From Group Scaffolded Individual Self-Trust to Group Self-Trust

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Nadja El Kassar (2021) argues that collective intellectual self-trust can both block the negative effects of epistemic injustice and support active resistance to it. Collectives enable those who might otherwise suffer the corrosive effects of having their epistemic capacities routinely disrespected to experience themselves as respected and valued members of a community of inquiry, which in turn sustains their members' intellectual self-trust. Collectives which have intellectual self-trust also support the emergence of new improved concepts that better enable resistance to unjust social practices.

I share El Kassar's intuition that intellectual self-trust in both its individual and collective forms is vulnerable to epistemic injustice and yet plays an important role in resisting it. I want to raise two seemingly unconnected problems for El Kassar's argument, but it will turn out that the solution to one provides a part solution to the other.

Issues of Self-Trust

The first problem is one that El Kassar is fully aware of: neither individual nor collective intellectual self-trust in themselves support resistance to epistemic injustice. Far from being helpful, they can even dig you deeper into a hole, as happens when an incel goes on-line, finds their misogynist world view endorsed, and learns improved strategies for resisting counter-evidence (El Kassar 2021, 205, 207 note 7). What protects against and enables effective resistance to epistemic injustice is not intellectual self-trust but *well-calibrated* intellectual self-trust; that is, self-trust that is neither too much nor too little, but pitched so as roughly to track competence.

The second problem concerns whether or not El Kassar has identified a phenomenon that counts as collective self-trust or whether instead she has identified the somewhat different, but still highly important, phenomenon of group scaffolded individual intellectual self-trust. Matthew Congdon asks the same question: "Is the collective: (a) the subject doing the self-trusting; (b) the object of self-trust; or (c) both, making it what we could term the 'subject-object' of trust" (Congdon 2021, 51)? We both share the intuition that if the account is to be one of collective self-trust then the answer should be (c): it's the collective who trusts, and it is the collective that is trusted by itself. This being so, we would expect the definition of collective self-trust to be put in terms of attitudes that somehow, and *non-metaphorically*, belong to the collective and that are directed towards the collective. But that is not what we find:

> [Collective intellectual self-trust] has a cognitive, a behavioral, and an affective component. The group members believe that they can trust the cognitive abilities and epistemic products of the group and the group members, (2) they act in such ways that manifest their trust in the cognitive abilities and products of the group and its members, (3) they have a feeling of trust in the epistemic products and abilities of the group and its members. … (4) The members of the group must be mutually aware of the joint

> intellectual self-trust that the group members have in the group and the
> members (El Kassar 2021, 204).

The subject of each of these clauses is not the group or the collective, but rather the *members* of that collective and its object is both the group and fellow members, though it isn't explained how a cognitive ability or epistemic product, whether belief, method, or question, can be properly said to belong to a group rather than merely being held in common among members of that group. I take it that condition (4), which El Kassar identifies as unique to collective self-trust, given that variants of conditions (1) – (3) apply to individual intellectual self-trust, is supposed to be part answer to how it is that we move from networks of individuals who trust each other to a collective characterized by self-trust. But it seems too weak to do the job: for all that's been said so far, we might simply be a collection of individual agents each holding positive attitudes towards the others in virtue of their membership in some loosely structured group (e.g. being female experients of under-diagnosed illnesses (202)) and each aware that those attitudes are reciprocated in virtue of their own membership in the group. The fourth clause does add something important, just not enough to put the group in either the subject or the object position of intellectual trust. When we know that others trust us, we tend to be trust-responsive (Pettit 1995, McGeer 2008).

Community, Warrant and Trust

If I know that other members of a community of inquiry are going to trust my intellectual contributions, then I will want to bring "my best game": I will not assert things I am not entitled to assert because I lack warrant, I will think carefully before reposting, or otherwise circulating as known, the testimony of others, I will be considered and generous in my response to the contributions of others. When trusted others second my contribution by agreeing with it and building on it, or when they challenge it in ways that demonstrate it was nevertheless worth taking seriously, my intellectual self-trust will increase and, if prior to my participation in this intellectual community, it was set too low, it will become better calibrated.

There is no guarantee that such participation will make my intellectual self-trust more accurately aligned to my epistemic competence, for I might have started with too much intellectual self-trust, but the pressure to use my intellectual faculties just as well as I can, a pressure that comes from knowing that I am trusted, will tend to increase my reliability at the same time as it increases my self-trust. Though El Kassar does not put the point this way, her argument draws our attention to the ways in which trust-responsiveness can better calibrate the individual intellectual self-trust of group members and create flourishing communities of inquiry.

What more would we need to add if we want to get the collective unambiguously in both the subject and object position in our analysis of collective intellectual self-trust, so that it is the collective that is trusted by the collective? We need two additional steps: the first is to

establish that we have a collective agent to which beliefs and methods can be ascribed that are not reducible to the beliefs and methods of individual members of the collective.

The input of the members must somehow be integrated or aggregated on its way to becoming the view of the collective and the constraints of reason must operate at the collective level so that the group does not endorse conflicting claims by, for example, rejecting what the collective accepts is a consequence of something it accepts (Pettit 2010). The second is to show how such a collective can have the kind of reflexive attitude towards its own beliefs, methods, and procedures that opens up the space for the reflexive attitude that is self-trust (Jones 2012, 239).

There are a range of aggregative procedures that might be used to move from the input of members to the view of the group: majority judgment, authoritarianism, weighted contribution that accords some members greater authority with respect to some propositions than others, discursive deliberation with or without the aim of consensus, and so on.[1] The reliability of a group will be affected by the aggregation procedure it adopts and by its membership rules. There is reason to believe that an authoritarian aggregation procedure such as found in groups where there is a small number of guru-like figures, or a single such figure (some alternative health communities have this structure), will be less reliable than groups with a less hierarchical structure, since an authoritarian aggregation procedure insulates the view of the group from directly registering the different experiences and expertise of its members. Any such influence must go through the assent of the gatekeepers and so the group is likely to do only modestly better than the authoritative figures could do on their own. An aggregation procedure that gives greater weighting to the views of those members who have special expertise regarding particular matters and that also allows for criticism from different perspectives as counter to group-think is likely to do a better job at weeding out false claims and at integrating all available evidence than is an authoritarian aggregation procedure. Success here depends not only on the aggregation procedure but also on who gets to be a member of the group.

Emergent Shared Knowledge

Drawing on the conception of objectivity developed by Helen Longino (1990), Deborah Tollefson and Christopher Lucibella (2018) argue that knowledge is more likely to emerge when non-authoritarian group aggregation procedures are combined with a diverse group membership, thus enabling contestation among and integration of a wide variety of different perspectives. To this should be added that it is not diversity as such that is of value, so that a group must contend with the views of those without expertise or commitment to shared goals, but rather diversity among those who have the relevant commitments and expertise. A community of feminist inquiry need not trouble itself with sexist views, but it had better be sure that it includes women of color, disabled women, transwomen, poor women, and so on across intersecting axes of oppression. That raises an interesting possibility: within a group, some members may distrust other members with respect to the use of their epistemic

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[1] For an overview of some options, see Tollefson and Lucibella 2018.

methods in certain sub-domains, as transwomen participating in feminist communities of inquiry no doubt distrust ciswomen. Despite such distrust among members, it remains possible that the group could trust itself as a group.

If we have an aggregation procedure that goes from individual input to group level output and that imposes coherence and other rationality constraints on that output, we can talk about group belief and group methods, but there's another step to go before we can talk about the group having intellectual trust in itself: there must be room for the group to turn its attention to its own beliefs and methods and endorse, reject, or improve them. That is, the beliefs and methods of the group must be subject to the reflective scrutiny of the group. Can groups do this? It seems to me that at least some groups can and do. To give a real life example, a committee charged with developing policy to support the justice claims of First Nation staff and students at a university might first begin with a membership and aggregation strategy that failed adequately to recognize the authority of lived experience and, as a result of listening to its First Nation members, change both aggregation strategy and membership. This would be a case where the group formed the belief that it could not trust itself and changed so as to become more trustworthy.

As El Kassar acknowledges, it is only well-enough calibrated intellectual self-trust that can provide remedy for epistemic injustice, which raises the question of how we tell whether a group's intellectual self-trust is well-enough calibrated. Understanding how membership conditions and aggregation procedures interact to increase or reduce the epistemic reliability of groups can help us spot which ones are likely to have well-calibrated intellectual self-trust and which are not. It's not an infallible guide because there is no guarantee that the members of a group will bring concepts, beliefs, and methods that are in the ballpark so that the best aggregative strategies can integrate them into a view that is more complete, more objective, more reliable than the initial input of members. But groups with the right deliberative non-hierarchical aggregation procedures and the right membership can function as epistemic accelerators and so be more likely to generate knowledge than individual agents (Tollefson and Lucibella 2018).

I have argued that we can make sense of a group being in both the subject and object position of intellectual trust; that is, we can make sense of collective intellectual self-trust where this is understood non-metaphorically, as trust in the collective, by the collective. Two objections need to be considered: first, even if genuine collective intellectual self-trust is possible, won't it be a niche phenomenon found only in relatively artificial communities of inquiry such as committees tasked with policy related verdicts that have a fact finding and theory building component, or research groups with limited membership and well-defined intellectual missions?

Conditions for Cohesion

I agree with El Kassar that social identity-based groupings such as "women" will not have the kind of cohesion required for the attribution of group beliefs (El Kassar 2021, 203); even adding the additional constraint of some commonality in desired ends and values, as might

be thought to link those women who are feminists, will still give insufficient unity. Nevertheless, the conditions required for attributing group beliefs and methods (aggregation procedure and rationality constraint at the group level) can be found amongst groups that are less formally structured than committees or research groups; they can be found, for example, among communities of feminist philosophers, prisoner writing groups (El Kassar 2021, 203), and even some on-line groups such as women experients of under-diagnosed illnesses.

The second objection concerns whether an account of intellectual self-trust that contains an affective component can apply non-metaphorically to groups. Suppose we grant, as I think we should, that we can attribute beliefs, questions, methods, judgments and so on to collective agents; even so, surely it is a bridge too far to attribute emotions to such collectives? How could such a group have an attitude of optimism towards its own intellectual abilities? If we understand this affective attitude as a feeling then it simply cannot be had by a group. The same goes for those other context-dependent emotions that typically accompany individual self-trust such as pride, joy, excitement, and anger (Congdon 2021, 49). However, it would be a mistake to understand this attitude of optimism as simply a feeling.

I argue that the attitude is partly constituted by patterns in the interpretation of what counts as a reason to revise, revisit, defer, or withhold judgement and that it is this pattern, not the feeling, that does explanatory work (Jones 2012, 243-44). The overly self-trusting seldom see such reasons, while those in the grip of a crisis of self-trust see them everywhere. It is this take on what constitutes a reason to revise, revisit, defer, and so on that explains the other characteristic dispositions of the self-trusting, such as their assertion dispositions. A group agent will likewise have patterns in its tendency to see reasons to revisit, revise, defer or withhold judgement. Those group agents with a high level of intellectual self-trust will seldomly see reasons to reopen lines of inquiry they consider closed; those with low levels of self-trust will be vulnerable to doubts others would not take seriously. A group's intellectual self-trust is well-calibrated just in case it tends to recognise *good* reasons to revisit past judgment or withhold current judgment and ignore spurious reasons. Since both group and individual agents can have the same kinds of patterns in their perception of reasons, patterns that partly constitute the attitude of optimism, we can correctly attribute that attitude to groups, even though group agents have no feelings.

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