the logic of *per genus et differentiam*, associating EP with similar concepts and theoretical categories, discussing their differences and resemblances. I begin by laying down the three pillars of EP theory and then give an account of earlier occurrences of the concept in the scholarly literature and of how it differs from some obvious sibling concepts. In the last chapter I suggest how epistemic

projects can be seen to incorporate some traits of established sociological epistemologies (theories of *systems, assemblages and dispositifs*). Finally, I summarize and draw conclusions, hoping that my ideas can be picked up in sociological research.

2. Characteristics: epistemic projects

The theory of epistemic projects can be understood in the light of three circumstances:

First, it acknowledges that questions form signification systems of their own. This requires the researcher to give primacy to semiosis. Semiosis can be defined as a continuous flow of signification "that orients human cognition and action" (see e.g. Jensen 1995:11). Approaching EP as a space or trajectory of continuous meaning-making allows scholars to see questions coming into being in cultural structures that take on a life of their own. This differs from popular sociological approaches that aim at mapping social movements and actors as networks, stakeholders, and influence relationships. These traditions often overlook the ways in which concepts – as meaning-making bundles – travel in their own signification patterns, as phenomena or "objects" in their own right. One example is how the human brain is construed as important to understanding addiction as a phenomenon. When we studied this question, we noticed that the significations stemming from the coupling of brain and addiction could be detached from any established stakeholder group or theoretical paradigm. The brain was referred to whenever it made sense to zoom in or relate to this ontological relation in order to understand the phenomenon of addiction (Hellman et al. 2022). We made the decision to approach the functions and roles surrounding the coupling of the brain and addiction as its own signification system, without tying it to any specific group of people or to any time and place. Anyone can participate in the epistemic project of addiction in the brain (EPAB) by articulating meanings about the role of the brain in addiction. This "articulation and rearticulation" is the primary mechanism of semiosis (Heiskala 2014: 43) and the way in which epistemic projects come about. The empirical problem that arises from this circumstance is how to make a cut around a question as an observable and meaningful phenomenon. When do the articulations of a circumstance become a "bundle" or a system of its own? Towards the end of this essay I suggest how Niklas Luhmann's concept of autopoiesis can help us in this.

Second, in order for the project to be a project, EP semiosis must "produce" "make", "construe" and "put into being" certain ontological relations. This substance or essence consists of beliefs, truths and knowledge entailing and pertaining to signification surrounding certain ontological relations. Public transportation, brushing one's teeth, and going to work all make sense in the relational ontology in and by which we live. We make

sense of, take part in, and practise social life by claiming that the order of things is what it is. The epistemic project is a process whereby these relations are given signification, they are created and represented. Our interviewees at one of Canada's largest addiction outpatient treatment centres referred to the brain when it served their biographies of a life path with addiction (Hellman et al. book; Hellman & Egerer 2021). Their "making" of EPAB, through references to the fact that the brain plays a role in addiction, stemmed from the function that the brain could offer to their understanding of their own problems in a certain context, in a certain phase of their lives. The main point was the creation of meaning in the relation between self-brain-addiction – EPAB – not their organization or social commitment to the issue. In the final section of this essay I shall suggest that Gilles Deleuze's concept of assemblage can help us along in approaching epistemic projects in this manner.

Third, the theory of epistemic projects regards ideas and concepts as signs. An epistemic project materializes when we name and frame reality in a symbolic sense: the sign is not only characterized by its appropriateness to fulfil a semantic function in the context of a proposition, but also by "its capability to act in an epistemologically efficient way on a cognitive power" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2011). Ideas and concepts are signs; their relations nurture into existence (provenate) an awareness of something other than what they signify in themselves (Bains 2006: 5; Deely, 2015: 22-23, for cultural units of concepts, see Eco 1979). The brain is an important sub-component in addiction because it stands for something else: it stands, for example, for certain views on human agency and on the severity of addiction problems. Semiotically speaking, the brain is a component in both associative or syntagmatic relations that are ascribed to and invested in the sign (idea) of addiction. Later on, I shall argue that Michel Foucault's dispositif can be of help in describing how ideas are given cultural emphasis or valence in standing for and becoming coupled with certain significations in our joint social imagination.

3. Previous uses of the concept

The concept of epistemic projects has figured in two main significations in the scholarly literature. First, it has been referred to in defining a more or less coherent knowledge genre, paradigm, niche, system, or thesis that is being established, developed or pushed by an academic tradition or by some scholarly front figure. Second, in philosophical work, EP has signified an undertaking aimed at settling a question in terms of ways of knowing, and more broadly regarding justification, legitimacy, and rationales. Both these previous uses entail a definition of project as an activity with a direction (see Munk-Madsen 2005).

In the first signification, the motion – "the project" – evolves towards an establishment of a

knowledge genre. The project is portrayed as being manifested through the constructive and reproductive work of academic disciplines, theses, or expertise-based compartments. For example, Huniche and Sørensen (2019) discuss how the discipline of psychology evolved as an epistemic project. The essence of this project can be derived from the question: "What insights does psychology seek to produce, and what kinds of knowledge are adequate for the psychological challenges of contemporary worlds?" (Huniche and Sørensen 2019: 441). The project is here the core of psychology as a science-making vehicle; its propellant, its raison d'être. Its contribution as such a vehicle signifies the project – the essence of what is being "made" and accomplished. Other examples of this signification include work by Giri (2018), who speaks of sociology as an epistemic project, and by Vigni (2020), who describes the epistemic project of complex systems sciences. Vaughn (2021:86) refers to Locke's theses on knowledge as an epistemic project and Hellman (2018) discusses public health as an epistemic project that entails certain worldviews and associated evidence production navigated by political efforts.

In all these examples, the word "project" denotes an epistemic agenda or more specifically the undertaking of establishing some sort of knowledge-based collective enterprise. It signifies the venture of establishing a scientific field or tradition. This signification of the word "project" is rather common (see also Zald 1991; Smith 2014; Boatcă et al. 2016: Malcolm 2014; Teubner 2013); it is an activity by which tradition is established, by which its architects and constructors are justifying and legitimizing the endeavour. This signification of project is comparable to the cultural anthropological focus on ways in which mechanisms in cultures (social, material, mental) build traditions.

In its second main use, the epistemic project appears more literally and specifically in the signification of an undertaking of settling or arguing a question. The work or action that makes up the project entails a movement towards some solution or a reasonable or accurate conclusion regarding questions of what to know and what it is to know. For example, in his work on the fragmentation of reason, philosopher Stephen Stich uses the term to explore how to proceed in the quest for knowledge (Stich 1990:1). Here, the concept refers to purposeful convincing and arguing by transporting propositions into epistemologies (logics of knowing). This includes the kind of epistemic entitlement that is employed in assembling evidential support (Wright and Davies 2004). The same connotation can be found in the work of Davies (2009), who discusses Jackson's two propounding arguments (teasing out, convincing) as transposed into the epistemological domain. Here, the epistemic project denotes the rationale and task of transforming proposals in logics that entail sound and convincing concordance with reality (Davies 2009; see also Coliva 2010). Further, De Brasi (2017) introduces the concept of regulative

epistemic projects in view of determining legitimate ways of obtaining knowledge outside mainstream epistemology, whereas Fratantonio (2021) engages with the proof paradox, concluding that "the Epistemic Project" is the endeavour of explaining this paradox from an epistemic perspective. The EP is an undertaking with ambitions to define the requirements that should reasonably and logically be met.

By now the reader will have an idea of the two contexts in which the academic literature refers to the EP concept. In the first variant, the "project" connotes the essence being construed, while in the second one it connotes the undertaking of arriving at some sort of end point. Compared to the sociological variant proposed in this text, the first variant shares a sense of a force that projects a manifestation of a worldview (changes in and additions to the flow of significations). The second is more concerned with the singular logical tasks of arguing a question in a convincing, credible and sound way.

The sociological sense of epistemic projects translates into a direction of human meaning-making activities concerning ontological relations (a question, theme). The question evolves and comes into being in communication and activities regarding a "core theme" (its content and propellant). It can emerge simply through articulations of certain ontological relations, or in a more intentional and articulated fashion in activities of persuading, arguing, and setting agendas.

When the concept speaks the event, not the essence or the thing (Deleuze and Guattari 1994:21), truth value is secondary in the sense that the observer is more concerned with the coming into being and direction of the constructions themselves. This view on matters opens up a path to view other social phenomena – not only academic traditions or knowledge production genres – as epistemic projects. The "epistemicness" of the project is warranted through claim-making formats. The continuous articulation or claim-making in itself configures an object or "agent" with roles and functions for the people involved in it. The primacy of semiosis stipulates a focus directed at how the configurations and conventions of knowing and believing are communicated and how they serve people, agendas, and movements. The focus is on the project's coming into being (being communicated) and on what it does (disseminating ontological relations that serve functions and roles for the people involved in its communication).

A concrete example is once again from research into the role of the brain in understanding addiction: In giving primacy to semiosis we allowed for a constructionist agenda by which we inducted the representation of ontological relations regarding how the idea of addiction is coupled with the idea of the brain as a project (Hellman et al. 2022). The epistemic project of addiction in the brain materialized in different more or less mimicry

formats of comprehending, knowing, believing, convincing, and arguing. In observing epistemic projects, the researcher captures how realities maintain and reproduce themselves through mythologies, grand stories, and bundles of logical reasoning.

4. Sibling concepts

The word project denotes that something gets done in a collective endeavour (cooperation) and in accordance with an orientation (see also Havila and Salmi 2008:2). Yet project is still a vague term in that it can imply actors without having to specify who these actors are. Projects can be intangible exercises that serve as social propellants. A brief explorative piece dating back to 1920 opens up to the idea of a project being an entity of signification rather than a practical task. In this early study, education scholar Ernest Horn asked school personnel to reason around the meaning of the word project. Two of his questions stand out: 1. Is an activity a project if the pupil merely thinks? and 2. Would you call listening to a victrola a project? Can thinking and listening be projects; that is what Horn is asking. The vast majority of respondents in his small survey felt that projects must involve the use of concrete materials in a constructive way, but one in ten took the view that listening to victrolas and thinking could classify as projects. One of the reasons why Horn's respondents hesitated to include thinking and listening in the signification of project is that these activities were not thought to involve a "whole-hearted purpose".

According to Horn's participants, the definition of project entails some direction and vision of a meaningful result. In this definition, the project is seen to be driven by people and to require that individuals or societies relate to some sort of end goal at the heart of the project. But not all signification propellants can be deduced to a coordination of singular actors: sometimes we can gain from viewing them as cultural flows or signification structures that have their own codes and logics.

The theory of epistemic projects suggests that reality is performed and comes into being through communication. We don't need to have a precise picture of all the specific social mechanisms involved. We are allowed to focus on the kinds of meanings that are in circulation. In the social sciences, we have long had concepts that capture a direction of meaning-making with associated epistemic agendas and agents:

Epistemic community is typically used to describe broader networked processes by which professional and expert ideas acquire power over worldviews, shape politics, and influence societies. *Epistemic governance* is used to describe the aims of altering views on reality. *Epistemic work*, on its part, is used to describe actions whereby people

"acquire, confirm, deploy, or modify what needs to be known in order for them to do what they do" (Cook and Brown 1999: 399). There are, however, some crucial differences between the epistemic project and these notions. The biggest differences stem from the weight given to semiosis and the view we have of the relationship between questions and actors.

Epistemic communities are actors associated with the formulation of causal beliefs and the circumstances, resources, and mechanisms by which new ideas or policy doctrines are developed and influence political processes (Haas 2008: 792). Epistemic communities' shared viewpoints can stem from the circumstance of being schooled in the same epistemic systems or sharing a profession with similar practice (Haas 2008). In this, language plays an important role: "The language of epistemic community is intended in part to alter how we think of belief regulation, and to front-load the ways that personal belief regulation is part of a larger interpersonal epistemic project" (Gunn 2020: 570). The members of an epistemic community discursively steer, orient, and institutionalize events, that is, practices, areas of expertise, and politics. The communities can be distinguished by semiotic criteria, bearing close resemblance to the epistemic project. Epistemic communities can be seen to be joined in their common epistemic projects.

Positioning itself in sociological new institutionalism, epistemic governance theory has been launched as an approach to the politics of policy-making (Alasuutari and Qadir 2014; Alasuutari 2015). According to this theory, governance (exercise of power) is embedded in the discursive action of (a) communicating an ontology (for example, cancer is caused by smoking), (b) actor identification (smokers, doctors, authorities), and (c) norms and ideals (a smoke-free society) (see Hellman, Hakkarainen and Saebo 2016). Epistemic governance is articulately concerned with politics and draws heavily on a Foucauldian tradition. The study of epistemic governance discerns a cultural signification texture that is indissociable from regulation and government. The scholar exposing epistemic governance aims to discern a transformation of ontological claims into power relations. Here, a subject fabrication takes place: Normand (2016), for example, writes about the Homo Academicus that takes shape through the epistemic governance of education. The exercise of epistemic power leads to a new/specific apprehension of subjects and their state of affairs (similarly to biopolitics, see Agamben 1998). The pushing of such an agenda is very much like an epistemic project.

Epistemic work signifies the "doing", the making of views on reality, which can be consciously influenced and transformed, for instance in policy-making (e.g. Anderson 2008). In social epistemology, the notion of epistemic work is understood in a similar way as the second variant of epistemic project discussed above. It signifies how agents alter

significance in argumentation and negotiation (e.g. Aydinonat et al. 2021). Epistemic work can, for example, signify preparatory work aimed at influencing conversational and attitudinal trajectories in courtrooms (Solomon 2007). The use of the concept, just as in the previous use of epistemic project, is twofold: in sociology it is employed as a more unspecific undertaking of introducing worldviews in sociocultural processes, whereas in philosophy and social epistemology it refers to a concrete action pertaining to knowledge-based practices (preparation, postulation, argumentation).

What sets epistemic projects apart from epistemic communities, epistemic governance, and epistemic work is the primacy of semiosis and concepts as signs. When observing the epistemic project, the sharpest lens is not from the outset trained on the result of power relations (governance by some people over other people, priority of some truths over other truths). Even though the signification of moving something forward through truth claims (or through the mimicking of truth claim formats) is a shared idea in all three concepts above, the word "project" also carries a more literal signification. The word is derived from the Latin *pro* ("forward") and *iacere* (to "throw"). Thus the original meaning of *project* is something that in a figurative sense has been thrown forward, a proposal (Munk-Madsen 2005: 5). The epistemic project is being thrown forward (proposed and pushed) in a continuous social semiosis in which the idea – whether it concerns QAnon, the benefits of brushing one's teeth or addiction in the brain – serves as a sign with functions for people. Semiosis – the continuing signification flow of ontological relations and the performance and meaning-making of ontological relations – is viewed as carrying forward a question *per se*. The project is the articulation of a question or a subject matter.

The element of episteme – or "epistemicness" – in the three notions of epistemic community, epistemic governance, and epistemic work pertains to a conceptualization of their being based on and ordered around epistemologies and knowledge conventions. Epistemic projects, on their part, are epistemic in the sense of being ordered around truth claims and assertions. Epistemic projects are communication-based manifestations of the human mind and its collective and individual needs of order, belonging, and appreciation.

The epistemic project of addiction in the brain comes about each time that the brain is referred to as playing a role in addiction. In this, epistemic communities, epistemic governance, and epistemic work can naturally play important roles in forming agendas and in supporting and hindering the course of events.

5. A system in-between dispositif and assemblage

Epistemic projects are epistemic in the sense of adhering to a core or keynote which

pertains to knowledge and beliefs. The many variants of project adherences by the people involved (e.g. support, enunciation, rejection) are acknowledgments (e.g. indifferent, supportive, rejecting) of what is claimed to be known, unknown, and believed. Building phenomena through enunciation and communication is of course not a new sociological idea. In fact, the epistemic project can be understood through some established grand sociological theories: The idea of it being a social communication system that refers to itself and functions as a zone of reduced complexity bears resemblance to Niklas Luhmann's system. In redistributing the capacity to act from individuals to a socio-material network of people, things, and narratives "coming together", the epistemic project also bears resemblance to Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's assemblage. In producing subjects with reference to knowledge and truth claims which connect ideas in a way that influences dogma, the project resembles Michel Foucault's dispositif. These three concepts have all been employed to study how questions acquire a life of their own in the digital age. All three travel with a history that has become a rather heavy luggage of rules and codes. However, I still want to argue that they contain elements that allow us to get closer to the essence of the epistemic project as an object of inquiry.

The resemblance between the epistemic project and the Luhmannian system is especially found in the signification structure that materializes in recursive communication (see also Hellman and Egerer 2021). According to Luhmann, self-reference is a format in which phenomena (organizations, systems) materialize regardless of the cut of observation by others. The recursive project is auto-affirming and self-referential to its core theme or essence (regardless of whether the referential activity entails a rejection, acceptance, or neutrality in view of the ontological relations that are being referred to). Self-reference (autopoiesis) was crucial to Niklas Luhmann's ambitions to detach social phenomena from specific actors. In the words of Jean-Sebastien Guy (2018, 857): *"Actors are still necessary for social phenomena to take place, but they are no longer in charge of them like an author is said to be in charge of her story"*. The primacy of semiosis means that the epistemic project and its relevance is upheld over time by the mechanism of articulation (see also Heiskala, 2014: 43).

However, autopoietic systems are not only self-referential for the sake of being self-referential, but their self-reference also involves production of other values and components (Luhmann 2008). The sociologist studying epistemic projects is interested to know what the references to the essence bring about apart from retaining the project in itself. Their inquiry can be focused on, for example, a trajectory of cultural norms and values, or on ways in which the project's emergent autonomy determines (and produces) a social place and identity for its subjects and participants (see also Deleuze and Guattari 1980).

The theory of epistemic projects acknowledges that all we perceive as "reality" comes into being through systems of significations, actions, and perceptions; that humans make the world through their enactments and dealings with it. In contemporary social theory, the notion of phenomena *being made, being enacted,* and *coming into being* has been connected with Deleuze's and Guattari's concept of assemblage[1]. The idea of assemblage centres around human perceptions and actions requiring complex socio-material interdependencies. The researcher's focus is directed at what the claimed ontological relations (assemblages) *do* and *accomplish*. Like assemblages, epistemic projects are never "finished" or readily available in the world to be discerned by the researcher, but they are studied as vehicles that come together with the aim of bringing about and ordering life around certain meaning-making and signification. Like the assemblage, the project remains open-ended and is continuously reproduced with different ingredients and functions of use. If viewing the project as a Luhmannian self-referencing system allows the researcher to view it as materializing as a self-referential signification bundle, it is the imagination of multiple movable heterogeneous elements that come together to produce ("do") a conceptual entity that makes it resemble assemblages. Another way of describing this is through the notion of semiotic ecologies, which are sometimes seen to be enacted as assemblages of action, process, discourse, space, and the spatial product within the ecology (Kim et al. 2021). When we give primacy to semiosis and regard concepts as signs, we can let the signification of the project orient us in discerning the conditions under which it comes about. In this sense the study of the epistemic project allows for a Deleuzian empirical disinterest in objectivity and truth value.

The semiosis of the epistemic project finds certain routes and forms (modi), which can be understood in the light of Foucault's *dispositif* (sometimes translated as "apparatus"). Foucault's work on the historical developments by which phenomena such as madness or sexuality change in their nature, is the story of how sociocultural essence (ideas) starts to be channelled in certain conceptual categories (signs). Dispositif is here understood in an abstract sense as the tilt towards a narrative interpretation or judgment ensured by a sociocultural subject-knowledge entangled pattern (dogma). A certain "arrangement" of elements creates a certain "tendency" to present ontological relations in one way rather than another.

Claims of influence and power constellations giving preference to one interpretation rather than another (the strategy/tactics complex in the study of dispositif, see e.g. Heiskala 2021, pp. 80) can provide a justification or impetus for the study of epistemic projects, but this is not the main focus of EP inquiries. Empirically, the main concern of the theory of epistemic projects is with how certain signification starts to order reality sociologically speaking.

For example, in choosing to study brain-based understandings of addiction as an epistemic project (EPAB) rather than exploring the adherence to the brain disease model of addiction (BDMA), our focus is turned to contexts in which EPAB "does" something to humans and societies (Hellman et al., 2022). The sociocultural conditions that make the project come together in certain ways rather than others provide important information on why and when we must or must not couple the brain with addiction. I suggest that dispositif could also be used it the signification of an inclination of individuals to adhere wholeheartedly to a myth or belief system. In today's world, we can come across people who have a coherent and "closed" system of epistemic truth claims that seems to be the result of Internet-based bubbles of social networks that serve as rabbit holes of theoretical and hypothetical reasoning. The sociologist's inquiry can be to zoom in on why some people are socially "predisposed" or wired to adhere to these epistemic projects.

Figure 1 summarizes how the epistemic project can be viewed in relation to epistemic community, epistemic work, and epistemic governance and to system, assemblage, and dispositif. The project materializes in social semiosis in which concepts function as signs. It is manifested in communication and it is self-referential and self-sufficient in that it makes a cut to other concept–sign systems (i.e. autopoietic). The epistemic project ontology sees humans, material objects, desires, and conceptual entities as interacting in a continuous process of concept creation and re-interpretation. In this sense it bears resemblance to the assemblage. Its direction or tilt or the ways in which it can be seen to mimic reasonable truth and knowledge claims (dispositif) are the reason why we need to study projects in the first place.

Figure 1. The epistemic project: shared traits with systems, assemblages and dispositifs

Epistemic project	
Resemblance Luhmannian system	• essence = communication • self-referential bubble • upholds a social semiosis pertaining to certain ontological relations (e.g. "addiction is situated in the brain") • resembles epistemic community in that it can develop an internal social sense-making logic (e.g. the social movement / system of people who are convinced that addiction is primarily a brain-based problem)
	• "machinery" that articulates meanings with a function • ontological relations have a function of the "making" and

Resemblance Assemblage	coming into being of epistemic projects (e.g. the idea of addiction in the brain is a sign of something, such as a realization of the severity of the problem) • continuously re-enacted and re-interpreted, never finished • resembles epistemic work in its focus on performance and execution (something is being done, achieved, pushed forward)
Resemblance Dispositif	• concepts stand for something else as signs (e.g. brain-based addiction stands for a certain type of agency among people living with addition) • EP will have a tilt or direction entangled with core aspirations of achieving something. The researcher's task is to understand how it comes about and what it means. • mimics established modes of knowledge-making and truth claims • Semiosis takes a direction entangled with aims of influence. In this it resembles epistemic governance with its intentional aims to influence

6. Discussion and conclusions

Digital technologies have created new arenas for people to disseminate worldviews and organize themselves in movements surrounding such worldviews (see e.g. Trittin-Ulbrich et al. 2021). A sales pitch for the theory of epistemic projects could claim that it addresses an urgency to capture how larger meaning-based social processes (convictions, worldviews) spread and order social life. The concept of epistemic project does not box us into assumptions of where the arguments stem from (speaker positions, value worlds, ideologies) or the embedded sociological role they have when they are being performed (governance, discourse, habitus). Rather, it invites the sociologist to inquire into an "ontological becoming" in a way that gives preference to semiosis and to concepts as signs that stand for an idea world setup. I have referred to these idea world setups as representations of ontological relations. I have also claimed that epistemic projects can be seen to come into being through ontological relations in formations akin to assemblages.

Concepts have begun to order social reality at great pace and intensity. Covid-19 vaccinations and the brain-based addiction model are two examples of knowledge-based phenomena that have their own lifespan and logical developments. The way they materialize and take shape is determined by how they are communicated. The concept of epistemic project invites us to accept this as a point of departure in our inquiries, without having to expose and unravel the social entanglements that we imagine are their

constituents. In this, the theory acknowledges that questions (matters, notions) have a semiotic life of their own.

So are epistemic projects simply postmodernist textual subject-objects? Who takes the EP forward in its constitutional direction? In line with the view that semiosis is a temporal flow of articulation and rearticulation (Heiskala 2015), I have suggested that epistemic projects come into being when ontological relations are referred to in communication. In this, the project can be pushed, reproduced, or contested. By positioning the epistemic project between a focus on epistemology (dispositif: how societies or people are culturally programmed to approach matters) and a focus on ontology (assemblage: how relations form meaningful entities), I have left the study of projects open to different purposes and methodologies. The study of epistemic projects can be constructionist or actor-focused as long as it is driven by the acknowledgment of its basic characteristics: the primacy of semiosis, the articulation of certain ontological relations, and the premise of concepts as signs.

The sibling concepts of epistemic communities, epistemic work, and epistemic governance share with epistemic project an imagined realization of a rationale that comes into being through a social process surrounding some epistemic standpoint or anchorage in expertise. However, in my reading of these theories, they still represent actor(s) and action in ways that do not give primacy to semiosis. When we study epistemic communities, we appreciate their characteristics or identifiable traits and what these (should) entail or produce. When we study epistemic work or epistemic governance, we discern ways in which certain action produces relationships of influence and power. In both instances the object of study is not the signification system and semiosis propelling on its own, but some product that comes about when people have shared interests (communities, power relationships).

Ideally, in the study of epistemic projects, the point of departure is inductively naïve and open. The aim is to pinpoint and observe the moments of coming into being and the reproduction of constructs that support an epistemic truth value. Actors only begin to materialize when the researcher has formed an understanding of the role and functions of meaning-making itself. The emphasis on the functions that come into play and make up phenomena when they materialize in functional connotations is a shared point of departure with ontopolitical and new materialist sociology, i.e. "the assemblage tradition". Whatever the phenomenon – QAnon, the reasons for the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the public health framing of smoking, brain-based addiction – the job of the sociological semiotician is to discern and unfold a semiosis that sustains the logic of the central ontological relations.

Last but not least, giving primacy to semiosis and seeing ideas as signs can be expected to help researchers, to some degree at least, subvert the opposition between realism and idealism (nature/culture) (see also Bains 2006). In the example of understanding addiction in the brain as an epistemic project, EPAB is not a theory of addiction in the sense of what the phenomenon is "in reality". It is a theory of the ways in which the notions of brain and notions of addiction are coupled and what this relation entails for our view on (social) reality. As such, the communicated connection is studied as a point of reference in the many ways in which it comes into view and materializes in various contexts, in mundane and expert utterances, both more or less intentionally and continuously (Hellman et al. 2022).

There is an urgency of finding good theoretical concepts that can help us grasp how larger meaning-making processes systematically advance beliefs and worldviews that order human reality. This essay is a first attempt to develop a concept that can be used for these purposes.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1. The assemblage figures as an object of focus especially in the sociological and anthropological literature that draws on the ontopolitical turn (Chandler 2018), new materialist sociology (Fox 2017), or an Anthropocene-conscious Approach (Hellman 2021).↵

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