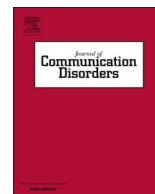


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# A role for epistemic trust in speech-language pathology: A tutorial paper

Angela Clarke<sup>a,\*</sup>, Pamela J. Meredith<sup>a</sup>, Tanya A. Rose<sup>a</sup>, Michael Daubney<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Children's Health Queensland Hospital and Health Service, Queensland Health, Queensland, Australia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper provides an introduction to epistemic trust for speech-language pathologists (SLPs). 'Epistemic trust' describes a specific form of trust that an individual places in others when learning about the world, particularly the social world. To date, the relevance of epistemic trust to SLP clinical practice has received little theoretical or empirical attention. The aim of this paper is to define epistemic trust and explain its relationship with parent-child attachment and mentalization which have, in turn, been linked with language development and use. Suggestions are made for ways in which SLPs may encourage epistemic trust in clients, emphasizing the need to establish strong therapeutic alliances. The authors conclude that epistemic trust is an important consideration for SLPs and that further research exploring the relationship between epistemic trust and language skills is needed to better understand the interplay of these variables and inform clinical practice.

## Learning objectives

Readers will be able to: (1) define epistemic trust, (2) recognize the importance of mentalization skills in developing epistemic trust, (3) identify the key communication behaviors which support the development of epistemic trust within the early parent-child attachment relationship, (4) understand the associations between epistemic trust and language development and use, (5) understand the role of epistemic trust in clients' capacity to engage in interventions provided by SLPs, and (6) recognize ways in which SLPs may support epistemic mistrust and foster epistemic trust in clients.

## 1. Introduction

Much of the information children and adults learn about the world comes from communicating with others (Gweon, Pelton, Konopka, & Schulz, 2014; Koenig & Harris, 2005). This highlights the importance of language and communication to learning, but it also raises the question, "How does one know whom, and what, information to trust?" 'Epistemic trust' describes an individual's capacity to trust that the knowledge provided by others is "...trustworthy, generalizable, and relevant to the self" (Fonagy & Allison, 2014, p. 373).

Two theories underpin the construct of epistemic trust: attachment theory (Fonagy, Luyten, & Allison, 2015) and 'mentalization' (Fonagy & Allison, 2014), also referred to as 'Theory of Mind' (ToM) (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008). With a large body of literature revealing links between language and: parent-child attachment (e.g., Belsky & Fearon, 2002), ToM (e.g., Astington & Jenkins, 1999;

\* Corresponding author at: School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Queensland 4072, Australia.

E-mail address: [a.clarke@uqconnect.edu.au](mailto:a.clarke@uqconnect.edu.au) (A. Clarke).

Nilsson & de López, 2016), and mentalization (e.g., Rutherford et al., 2012), a lack of epistemic trust may be a clinical concern for some individuals attending SLP clinics. Despite theoretical links, this topic has, to date, received little attention in the literature. In the following sections, epistemic trust is defined, the association between epistemic trust and mentalization is explored, and the development of epistemic trust within the parent-child attachment relationship is described. The possible links between epistemic trust and language are then elucidated. The clinical relevance of epistemic trust to SLPs is discussed and suggestions are made for managing epistemic mistrust and encouraging epistemic trust in clients. Finally, recommendations are made regarding the need for research in this field.

## 2. Epistemic trust

Functioning in the world requires an individual to understand a vast amount of information (Liu, Vanderbilt, & Heyman, 2013). Imagine you are in a supermarket and cannot find an item you need. You could continue to look, walking down aisles, looking along shelves. You may eventually find the item, but looking by yourself would take time. Alternatively, you could ask someone for assistance. Many would agree that the best person to ask is not a fellow shopper, but, rather, a supermarket employee, because the employee presumably has expertise in finding grocery items. You approach the service counter and there are two employees: one looks grumpy, the other is smiling. Are you going to keep looking by yourself? If you ask for help, which supermarket employee will you ask? The decision you make regarding whether to ask for help and whom you would ask in this scenario may depend upon whether you have developed epistemic trust, which is the ability to readily accept information and help from others. Epistemic trust enables more efficient learning than trying to gain all knowledge on one's own (Mascaro & Sperber, 2009).

Developing epistemic trust also involves recognizing that learning from others may have drawbacks. For example, an informant may provide inaccurate information, or provide only partial or deceptive information (Nurmsoo & Robinson, 2009). To avoid being misinformed, learners are wise to be sceptical about information (Sperber et al., 2010). This scepticism is referred to as epistemic vigilance (Mascaro & Sperber, 2009). Sperber et al. (2010) have argued that epistemic vigilance is a safeguard against being misinformed or deceived by others, which "...is likely to have evolved biologically alongside the ability to communicate in the way that humans do" (p. 361). Fonagy and Allison (2014) have proposed that epistemic vigilance is reduced, over time, through supportive early parent-child interactions involving key communication behaviors, allowing epistemic trust to develop. These communication behaviors (discussed in detail in a later section) signal to the infant that the information which follows will be culturally-valid, relevant knowledge which the infant needs (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016; Csibra & Gergely, 2009).

Individuals who have been unable to develop epistemic trust remain wary of learning (i.e., are in a state of epistemic mistrust), potentially limiting psycho-social (Fonagy et al., 2015) and educational development (Durkin & Shafto, 2016). Under some conditions, such as those involving child abuse and neglect, epistemic vigilance can become excessive, leading to epistemic hypervigilance (Fonagy & Allison, 2014). An individual in a state of epistemic mistrust, or the more severe, epistemic hypervigilance, may have difficulty developing rapport with others, may be reluctant to take on-board new information, and may misperceive others' intentions as threatening or malevolent (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016). As epistemic trust supports an individual to learn from others, particularly about the social world, it is plausible that some individuals who fail to develop epistemic trust may experience difficulty learning from others which may impact the learning of language. To date, however, there has been no research exploring associations between epistemic trust and language skills. If an association between epistemic trust and language was identified, this finding may have important implications for SLP clinical practice. Potential clinical implications of epistemic trust for SLPs are discussed in more detail in a later section.

## 3. Epistemic trust and mentalization

In order to develop epistemic trust, one must be able to mentalize (Knox, 2016). 'Mentalization' is the capacity to identify 'mental states' – the thoughts, beliefs, and feelings of one's self and others (Bo, Sharp, Beck et al., 2017; Bo, Sharp, Fonagy, & Kongerslev, 2017; Fonagy & Allison, 2014). First proposed by Fonagy (1991), mentalization extended the concept of ToM (Premack & Woodruff, 1978). Whereas ToM relates to the cognitive abilities that permit an individual to identify others' mental states in order to interpret others' behavior, mentalization is focussed on understanding the mental states of both *the self* and others, and emphasizes the role of affect (emotions and feelings) in that understanding (Choi-Kain & Gunderson, 2008). The terms 'mentalization' and 'theory of mind' are often used interchangeably in the literature, and are akin to the concepts of 'mind-reading' (Langdon, Coltheart, Ward, & Catts, 2002), 'reflective function' (Fonagy & Bateman, 2016), or 'mind-mindedness' (Laranjo, Bernier, Meins, & Carlson, 2010).

Epistemic trust relies on mentalization as the capacity to mentalize permits an individual, when deciding whether or not to trust, to infer information about an informant's knowledge and intentions. The capacity to infer informants' beliefs and perspectives is critical in avoiding misinformation or deception (Mascaro & Sperber, 2009). There is research demonstrating that children as young as four years of age attempt to understand others' mental states, knowledge, and intent, when judging the trustworthiness of information (Koenig & Harris, 2005; Shafto, Eaves, Navarro, & Perfors, 2012). In the following section, the development of epistemic trust within the early parent-child attachment relationship is discussed.

## 4. Early attachment relationships and the development of epistemic trust

Responsive and attuned caregiving within the early parent-child attachment relationship is fundamental to the development of attachment security, as well as to the acquisition of mentalization and formation of epistemic trust (Fonagy & Allison, 2014; Fonagy

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