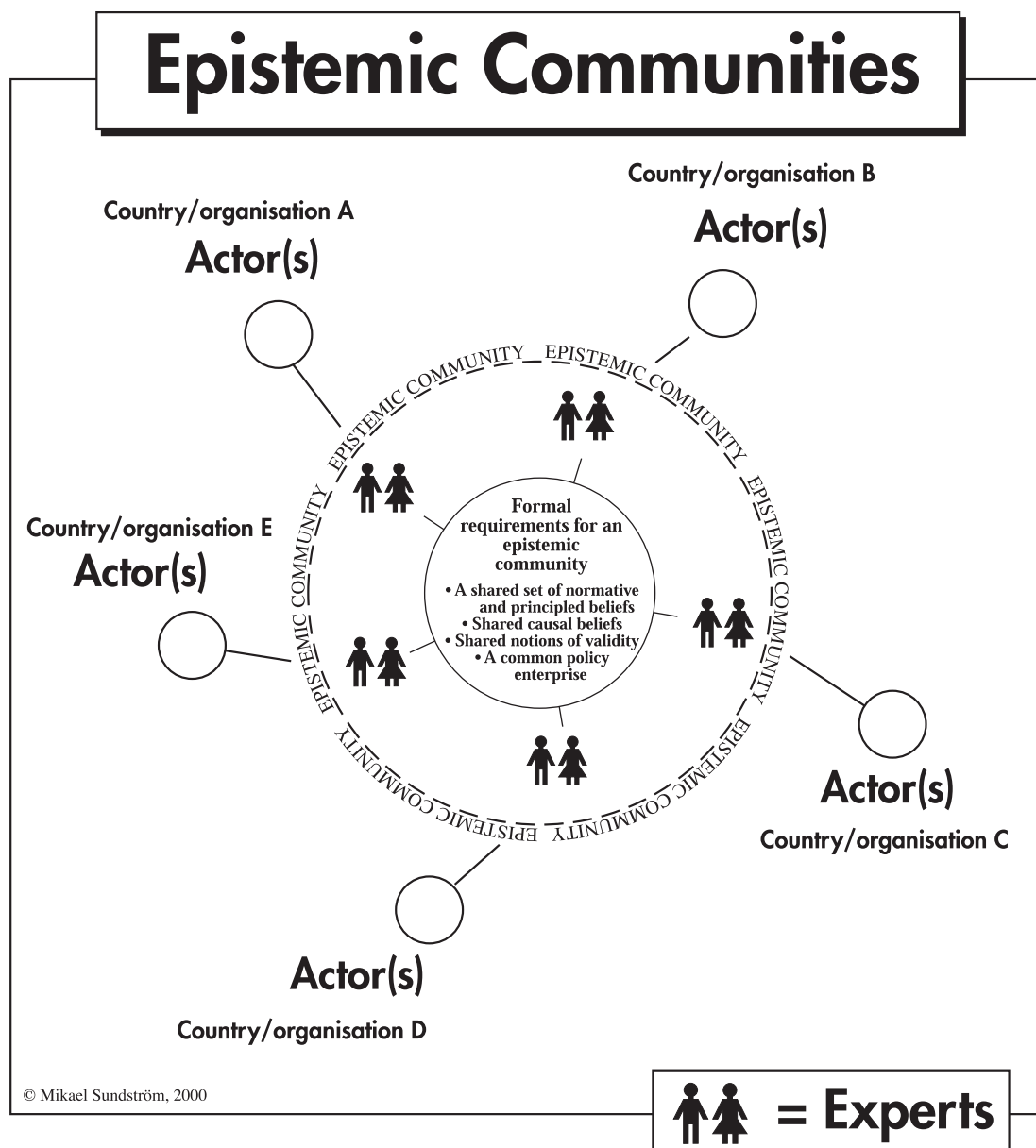


# A Brief Introduction: What is an Epistemic Community?

(Mikael Sundström, 2000)

## *The Short version*

Epistemic Communities is a way of trying to make sense of the fact that hard-to-grasp decisions may move actual, although not necessarily formal, power from elected representatives (or dictators for that matter) to elites acquainted with the subject in a trans-national setting. Let us consider the following figure:



An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue area

What we have is a tricky, probably trans-national, issue-area, a number of formal actors and a group of experts. In many cases the formal actors (political representatives, ministers etc.) get together to discuss their particular problems with counterparts from other nations and/or organisations (normally, theorists only discuss national representatives with formal authority). If the subject is obscure and difficult to grasp, they will find it hard or impossible to solve problems by themselves. Each actor will therefore consult with one or more national experts with intimate understanding of the complex issues involved. A Swedish minister may consult with experts from academia, industry or, not uncommonly, with people directly employed by the government to provide that expertise and service. Thus far, it would seem, the autonomy on the part of the formal actor is merely circumscribed to the extent that he/she listens to his/her advisor.

The epistemic community factors in when we realise that these issue-centric experts meet their counterparts from other nations/organisations. They may meet at conventions or even be members of some international organisation focusing on a particular issue. Because the experts share the language and the understanding pertinent to the issue-area, they may soon begin to form stronger ties with their international colleagues. Eventually they may begin to discuss possible solutions to given problems among themselves. At that point they are at the point of forming an epistemic community proper, (epistemic community literally translates as *knowledge-society*). In the figure above, such a community has already been formed (it should be remembered that it is not necessary to have any formal meeting arrangements for an epistemic community to be present). The community will devise their own solutions to problems that their respective superiors are formally supposed to solve. When the actor asks his/her experts how to go about solving a particular issue, the community solution will be suggested.

When the actors get together to discuss the issue at hand, they will, lo and behold!, find that they share similar ideas, *because the "independent" experts have all offered the similar advice*. This seeming harmony among the actors will probably mean that the solution on the table will be implemented: why complicating things when everyone agrees? The actors may not realise it, but their actual power to affect things have now been reduced to the point of nonexistence.

### *A Slightly Longer Version and Technical Criteria.*

The question what an epistemic community is touches the very fabric of this paper. Before delving into the definitional technicalities, it is necessary to understand why the perspective was originally “invented”, and how it may enhance our understanding of international affairs. In the wake of growing interdependence,<sup>1</sup> many scholars have tried to get out of the theoretical cul-de-sac of traditional realism, as states were seemingly loosing their relative power-monopoly in the international system. Inventing overlaying structures could help explain co-operation among states.

There have been various attempts at explaining international co-operation. Over the last 25 years, much interest has been devoted to the cognitive aspects of decision-making, as “...developments in psychology have produced a major paradigm shift referred to some as “a cognitive revolution””<sup>2</sup> The revolutionary ingredient is that many sub fields of psychology have converged into a common information-processing framework. Where earlier cognitive approaches pictured man as primarily a consistency-seeker, the “post-revolutionary” paradigm portrays man as a problem-solver.<sup>3</sup> The latter model allows active search for relevant information to solve a particular problem, where the former suggested that much potentially valuable information/advice would be disregarded unless it fitted the into the world-view of the particular individual.<sup>4</sup>

Viewing man as an information-seeker, means that information-*providers* can have a significant influence on his attitudes and, ultimately, on his behaviour. Because of his active nature, he will try to procure the best, i.e. most trustworthy and relevant, infor-

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<sup>1</sup> Using the common definition of this term at least. Kenneth Waltz, a fervent advocate of the basically realist outlook, does not agree with this though, and actually states (in his *Theory of International Relations*), that the world of today (which was 1979) is characterised by a rather low level of interdependence.

<sup>2</sup> George, p.55.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57 f.

<sup>4</sup> It is essential to note, however, that while there has been a reassessment of the cognitive substructures at work, the traditional view of man as a consistency-seeker has by no means been superseded. Indeed, as George notes: “[T]his recent emphasis on viewing man as a problem solver does not mean that it is no longer fruitful to view man also as a consistency seeker in certain contexts. What it does is to overcome the narrowness of the earlier model of man as a mere consistency seeker...” (*Presidential Decision-making*, p.56 & 61f.). The reader will find that both views are used throughout the paper. The “modern” view is particularly useful when the basic rationale for epistemic communities is explicated.

mation, which he can then evaluate. He will therefore lend his ear to various *experts* which can help him make educated assessments of the decision-specific situation at hand.<sup>1</sup>

### *Why Epistemic Communities?*

The logic behind the concept of Epistemic Communities is seductively simple. National decision-makers find it increasingly difficult to keep up with the steadily swelling river of information pertaining to different issue-areas. Eventually, they will need someone to abbreviate the information into manageable portions. This translation-process opens up new avenues of influence, as the experts who will perform the interpretation, unlike traditional advisers, can slant the information on which the decision-makers will base their deliberations, as well as present their views on how this already coloured information, should be interpreted.<sup>2</sup> With growing internationalisation, the experts in various issue-areas will meet their extra-national peers, to discuss problems and possible solutions. If this information-exchange is frequent enough, the national expert will be coloured by his colleagues' views, or, rather, by the *aggregate* views of the international community of experts to which he belongs - the *epistemic* community.

As all the experts within the epistemic community will be equally prone to such "indoctrination", they will tend to furnish "their" decision-makers with similar information, and similar views. Decision-makers will suddenly find that their counter-parts in other countries share their opinions on many matters, providing new incentives for international co-operation.

### *Technical Criteria for Epistemic Communities*

As a starting-point for the ensuing discussion we can use the definition (with corollaries) presented by Peter M. Haas:

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<sup>1</sup> An interesting debate concerned with the potential power of knowledge-elites, is the question of a potential (many would say factual) military-industrial complex, where the experts (the military and the arms-manufacturers) use their virtual information-monopoly to instil political leaders with a sometimes illogical fear of the adversary's military strength, in order to maintain high levels of funding. (Pilisuk, p. 108 ff.)

<sup>2</sup> Or in the more formal words of Haas: "Members of trans-national epistemic communities can influence state interests either by directly identifying them for decision-makers or by illuminating the salient dimensions of an issue from which the decision makers may then deduce their interests" (Haas, p.4)

Figure 1: Haas' Definition of Epistemic Communities

**An epistemic community is a network of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area**

The professionals may be from a variety of disciplines and backgrounds but must have:

- 1) a shared set of normative and principled beliefs, which provide a value-based rationale for the social action of community members.
- 2) shared causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain and which then serve as the basis for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy action and desired outcomes
- 3) shared notions of validity-that is, intersubjective, internally defined criteria for weighing and validating knowledge in the domain of their expertise
- 4) a common policy enterprise- that is, a set of common practices associated with a set of problems to which their professional competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a consequence.

Based on *International Organisation*, vol 46, p.3.

It would seem that the relevance of epistemic communities are dependant on four variables: type of issue-area, issue-relevant information complexity, community cohesion and links to policy-shapers.

### **Type of Issue-Area**

As we can extract from the definition, the notion of epistemic communities is issue-centred. Less clear, however, is the distinction between different issue-areas. Parapsychological “experts” could arguably fit Haas’ definitional requirements for an epistemic community,<sup>1</sup> but because no, or at least very few, policy-shapers would attach any importance to the issue-area itself, they would never need the services of a parapsychological epistemic community.

While Haas is predominantly preoccupied with fairly narrow “hard” scientific issue-areas, the very first sentence in his *Introduction: epistemic communities and international policy co-ordination*, theoretically allow a wide range of issue-areas: “The growing technical uncertainties and complexities of problems of global concern have made international policy co-ordination...increasingly difficult”<sup>2</sup> Growing internationalisation in general and issue-interlinking in particular makes the effects of policy-decisions

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<sup>1</sup> They comprise a network of “professionals”, they have recognised expertise (by their believers...), and if there are any potential policies which can be related to para-psychological factors, surely this group of expert is the one with pertinent knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Haas, p.1

increasingly impenetrable. Traditionally domestic issue-areas, may have an impact on a wide array of other issue-area - domestically as well as internationally oriented ones. That in turn means that most traditional issue-areas (as opposed to esoteric ones) may be included in the epistemic community approach.

### **Issue-Relevant Information Complexity**

The community is a source for expertise in a given issue-area, which policy-shapers can draw from, should the need occur. The degree to which policy-shapers demand advice must logically be a function of the level of information-*complexity*,<sup>1</sup> which in turn is a function of the *amount* of information and the amount of (perceived) information-*interconnection*. That the level of both have increased dramatically is hard to disprove - Haas exemplifies with the growing number of white-coat staff serving in government departments, and the swelling number of departments themselves,<sup>2</sup> and writes: “Thus, the expansion and professionalisation of bureaucracies and the growing technical nature of problems have fostered an increase in the deference paid to technical expertise, and in particular, to that of scientists”<sup>3</sup>

### **Community Cohesion**

A core assumption of the epistemic community approach is that aggregate community-views to a certain extent takes precedence over the views of individual members. That must mean that *in general*, individual members will tend to be faithful to the community, as they share basic community-norms. Deviation can either be dismissed as extraordinary, and statistically unimportant, individual exercises, or as altogether “extra-communal” activities. As all four definitional corollaries deal with the cohesion of epistemic communities, this is obviously seen as a crucial element.

Chapter 3 in this paper addresses this topic from a different angle, i.e. how community cohesion is affected by lingual, cultural and “technical” barriers to the free

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<sup>1</sup> Haas elaborates on the motives why decision-makers will seek the advice from the epistemic community: Facing uncertainty (inadequate information about the situation at hand / inadequacy of available general knowledge needed for assessing the expected outcomes of different courses of action), the decision-maker “lacks many of the conditions facilitating a focus on power...[it is difficult] to identify their political allies and to be sure of what strategies are most likely to help them retain power...[and] poorly understood conditions may create enough turbulence that established operating procedures may break down, making institutions unworkable” (Haas, p.13 ff.)

<sup>2</sup> Haas, p. 9 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p.11.

flow of issue-relevant information, and how that may engender systems of parallel epistemic communities within a single issue-area.

### **Links to Policy-Shapers**

If the epistemic community is to exert any influence over policies, they must have links to the actual decision-makers. Without such power-links, epistemic communities would have questionable significance as Haas points out when he states that "...it is unclear how effective consensus knowledge is, as an independent variable, at explaining or predicting state behaviour".<sup>1</sup> He also offers us more practical pointers: "...epistemic communities can insinuate their views and influence national governments and international organisations by occupying niches in advisory and regulatory bodies"<sup>2</sup>

### *The Crucial Flow of Information*

In the last section we identified 4 basic variables which will affect the significance of epistemic communities. While all are fundamental, the flow of information must be absolutely critical for, indeed an indispensable part of, epistemic communities as well as any other "epistemic structure". The quest for information is, as we have learned, the main incitement for gradually increasing epistemic co-operation, as well as the link to the traditional decision-making structure.

Because of its powerful implications, much of the ensuing discussion will be concerned with distortions of the flow of information, as it progresses through the issue-relevant global scientific community. As indicated in 2.3.3 it will be argued that such distortions may affect the level of community-cohesion, and, hence, their geographical reach.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p.30.



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