

Experimental Challenges to Intuition, Pt. 1: Surveys

I. Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich's Data

Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich surveyed their undergraduate students at Rutgers in order to determine whether reactions to typical scenarios from the epistemology literature varies depending on one's cultural background.

In each study, subjects were asked to respond in one of two ways to a certain vignette. Subjects were also asked to respond to a questionnaire identifying them as either of *Western* (i.e. European), *East Asian* (i.e. Chinese, Japanese, or Korean), or *Indian subcontinental* (i.e. Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi) descent.

Here are some of the more surprising results that Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich obtained:

- Subjects were given the following variant of a Gettier case:

Bob has a friend, Jill, who has driven a Buick for many years. Bob therefore thinks that Jill drives an American car. He is not aware, however, that her Buick has recently been stolen, and he is also not aware that Jill has replaced it with a Pontiac, which is a different kind of American car. Does Bob really know that Jill drives an American car, or does he only believe it?

REALLY KNOWS

ONLY BELIEVES

The responses were as follows (p-exact < 0.010):

Group	"Really knows"	"Only believes"
Western	26% (= 17/66)	74% (= 49/66)
East Asian	57% (= 13/23)	43% (= 10/23)
Indian subcontinental	61% (= 14/23)	39% (= 9/23)

- Subjects were given the following case made famous by Dretske:

Pat is at the zoo with his son, and when they come to the zebra cage, Pat points to the animal and says, "That's a zebra." Pat is right—it is a zebra. However, given the distance the spectators are from the cage, Pat would not be able to tell the difference between a real zebra and a mule that is cleverly disguised to look like a zebra. And if the animal had really been a cleverly disguised mule, Pat still would have thought that it was a zebra. Does Pat really know that the animal is a zebra, or does he only believe that it is?

REALLY KNOWS

ONLY BELIEVES

The responses were as follows (p-exact = 0.050):

Group	"Really knows"	"Only believes"
Western	31% (= 19/62)	69% (= 43/62)
Indian subcontinental	50% (= 12/24)	50% (= 12/24)

In a separate study, responses to vignettes of this sort were also found to vary depending on one's socio-economic status (SES).

II. Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich's Interpretation of Their Data

Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich take their data to provide good evidence for the following hypotheses:

hypothesis 1: Epistemic intuitions vary from culture to culture.

hypothesis 2: Epistemic intuitions vary from one socio-economic group to another.

In "Meta-Skepticism: Meditations in Ethno-Epistemology" (2003), Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich provide data which they take to confirm the following hypothesis:

hypothesis 3: Epistemic intuitions vary depending on how many philosophy courses a person has taken.

In a forthcoming paper in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Weinberg and several of his students report data in support of the following hypothesis:

hypothesis 4: Epistemic intuitions vary depending on the order in which cases are presented.

III. Worries about Experimental Design

Fixing on the experiments intended to support hypothesis 1, there are several reasons to be worried about whether the data provided really establishes that epistemic intuitions systematically vary from culture to culture:

- The experiments were not conducted with very many controls. It would have been nice if respondents had been given several different versions of each scenario that vary in (what we would deem to be) epistemically irrelevant ways. Similarly, it would have been nice if respondents had been asked questions designed to make sure they understood the scenario being presented.

Stich's reply: Should we also vary the font of the surveys?

- Respondents were forced to choose between two options, "Really knows" and "Only believes." However, results might have been different if the respondents had been given more options.

Weinberg's reply: In later studies, subjects were asked to respond to a statement attributing knowledge to the person in the story on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

- Respondents might be filling in the non-epistemic facts about the stories in different ways. For example, it might be that students of East Asian descent are more likely to assume that an American who has owned an American car in the past will continue to own American cars in the future, or are more likely to assume that zoos are untrustworthy.

Weinberg's reply: This sort of reply is threatening to standard philosophical practice, since by the same reasoning we can never be sure that two *philosophers* talking about a given piece of philosophical fiction are actually talking about the same case.

- It is being assumed that a subject's responses to the probe questions correlates with his or her intuitions about the cases. However, one might doubt this. For example, if one holds that intuitions are distinct from beliefs, or that intuitions are accompanied by a clear sense of necessity, or that intuitions require reflection and/or discussion, or that intuitions must be pre-theoretical, one might doubt that the respondents' forced-choice judgments accurately track their intuitions.

Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich's reply: Call these special sorts of intuitions "strong intuitions." Even if our data cannot distinguish between strong and weak intuitions, they do show that (for example) over 60% of respondents of Indian subcontinental descent do not have either a strong or a weak intuition that the subject in a Gettier case lacks knowledge. Moreover, there is every reason to believe that these patterns of response would be sustained even after prolonged reflection and/or discussion.

IV. The Philosophical Implications of the Experimental Findings

In “Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions,” Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich argue that their findings cause serious problems for a widely practiced methodology they call *Intuition-Driven Romanticism* (IDR).

Intuition-Driven Romanticism (IDR) = any philosophical methodology that takes epistemic intuitions as input and yields a verdict about which epistemic norms are correct as output, and does so in such a way that significantly different inputs would lead to significantly different outputs.

Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich’s argument against IDR appears to proceed as follows:

1. There is significant cross-cultural variation in epistemic intuitions. [*premise*]
2. If there is significant cross-cultural variation in epistemic intuitions, then there will be significant cross-cultural variation in the epistemic norms that IDR deems to be correct. [*premise*]
3. So, there will be significant cross-cultural variation in the epistemic norms that IDR deems to be correct. [*follows from 1, 2*]
4. If two sets of epistemic norms conflict, they cannot both be correct. [*premise*]
5. There is no good reason to privilege the results of IDR as practiced by one culture over the results of IDR as practiced by another culture. [*premise*]
6. So, IDR cannot be a way of discovering the correct epistemic norms. [*follows from 3, 4, 5*]

In “Meta-Skepticism: Meditations in Ethno-Epistemology,” Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich draw a slightly different lesson from their empirical results:

“. . . we are inclined to think that the lesson to be drawn from our cross-cultural studies is that, however obvious they may seem, these intuitions are simply not to be trusted. If the epistemic intuitions of people in different groups disagree, they can’t all be true. The fact that epistemic intuitions vary systematically with culture and SES indicates that these intuitions are caused (in part) by culturally local phenomena. And there is no reason to think that the culturally local phenomena that cause *our* intuitions track the truth any better than the culturally local phenomena that cause intuitions that differ from ours” (p. 243).

Their argument here seems to be as follows:

1. There is significant cross-cultural variation in epistemic intuitions. [*premise*]
2. If there is significant cross-cultural variation in epistemic intuitions, then epistemic intuitions are caused (in part) by culturally local phenomena. [*premise*]
3. So, epistemic intuitions are caused (in part) by culturally local phenomena. [*follows from 1, 2*]
4. If two epistemic intuitions conflict, they cannot both be correct. [*premise*]
5. There is no good reason to think that the culturally local phenomena that cause one culture’s epistemic intuitions track the truth any better than the culturally local phenomena that cause another culture’s epistemic intuitions. [*premise*]
6. So, there is no good reason to think that our epistemic intuitions track the truth. [*follows from 1, 3, 4, 5*]
7. So, our epistemic intuitions are not to be trusted. [*follows from 6*]

Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich’s conclusion (in its most provocative form): When analytic philosophers appeal to “our” intuitions while constructing epistemological theories, they are engaged in a culturally local endeavor, *ethno-epistemology*, that fails to lead to genuinely normative conclusions.

V. Objections and Replies

Some of the most common objections to the philosophical conclusions that Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich draw from their empirical results:

- *the “different concepts” objection:* The variation in responses just shows that the different groups of respondents are employing different concepts. Moreover, because they are employing different concepts, they are having intuitions about different propositions, so there actually is no disagreement.

reply: First of all, this response leads to the worry that *philosophers* might be employing different concepts when they elicit each others’ intuitions, thus threatening standard philosophical practice. Second, if there are many different concepts picked out by the word “knowledge,” then we need some reason to believe that the concept picked out by white, Western, high SES people’s use of the word “knowledge” is the sort of thing worth having and worth studying. Third, is it really plausible that *every* apparent conflict in intuition can be traced to the employment of different concepts?

- *Sosa’s objection:* People from different cultures or different socio-economic groups (as well as different philosophers within the same culture or socio-economic group) are responding to different epistemic values.

“. . . in speaking of a justified belief we are saying something rather like ‘Good shot!’ which someone might sincerely and correctly say despite being opposed to gun possession and to shooting. And now any vestige of conflict across the divides is in doubt. For now there seems no more conflict here than there is between someone who rates cars in respect of how economical they are and someone who rates them in respect of how fast they go” (Sosa, “A Defense . . . ,” p. 17).

reply: Either this reduces to a version of the previous objection, or it just plays into our hands.

- *the “why not epistemic relativism?” objection:* Why not accept that the epistemic norms that IDR yields for Westerners are justified for them, and the epistemic norms that IDR yields for East Asians are justified for them?

reply: To hold that the epistemic norms that are appropriate for white people are quite different from the epistemic norms that are appropriate for people of color is a preposterous result. [Note: this reply seems to have conflated *agent* and *critic relativism*.]

- *the “who cares? we already knew about disagreement” objection:* So what? We’ve known about moral disagreement for millennia, but that doesn’t stop us from appealing to our moral intuitions. Similarly, the fact that eye witnesses to crimes regularly give conflicting reports doesn’t stop us from trusting perception and memory.

reply: We should probably extend our argument to intuition-driven moral philosophy as well. Moreover, the sorts of stressful circumstances that cause eye witnesses to be unreliable are relatively rare, unlike the circumstances in which epistemic intuitions vary.

- *the “tu quoque” objection:* You yourself rely on epistemic intuitions about such matters as whether your collected data confirms your proposed hypotheses, whether your experimental design was biased in any way, etc. Moreover, you yourself rely on epistemic intuitions when arguing from your empirical findings to your conclusion that epistemic intuitions are not in good epistemic standing.

reply: It is compatible with our conclusion that some epistemic intuitions are in good epistemic standing. Also, we could phrase our argument as a *reductio*, rather than a direct proof.