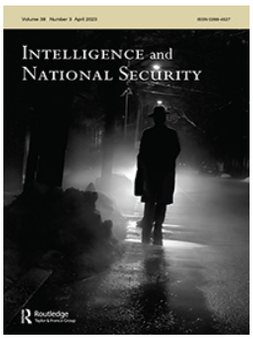

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Rethinking intelligence practices and processes: three sociological concepts for the study of intelligence

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ABSTRACT

Recently, a small but growing number of intelligence scholars has called for more methodological variety in the study of intelligence. In this article, we connect with the emerging discussion about the utility of sociological approaches and discuss three influential sociological concepts, namely 'epistemic communities', 'transnational fields' and 'knowledge circulation' for understanding international intelligence relations. We apply each concept to an empirical example from our research on German-Arab intelligence relations during the Cold War. The paper concludes that the concepts highlight the everyday life and social embeddedness of shared and transnational intelligence practices and processes.

Introduction

In a recent article, intelligence scholar Pepijn Tuinier argues that intelligence theory continues to suffer from neo-realist presumptions and fails to explain 'the increasing depth and breadth of international intelligence cooperation'.[1] Tuinier joins a growing critique of the dominant understanding of intelligence agencies as rational, neutral, service providers, that only communicate with their international counterparts as a last resort.[2] We seek to engage with this critique and investigate whether sociological approaches to intelligence, which have recently gained traction in the study of international intelligence cooperation, offer a stronger methodological way ahead.[3]

Intelligence cooperation, broadly, refers to contacts between the intelligence agencies of different states; more accurately described as 'the international relations of intelligence agencies'. Intelligence cooperation is also commonly referred to as 'liaison'.[4] Intelligence cooperation comprises many different types of contacts, of varying degrees of closeness and continuity. Stéphane Lefebvre,[5] Adam Svendsen[6] and Jennifer Sims,[7] who all penned influential articles on the topic, differentiate between numerous types of cooperation, for example simple and complex, symmetric and asymmetric, bilateral and multilateral or friendly and adversarial. Well-known examples of multilateral cooperation are the Club de Berne[8] and the Five Eyes,[9] examples of important bilateral intelligence relations include US-German,[10] or UK-Pakistani[11] cooperation; many more examples exist.[12]

Especially since 9/11, attempts to develop theories that explain the existence and impact of intelligence relations on international politics have gained ground, albeit from a low base.[13] These efforts have been hampered by a prevailing belief that intelligence agencies regard each other with suspicion and are generally extremely hesitant to share information with each other.[14] Theoretically speaking, the analysis of intelligence relations has been hobbled by a neo-realist 'methodological nationalism', in that agencies are a priori defined by and analysed via their national borders. For example, Clough defines strategic intelligence as 'more closely aligned with a nation's strategic culture'[15] than any other government area and quotes Sherman Kent, a founding figure of

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intelligence studies, who defined intelligence as 'the knowledge upon which our nation's foreign relations, in war and peace, must rest'.[16] Even Westerfield, despite his nuanced, empirical observation that in cooperation 'interdependencies become habitual and systemic'[17] in the end cannot transcend the theoretical perspective of nationalism when he describes cooperation as 'a systemic pattern of *cross-national* differentiated competence, attitudes, behaviour, and structure'[18] (emphasis added). Caught within the methodological frame of nationalism, intelligence studies lack the language to explain adequately the wide-spread empirical evidence that transnational intelligence sharing is not just common but lies at the heart of the international system of modern intelligence.[19] Sociological approaches – a small, but exciting new trend in intelligence studies – are very well placed to overcome this fundamental problem of most existing scholarship on cooperation.

Sociology starts from a focus on relations between individuals, groups and institutions. The idea that states or agencies exist as bounded containers is alien to sociology. Sociological approaches to intelligence ask from the start: what are the (national and international) social relations that shape intelligence? Thus, the trap of pre-conceiving intelligence agencies as 'stewing in their own national juice' is avoided. Further, sociological approaches focus on everyday intelligence practice, and the motives and values that animate it, which are often overlooked in intelligence scholarship. For cooperation scholars, they open up ways of mining and reading archives for relational factors, and for reading 'against the archival grain', which is often (but not always) structured by a common-sensical, nationalist perspective. Sociological approaches provide opportunity to combine in-depth empirical research with theoretical analysis. They include a broad, constructivist understanding of knowledge, via which understudied areas of cooperation, beyond the exchange of secret knowledge, move into view. For practitioners and policymakers, sociological approaches firstly help to understand that intelligence is, in most ways, governed by the same principles of human behaviour as any other government function. Here, sociology can help de-mystify matters such as secrecy or covert practices, opening them up to a nuanced, sociological gaze, which can assist with both workplace and policy reform of intelligence. Secondly, sociological analyses will break down common-sensical assumptions often attached to intelligence a priori and offer a fresh understanding of intelligence as a governing activity.

From a sociological point of view, intelligence relations are determined by a much more complex set of factors than strategic aims and shared threat perceptions, which neo-realist approaches have emphasized. International intelligence relations no longer appear as primarily state driven, competitive and rational decisions. Instead, they depend on social questions, such as shared knowledge-frameworks or similar understandings about practices and daily routines. For researchers, this means that examining the reasons behind flourishing or failing intelligence relations requires attention to the language, belief, organizational set-up and micro-practices within agencies. Sociological approaches can assist with this, because they can address social relations among intelligence professionals or the inner life of agencies in an analytical manner and beyond the anecdotal.

Thus, to push forward and develop sociological approaches for intelligence studies, in this article we introduce three prominent sociological concepts to an intelligence readership and highlight their applicability to intelligence relations. The three concepts are **'epistemic communities', 'field theory'** and **'knowledge circulation'**. We choose these three concepts pragmatically, as they arose as useful, analytical lenses during our research-group work. In this work, we intensively mined intelligence studies for promising concepts that would help us theorise intelligence relations between East and West Germany and several Arab republics, our empirical focus. We found that both 'epistemic communities' and 'field theory' had received some treatment in intelligence studies,[20] and we sought to develop this material further for our work. Secondly, we actively sought outside of intelligence studies for theories that could help explain how transnational *learning* takes place between individuals and institutions. Here, we considered sociological concepts such as practice theory, actor-network theory, a Certeau-inspired focus on 'everyday life', or organizational sociology, however found them lacking for our purpose to build a theory around patchy, historical, archival documents. We found that 'knowledge circulation' gave us an excellent framework of analysis.

Knowledge circulation allowed us to grasp different types of knowledge that are transmitted during intelligence cooperation, and also allowed us to theorise the many different levels, practices and materials, via which knowledge-transmission (a necessary precondition for learning) takes place. Particularly for the fragmented, empirical data that intelligence scholars have to contend with, this is a usefully broad, but nevertheless precise theoretical avenue.

Firstly, the epistemic communities concept addresses the fact that intelligence professionals in different countries work from the same professional knowledge systems, and frequently share similar values and norms. Such epistemic communities of intelligence professionals can be empirically determined by comparing the professional knowledge used by different intelligence agencies. For understanding why intelligence cooperation happens even between agencies with differing aims or cultural contexts, this is crucial: what matters, is the shared epistemology – knowledge – and a communal professional understanding. Secondly, 'field theory' focuses on practices and stakes shared by intelligence professionals in different countries. Thirdly, 'knowledge circulation' argues that knowledge is in fact broader than 'secret information' and includes tradecraft, technological innovation, procedures and standards of secrecy and professionalism. The circulation of these latter types of knowledge, which is embedded in material and financial exchange between foreign intelligence agencies, provides another explanatory framework to cooperation, exceeding the problematic 'methodological nationalism'.

The article is structured as follows: firstly, we discuss existing sociological approaches within intelligence studies, which appeared sporadically since the 1990s but have gained significant traction in the past three years. Secondly, we discuss each of our concepts in turn and apply each to a specific historical episode from our archival research. Lastly, our concluding analysis draws out the three concepts' strengths for studying international intelligence relations, ending with a forward-looking discussion on potential avenues for further research.

Existing sociological approaches within intelligence studies

In her remarkable contribution[21] 'A sociological approach to intelligence studies' the sociologist and former CIA counter-terrorism analyst Bridget Nolan argues that 'the study of intelligence is missing a sociological perspective'. Nolan writes that especially understanding intelligence cooperation (or lack of it) 'requires knowledge of the principles of group dynamics, inequality and power' and that 'intelligence work in industrialized countries is inextricably intertwined with sociological notions of complex formal organization and bureaucracies'.[22] While indeed there exists no coherent body of 'sociological intelligence studies', sporadic articles with at least implicit sociological methodology have appeared regularly, including in this journal[23] and the *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence*.[24] Related to sociological writings within intelligence studies are recent attempts to establish the field of 'critical intelligence studies'.[25] Authors within this critical perspective share many sociological methodological convictions, such as reflexivity,[26] hermeneutics,[27] the relevance of social identities[28] and intelligence's interactions with wider society.[29] Since at least 2019, a discernible effort exists to establish what may be developing into a 'sociological school' of intelligence studies,[30] much of it based around King's College London's War Studies Department, Leiden University's Faculty of Security and Global Affairs and a number of French scholars. Others interpreted this development as the emergence of a European School of Intelligence Studies[31]; an understanding that includes Scandinavia, Benelux and Central and Eastern Europe and puts less emphasis on theoretical and methodological aspects, but focuses more on the fact that there is an increasing number of intelligence studies scholars in continental Europe who benefit from the opening of once-secret files and vast archival access since the end of the Cold War.[32] The 2020 article 'Collective Discussion: Toward Critical Approaches to Intelligence as a Social Phenomenon' was a milestone in this regard. Its authors establish a methodological approach 'sensitive to the actual social relations constituting intelligence as a practice'.[33] Empirically, the article highlights, inter alia, practices of representation within intelligence assessments, the relevance of scientific and

policing actors for intelligence studies and shows how specific ideas about social spaces structure intelligence activities and perceptions. Here, several core elements of a sociological approach emerge: a focus on actually existing (rather than ideal) micro-practices of day-to-day intelligence work, a broad understanding of actors relevant to intelligence (who may be located outside the core intelligence community) and an interest in how general societal phenomena, such as space, norms or economic change shape intelligence. This new, sociologically inspired research agenda is strengthened with the establishment, in 2021, of a new Routledge series entitled *New Intelligence Studies* and a first, 2022 publication edited by Hager Ben Jaffel and Sebastian Larsson that sets out to problematise existing approaches to Intelligence Studies.[34]

In addition, we take inspiration from Brown and Farrington's 2017 article, in which they apply sociological models about knowledge-transmission within social groups to better understand intelligence sharing.[35] Building on arguments about the social functioning of 'gossip', better defined as 'the private transmission of evaluative information about an absent third party', they conclude that aside from strategic reason, intelligence-sharing is strongly shaped by social factors, including pre-existing, close personal relations between key individuals.[36] Such pre-existing ties mean that exchanging actors have formed expectations of each other's behaviour, which not just generate the oft-mentioned but vaguely defined 'trust' between intelligence actors,[37] but more precisely include concrete experiences of each other's behaviour upon which future expectation may legitimately be based. Two of the three concepts we discuss below – epistemic communities and field theory – present a focused analysis of how and why professional communities (such as intelligence professionals) form important social bonds, which are key to understanding their behaviour. Here, we highlight the rich methodological toolkit that sociology offers, to help introduce some methodological rigour into intelligence studies.[38] Our third concept – knowledge circulation – speaks also to the literature within the emerging field of 'critical intelligence studies', as it draws attention to the social and material factors, which determine the spread of knowledge, beyond its relative importance for a strategic aim.

Epistemic communities, transnational field theory and knowledge circulation: ways ahead for intelligence theory?

In the following section, we briefly describe our three concepts and highlight how they may improve analysis of international intelligence relations. In particular, we ask: 1) what questions do these concepts guide us to ask?, 2) what empirical material do they emphasize?, and 3) what factors do they highlight as important?

Epistemic communities

Peter Haas' framework of epistemic communities, which he first presented in his foundational article 'Epistemic communities and international policy coordination' is instructive to understand intelligence communities. Haas defines an epistemic community as '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'. He argues that epistemic communities share (1) normative and principled beliefs in their actions, (2) causal beliefs, which are derived from their analysis of practices leading or contributing to a central set of problems in their domain, (3) notions of validity of their analysis in their field of expertise and (4) a common set of goals, a 'common policy enterprise'.[39]

Epistemic communities are not identical with broader scientific communities or professions and disciplines as such.[40] While economists, for example, constitute a profession as a whole, Keynesians or followers of other schools of economic thought may become an epistemic community with shared principles, beliefs and ideas. The combination of having a shared set of causal and principled (analytic and normative) beliefs, a consensual knowledge base, an authoritative claim on the specific

knowledge for policy, and, in particular, a *common policy enterprise* (common interests) distinguishes epistemic communities from other groups.[41] National epistemic communities can become transnational over time, even while their mutual policy interest remains focused on a single country. Within an epistemic community, conferences, journals, or research collaboration can create transnationalization. An important element of the epistemic communities' concept is the way it understands knowledge. Knowledge is constructed by humans and therefore always subjective and interrelational. Haas argues that epistemic communities do not provide independent, objective knowledge to policy makers, but that this knowledge is always shaped by their common beliefs and interests.[42] Epistemic communities experience varying degrees of institutionalisation, depending on how far they achieve consolidated bureaucratisation within national administrations or international secretariats. Haas argues that epistemic communities are non-systemic, but rather 'channels through which new ideas circulate from societies to governments as well as from country to country'.[43]

The influence of epistemic communities on policy decisions increases during moments of uncertainty, when the legitimacy of existing modalities for interpretation and institutionalization is questioned.[44] George argues that conditions of uncertainty are situations in which decision makers have to act without 'adequate information about the situation at hand' or while facing 'inadequacy of available general knowledge needed for assessing the expected outcomes of different courses of action'.[45] Therefore, the concept of uncertainty is significant for the concept of epistemic communities for two reasons. First, during a time of uncertainty 'many of the conditions facilitating a focus on power are absent'. Secondly, while facing uncertainty, decision makers are pushed to consult epistemic communities, as it 'often takes a crisis or shock to overcome institutional inertia and habit and spur them to seek help from an epistemic community'. The power of an epistemic community is dependent on how far policy makers solicit its information and give it responsibility. This relationship between uncertainty, lacking information and the influence of specific epistemic communities makes the concept especially relevant for understanding intelligence communities, whose standing is closely related to the information they can provide in uncertain times.

Intelligence studies scholars have applied the epistemic communities' concept to a variety of intelligence settings, but the full potential of the concepts remains to be explored.[46] For example, Herbert underlines the epistemological challenges of intelligence analysis. He argues that analysts might face the same problems of biased assumptions when it comes to producing intelligence from raw information.[47] Rønn and Bang delve into the aspects of shared beliefs and the notion of validity within an intelligence community. While Bang analyses the shared beliefs on the definition of intelligence within military intelligence institutions in Sweden, the US and GB, Rønn analyses the epistemic reasonability within intelligence agencies and problematizes the notion of validity within the epistemic intelligence community.[48] On the other hand, Fry and Hochstein use the idea of epistemic community to explain why intelligence studies scholars and international relations scholars engage so little with each other's work.[49] Arguing that the two scholar communities work with different scientific paradigms and methodologies, Fry and Hochstein conclude that they do not share the same values or goals. Further, Nicolae Sfetcu has written an unpublished study on epistemic intelligence communities with a focus on counterintelligence.[50] He argues that while on the one hand, counterintelligence is an intrinsic part of a wider intelligence agency, on the other hand, counterintelligence departments distinguish themselves from others through their primary engagement with the study of other intelligence services.[51] This particular focus creates a distinct counterintelligence epistemic community. Ultimately, intelligence practitioners, nationally and internationally, are part of expert networks with influence on policy making.[52] These communities have an authoritative claim on specific security related knowledge, not only because of their expertise but also because of their access to top secret information.

Across national boundaries, transnational networks of intelligence experts and specialists exist, such as counterterrorism experts and cyber specialists, with special knowledge and influence in policy making.[53] Because of the secrecy surrounding intelligence and its methods and sources, these professionals have unique access to information which forms the basis of their assumptions and

hypotheses.[54] Michael Herman, in his seminal 1996 book *Intelligence Power in Peace and War*, referred to such networks as transnational 'intelligence colleges'.[55] According to him, transnational cooperation produced considerable commonalities in intelligence practices.[56] These intelligence networks are nationally and internationally interconnected, share similar beliefs, have certain ways of validations, and in times of uncertainty, probably have influence on policy making. Here, the concept of epistemic communities delivers an overall theoretical approach that would allow us to investigate, for example, which values or principled beliefs cyber specialists working for intelligence agencies in Saudi Arabia share with cyber specialists in Switzerland. The concept of epistemic communities can draw attention to the influence of epistemic intelligence communities on decision makers. Also, the concept helps to understand how certain epistemic intelligence communities shape the procedures and mechanisms in the intelligence making processes. Lastly, the concept can elaborate how epistemic intelligence communities act in crisis situations and if the procedures in national or international communities look similar.

When it comes to intelligence cooperation, the epistemic communities' concept can firstly highlight that different agencies may use similar practices, methods and knowledge in their daily operations. This first insight is achieved by comparison of foreign agencies. If and when such similarities do exist, this points to the possibility of a transnational epistemic community existing among these agencies, or at least to the possibility that such a community could emerge. Most definitely, the concept explains why similar practices, methods and knowledge can smooth the way towards cooperation, even if the agencies pertain to highly different governments or are pursuing different strategic targets. A similar epistemic framework indeed may form the most basic requirement for cooperation, as without it, foreign intelligence officials would simply not comprehend each other's work enough to communicate.

Example analysis: using EPISTEMIC COMMUNITY to understand comparable security clearance practices in 1980s West Germany and Iraq

The epistemic community concept helps to understand the effect of comparable West German and Iraqi intelligence' security clearances and hiring practices. The similarity of these practices between two otherwise very different intelligence actors partially explains why communication and cooperation between them flowed with relative ease since the late 1970s.[57]

Hiring trustworthy personnel poses a problem for intelligence agencies everywhere. During the 1970s, the *Bundesnachrichtendienst* (BND) as well as the Iraqi *Mukhabarat* developed special requirements and procedures for the recruitment of new personnel. The agencies developed standardised, professional hiring and clearance practices, together with expert-staff to carry them out. The epistemic community concept allows us to have a closer examination of these professionals dealing primarily with security clearances in Germany and Iraq, and to highlight their similarities. A 1960 West German government document explains the process of carrying out security clearances for new government and security employees:

> In this process, information is requested from those departments in whose district the employee has had his place of residence or abode within the last ten years [. . .] Security investigations are active inquiries about the employee [. . .] by means of oral questioning of persons providing information about the background and personal circumstances of the person concerned.[58]

A comparable, 1987 document about Iraqi governmental security screening states the following:

> In the case of activities involving the handling of confidential documents, more extensive security checks are carried out, such as the questioning of reference persons as well as covert or also overt investigations, questioning of neighbours and officials in the residential area.[59]

Obtaining clearances formed part of a bundle of activities, via which both Iraqi and German intelligence sought to hire trustworthy personnel. In both cases, these also included relying on

social and family networks to hire new personnel.[60] According to a 1974 article by the leading West-German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, a top-secret government document stated that the BND employed 16 relatives of Reinhard Gehlen, the BND's first president. In a parliamentary enquiry, Herbert Rieck, the BND's then chief-of-staff, reported about 130 cases, in which two or more close relatives worked for the BND. Within Iraqi intelligence, Ibrahim Al-Marashi's writings inform that between the late 1970s and 2003, social and family ties played a key role for the recruitment of senior Iraqi intelligence personnel, most of whom were relatives of Iraq's president Saddam Hussein, i.e., members of his al-Bu Nasser tribe, or came from the towns of Tikrit, Dur, Sharqat, Huwayja, Bayji, Samarra and Ramadi. Others employed in the intelligence services were the Dulaym, the Jubur, the 'Ubayd tribe, the Duri, and Samarrai families.[61] How does this example interact with the epistemic community concept?

Firstly, the example highlights mechanisms via which individuals become part of the epistemic intelligence community through the screening process itself. The screening process in West Germany and Iraq is the gateway for accessing top-secret information and becoming a member of the wider epistemic intelligence community. However, the example shows that to become a member of the intelligence community there was not only a bureaucratic abstract background check, but also the common belief that it was of benefit to have a particular social affiliation with the intelligence agency. The West German foreign intelligence agency as well as the Iraqi services preferred applicants with social and ethnic relations to already employed intelligence personnel. This in particular shows that intelligence officers believed that the commitment to shared beliefs (including the oath for secrecy) would be stronger with applicants who were already part of the social or ethnic environment of an intelligence officer.

Secondly, the example highlights aspects of the community of security personnel conducting the background checks. The security clearance reviewers could access the most personal information of the most secret personalities of West Germany and Iraq. Security reviewers in Germany and in Iraq used the same methods and ways of validation. The reviewers in both countries had access to specific knowledge and also shared similar understandings of screening personnel for the effectiveness of secrecy in their intelligence service. The access to personal information on intelligence officers distinguishes security reviewers from the more general personnel. It creates a more specific subgroup of an epistemic intelligence community of security reviewers which has a decisive influence on hiring practices and, thus, indirectly shapes policy outcomes. The concept shows how specific knowledge experts irrespective of the political system share the same assumptions and understandings on how to conduct their profession as other experts from both allies and adversaries do.

Especially when it comes to authoritarian or totalitarian regimes it is often assumed that their hiring practices are at the opposite ends of a spectrum: while in authoritarian settings, intelligence personnel are assumed to be hired due to their personal connections and ideological views, the recruitment in democracies is portrayed to be based on rational, administrative processes. However, the above comparison of the vetting process in West-Germany and Iraq shows us that in both political systems, recruitment occurred on the basis of a similar understanding of what made candidates suitable. We see that shared knowledge about the vetting process is linked to shared values and beliefs in both countries' intelligence services. A comparative analysis of the vetting process therefore allows us a better understanding of why and how international cooperation was made possible between West Germany and Iraq, through depicting a shared epistemology between their recruiters.

Field theory

Secondly, we put forward the idea of a (transnational) field of intelligence.[62] The key scholar associated with field theory is the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who first developed the concept. A field is a relatively autonomous social arena structured by the relations and social

positions of individuals or institutions struggling over access to specific resources.[63] Each field follows a different logic according to the 'stakes which are at stake'. Prominent examples of what may be at stake include power, housing, social class, art, or education. In any given field, actors do not only struggle over power relations, but also about the core resource ('capital') at stake within a field: 'The existence of a field *presupposes* and, in its functioning, *creates* a belief on the part of the participants in the legitimacy and value of the capital, which is at stake in the field'.[64] The boundaries of fields are themselves subject to internal struggle; thus, they are shifting and vague.

Actors within a field behave according to a shared body of categories and behavioural patterns which are a product of collective history, a set of dispositions which forms the so-called 'habitus'.[65] Actors have internalized the habitus through experiences as well as learned rules and principles. Habituation and routine constitute the power of the habitus. The habitus produces practices, but it does not exist in a void and simply determines behaviour. Instead, the habitus lives through the very practices and interactions of the actors in a field. Habitus changes according to circumstances, expectations, and aspirations that the field and its actors are subjected to. Bourdieu employs the notion of habitus to overcome the explanatory dilemma that practices are situated in structural circumstances and simultaneously confront and shape them (structure vs. agency).[66] While Bourdieu focused mainly on national fields that interact with each other, the question of fields beyond the national has attracted much attention. A recent edited volume[67] is devoted to this question and examines the implications of transnationalization for field theory. Several theoretical reflections and some examples are featured in the volume, including on security, education, and European policy.

Field theory has only rarely been applied by intelligence scholars, and Bourdieu himself did not touch upon the issue of intelligence. Important examples of intelligence writing which applies field theory are the works of Didier Bigo, Ronja Kniep and Hager Ben Jaffel.[68] These scholars have lifted field theory to the transnational level to grasp intelligence agencies' and communities' international exchanges of secrets and sensitive knowledge. Bigo argues for analysing transversal practices of security and intelligence professionals in national and transnational settings to understand actors who play 'multiple games simultaneously'.[69] For Bigo, a 'transnational professional guild of security experts' has emerged in Europe (including police, intelligence officials and others) whose solidarity does not lie with the nation state, but with other members of the guild.[70] A certain habitus linked to the field of security determines and is shaped by the practices of the agents in the field.[71] He further argues that the character and perception of national security has changed over time and has led to the creation of a transversal field of national intelligence services.[72] The paradox of the need to cooperate globally and yet to pursue national interests through competition has been captured by the term 'coopetition' which in some cases has led to even better cooperation abroad than domestically.[73] Kniep talks more specifically about transnational fields related to two signals intelligence alliances: the Five Eyes and the Sigint Seniors Europe.[74] Kniep argues that field theory uncovers internal struggles, bureaucratic infighting and internal contestation among the transnational SIGINT community.[75] She argues signals intelligence has developed as its own transnational professional field and that a new elite has been formed.[76] Initial factors driving and shaping the field of SIGINT cooperation in Europe have been the focus on war-time intelligence sharing in WWII (Five Eyes), gathering information about the Soviet Union's military capabilities during the Cold War (SIGINT Seniors Europe) and later counterterrorism efforts which led to the formation of SIGINT Seniors Pacific in 2005. Not only confidential information and intercepted communications were exchanged but also knowledge on surveillance technologies. Ben Jaffel uses field theory to analyse British-European anti-terrorism intelligence (and police) cooperation. She argues that the joint goal of combating terrorism has bound Britain and Europe together – and continues to do so despite Brexit. Her concept of a transnational field of intelligence cooperation focuses on the human, practical and relational dimensions and argues against rational choice, institutionalist or functionalist approaches. Ben Jaffel looks at daily routines and social relationships of intelligence officials in this 'transnational game in which social actors play in, and navigate between, the British scale and the

European scale'.[77] These approaches have established the merit of a field and practice theoretical perspective to intelligence relations.

Field theory thus guides intelligence scholars towards researching concrete practices and behaviours that elucidate social relations among intelligence actors, and towards analysing their power structure. Examples may be interviews, memoirs, biographies or archival material that describe interactions and behavioural patterns – the habitus – during meetings and delegation visits, and that captures everyday practices such as recording, filing and processing information. It leads us to ask, among others, what practices characterise intelligence professionals, and how they acquire them. A field approach investigates the similarities between intelligence officials in terms of their everyday routines and whether different intelligence actors share norms and beliefs. The role that personal relations and practices play for inter-agency interaction moves to the forefront. Finally, it also pays attention to the struggles that exist within the field and does not discard them as problems. Instead, it highlights the meaningful competition among professionals for political influence, autonomy, resources, and access to information. Kniep points out that this perspective neither demonises nor heroises intelligence agencies and does not present them as a homogenous actor or as an alliance. Instead, it allows us to pay attention to, for example, bureaucratic infighting among intelligence practitioners and comprehend it as an important feature of the field itself.[78] Further, it offers a more inclusive approach to intelligence by incorporating actors not commonly viewed as intelligence actors, but which effectively conduct similar work or work closely associated with intelligence, such as the police,[79] the military or private, commercial actors.

Empirical analysis: using FIELD THEORY to understand quotidian interactions between the East German HVA, the Syrian political police and the Russian KGB

While formal cooperation agreements are a rare archival discovery, many documents contain 'nitty-gritty' details of quotidian interactions among intelligence professionals. For instance, there is a 1966 letter from Markus Wolf, then head of East German foreign intelligence department HVA, to his boss, Minister of State Security Erich Mielke. In this letter, Wolf sought instructions on how to proceed with regards to a Syrian request to build a direct channel between their political police and the Ministry for State Security (MfS).[80] The Syrian political police is formally subordinate to the Interior Ministry, but effectively conducts intelligence work, such as telecommunications surveillance, and was thus interested in exchanges with the MfS. The letter from 1966 probably captures the first step toward the build-up of Syrian-East German intelligence relations. As the information derived from archival research is fragmented and limited, we cannot know whether there were earlier points of contact between the Syrian and East German intelligence. In typically bureaucratic language, Wolf suggested

> [. . .] to instruct the GDR's consul general to the Syrian Arab Republic to inform the Syrian side, with reference to the talks with the delegation of the Ministry of Interior, that the MfS is willing to hold talks with regard to the request.[81]

Wolf added that, before committing to an exchange, the MfS should firstly investigate the Syrians' intentions and expectations in an exploratory meeting, and, in three lines of neat handwriting, emphasized that advice should be sought from the MfS' Soviet 'friends' on whether they already collaborated with the Syrians and how they assessed the interactions' results.

Employing a *field theoretical approach* to Markus Wolf's letter, practices of the intelligence personnel and struggles over the capital at stake come clearer to the forefront. The document, despite its brevity, contains important details about and around the request of the 'Syrian side' to build relations with the MfS regarding police training and about the MfS-KGB relations. The main capital or 'currency' of the intelligence field that actors, as illustrated in the document, consider worth playing for is intelligence-knowledge. It shows that intelligence actors compete *and* cooperate to access and accumulate the field's currency. Thus, 'coopetition' is a defining feature of

transnational intelligence fields. On the one hand, practices of knowledge exchange constitute the core business of intelligence agencies as they seek intelligence from other services to gather information about each other. Therefore, Wolf suggests inquiring with Soviet agencies about the Syrian approach of the East German delegation. He tries to address a knowledge gap within his own agency by cooperating with the KGB which was the MfS' powerful and knowledgeable 'big brother'.[82] The MfS, similar to other intelligence agencies of the Eastern Bloc, was not a fully autonomous intelligence service, but remained under supervision and guidance of the KGB. On the other hand, intelligence agencies compete over a head start in knowledge and are concerned that access to secret and sensitive information remains restricted. Thus, actors struggle to know as much as possible and to give away as little information as needed. Competition over knowledge advantages also exists inside intelligence services. For example, Wolf does not reveal much about the Syrian request to Mielke in his brief letter that does not even include greetings, while he is willing to inquire with foreign agencies to gather more relevant capital. The document shows that the struggle for intelligence-knowledge is present both *within* an agency, i.e., between Wolf representing foreign and Mielke representing domestic intelligence, and *among* different services, i.e., between the MfS and the KGB. Varying access to intelligence-knowledge produces power relations, and while the document is informative of internal *formal hierarchies* between Mielke and Wolf, it also demonstrates that de facto power relations can shift and are in fact linked to the possession of more of the relevant capital. In this case, Wolf as the head of foreign intelligence informs his superior Mielke of the Syrian approach and the next steps towards establishing relations, but Wolf as head of relatively autonomous foreign intelligence has the capacity to limit Mielke's knowledge.

This example, as well as the below-mentioned MfS-KfS agreement, offers insights on shared behavioural patterns within the intelligence field, but also about the durability of the field as such. On the one hand, the desire to know the 'full picture' and to know as much as possible about the (potential) partners and, on the other hand, secrecy and the fear of leaked information, which led to the 'third party' rule, constitute the intelligence habitus which is shared among intelligence officials of very diverse backgrounds such as East Germany, the Soviet Union and Syria. This habitus is internalized by the actors in the field and comes to life through the practices examined here. The practices do not exist in a vacuum, but are manifested through personal interactions competing for the capital at stake, here secret knowledge.

Knowledge circulation

Yet another sociological approach suited to study intelligence exchanges is knowledge circulation, as Sophia Hoffmann already argued in this journal.[83] Drawing on historian of science James Secord[84] and knowledge circulation theorists Nicolas Guilhot and Wiebke Keim,[85] Hoffmann points to several fruitful aspects which the knowledge circulation concept emphasises, such as various modes of circulation (reception, exchange, negotiation), different levels of analysis (state, institution, individual) and the materiality of international intelligence relations.[86]

The concept contains several key assumptions about knowledge. Firstly, knowledge does not develop within 'exclusive settings', but emerges from (virtual or actual) 'laboratories', whose technologies, discourses and practices themselves developed elsewhere, perhaps even with a different intended purpose.[87] Even specific knowledge, thus, does not spring from an identifiable origin or source, but must be understood as the result of cultural and social processes, embedded in power relations. These may 'crystallise' into specific moments and settings in which new knowledge is written down or captured otherwise but must be considered when analysing epistemological innovation. Knowledge is extremely difficult to contain, as it 'generally moves across geographical and cultural boundaries and transcends social and institutional barriers'.[88] Yet, as intelligence scholars are very aware, this does not mean that all knowledge is always available to everyone; to write a 'politically-aware' history of knowledge means to analyse the connection between power relations and access to knowledge, and to understand that barriers around knowledge may come in many forms. State

secrecy procedures may be an obvious version, but knowledge may also fail to spread because it is rejected as false or because it is spread via a medium or channel without sufficient traction.

Knowledge is, of course, the key currency in the world of intelligence, and transmitting knowledge one of its central activities. The epistemological status of intelligence has come under scrutiny, but recent scholarship concurs that information produced by intelligence agencies is just as much shaped by historical, political and cultural contexts as that produced by other actors, and should thus firmly be understood as knowledge, rather than objective truth.[89] Because the creation and communication of knowledge is such a fundamental aspect of the intelligence process, knowledge circulation is an apt framework for its analysis.

Intelligence scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on one specific type of knowledge: that of secret information, created via agencies' collection abilities; and questions of how, where and when agencies collect this secret information dominate intelligence studies. What has been largely ignored, but what knowledge circulation theory draws attention to, is the vast body of institutional and operational knowledge that agencies produce and rest on, which shapes the basis of their work, and which is as much transnationally transmitted between agencies as the results of collection. Specifically, what is meant here is knowledge such as tradecraft, technological innovation, threat and risk assessment procedures, organizational and bureaucratic procedures, standards of secrecy and professionalism and so forth. The knowledge circulation concept raises questions about the processes that set intelligence-knowledge in motion (or not), and about the material and discursive conditions that enable or disable the transmission of knowledge. Practices of secrecy, which allied intelligence agencies may share, play a special role for the movement of intelligence-knowledge.

For intelligence studies this approach can bring to the fore the role that transnationally constituted intelligence-knowledge plays for the work of national agencies, and thus, relatedly, for international affairs, on which these national agencies impinge. Proceeding from the hypothesis that intelligence agencies operate from a basis of transnationally constituted knowledge, rather than conceptualizing them as mutually suspicious, nationally bounded actors, allows intelligence scholarship to re-focus on the vast, historical material documenting events, people, practices, and artifacts via which knowledge travels between agencies. Crucially, knowledge circulation does not mean that a focus on strategic interests must fall by the wayside. However, it becomes a question for research, what circulating knowledge constituted strategic interests of agencies in the first place. Was it a briefing from the executive? Or was it a piece of information obtained from an allied (or hostile) intelligence agency abroad? Knowledge circulation allows for a thorough investigation of whether and how intelligence agencies' interests, and ideas about national security and threats to it, emerge in concert with other, foreign intelligence agencies, rather than in a strictly national arena. Further, it may alert decision-makers that intelligence does not emerge in a vacuum, but from a contingent knowledge-base upon which a transnational college of intelligence has influence.

Empirical analysis: using KNOWLEDGE CIRCULATION to understand formal intelligence arrangements between the East German MfS and the South Yemeni KfS

The archives of the East German MfS include the rare example of a detailed, formalised intelligence cooperation treaty between the MfS and the Komitee for Security (KfS) of the People's Republic of South Yemen.[90] This treaty, which was first struck in 1970 and then regularly renewed and adapted, includes what intelligence scholars might recognise as 'standard' elements of such agreements: the 'third party' rule, which determines that shared intelligence may not be shown to third parties without consent; guaranteed diplomatic status for each other's delegates, and assurances about secrecy measures. The treaty firstly focuses on information exchange and mutual operative support, and secondly on what may be termed 'development aid' for the South Yemeni KfS. Here, the treaty promises intelligence training and technical support, but also graduate studies, paid-for holidays, and medical treatment in the GDR for KfS members.

The treaty's preamble describes its basis as

> [. . .] the brotherly relations, close cooperation and full concordance of both sides regarding the fight against imperialism and reactionary forces, their henchmen, and against imperialist secret services and other subversive powers . . . .and the understanding, that cooperation between the security organs of both sides will improve and make more effective their fight against a mutual enemy and the security of their states.[91]

The treaty, which stipulates regular visits and delegation exchanges, presents the *formal framework* of an intelligence partnership and gives an idea of how often, and via what kinds of social, economic and political interactions intelligence-knowledge moved between the two agencies. It provides no detailed information on how these interactions were carried out in practice, e.g., no information about the rank or institutional position of the interacting officials, about the precise information and operations shared and nothing on the precise technology used in the process.

From the *perspective of knowledge circulation*, it is especially the concept's emphasis on the *material embeddedness* of knowledge that delivers an additional perspective on the MfS-KfS treaty. The first part of the treaty emphasizes the two agencies' shared epistemic framework. Knowledge circulation on the other hand, draws attention to the *second* part of the treaty, which discusses financial, technological, and educational exchange, the exchange of delegates and advisors. These material elements played a role in how effectively or not knowledge transmission functioned between the two agencies. For example, while the treaty creates the impression that East Germany is the dominant, wealthy and generous partner in this arrangement, there is ample archival evidence of foreign partner's complaints about the low standard of East German technology and the tensions that these complaints created within the relationship. On the other hand, MfS advisors to South Yemen intelligence frequently complained about their Yemeni colleagues' lack of training and expertise, and voiced their impression that expensive technology was wasted on them.[92] While the treaty therefore creates the impression of smooth intelligence cooperation and flowing knowledge, a closer look at the material conditions via which these transfers occurred, shows a much bumpier and conflictual process. Here, knowledge circulation firstly retrains the academic gaze away from the 'high politics' of intelligence cooperation and towards the 'low politics' of day-to-day life in an intelligence agency. Secondly, it alerts intelligence scholars to the broader conditions of foreign relations into which intelligence cooperation is embedded, in this case economic and trade relations. While the MfS' strong intelligence expertise made it a sought-after partner in the transnational world of intelligence, and promoted the diffusion of MfS knowledge, the GDR's technological and economic weaknesses created structural, material problems for the MfS' international partnerships. Particularly in the Arab world, nearly all republics eventually turned westwards, including with regards to intelligence cooperation, due to the limited potential for economic and technological development that East Germany offered. In addition to the material embeddedness of intelligence-knowledge relations, knowledge circulation further allows for a more precise definition of the level of analysis, in which intelligence scholarship unfolds and broadens the understanding of the kind of knowledge, which travels between agencies.

Conclusion

Sociological analyses of intelligence show that intelligence activity does not just develop in reaction to external, strategic challenges and threat perceptions. Instead, internally produced knowledge, bureaucratic procedures, and material structures shape intelligence work, which emerges as a deeply social activity, embedded within both national and transnational relationships. Of course, the understanding of strategic aim, national security and threats shape this activity, but crucially, this understanding is itself a product of social relations and knowledge circulation. To better understand the determinants of intelligence, its successes and failures, scholars may usefully turn to sociological concepts.

In this paper, we firstly discussed how intelligence scholars have applied sociological methodologies to date. Since 2019 a growing field of sociologically inspired intelligence

scholarship is emerging, which may even constitute a new school of thinking within intelligence studies. Contributing to this development, and with an aim to systematise it, in this article we compared three central sociological concepts with regards to their merit for intelligence studies in general, and intelligence relations in particular, as well as for our empirical material: 1) the concept of epistemic communities; 2) field theory; and 3) the concept of knowledge circulation. We applied the concepts to three diverse examples from our research on German-Arab intelligence relations during the Cold War, showing how each concept delivers analytical merits.

Our comparison found that all three concepts have the merit of drawing intelligence scholarship away from its existing focus on rational decision-making, strategic advantage, functionalism and methodological nationalism. Instead, they draw attention to the 'everyday life' of intelligence work and intelligence relations. Each of the three concepts focuses on a different aspect of the internal bureaucratic and social processes as well as the transnational intelligence relations.

The concept of epistemic communities foregrounds the significance of shared beliefs, values and principles for intelligence work in an international interrelated knowledge system. Field theory reveals social relations of intelligence professionals, including infighting, struggles and competition, as meaningful social practices for domestic intelligence institutions and transnational relations. Knowledge circulation puts emphasis on the materiality of the relations and modes of knowledge transmission. While the three approaches have clearly distinct foci, they all speak to and complement each other.

The joint central concern is with (secret) knowledge. Therefore, a broad understanding of knowledge as constructed, intersubjective and relational is indispensable and underlies this article. Epistemic intelligence communities are built upon certain shared knowledge (worldviews, principles, threat perceptions, problem definitions etc.) and function as channels through which knowledge flows transnationally to other epistemic intelligence communities. Field theory understands secret knowledge even as 'currency' (field-specific capital) of a (transnational) intelligence field, the possession of which determines the position takings of intelligence professionals in a field in relation to each other, i.e., how powerful they are. The concept of knowledge circulation agrees with the field theoretical prominence of knowledge and centres the way secret intelligence-knowledge moves within and between different intelligence agencies. By using sociological concepts, it becomes clear that sharing (secret and special) knowledge is a key intelligence activity of intelligence services in different political and cultural contexts.

A better understanding of all these matters, we argue, may provide explanations to open questions such as why intelligence work prioritises certain threats over others, how intelligence work interacts with policy making and society more widely, or why intelligence work remains static or changes in response to its internal or external environment. Each of the concepts, by itself and together, illuminates some aspects of the complex role of intelligence services and the people working there for world politics.

Notes

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3. Didier Bigo, "Shared Secrecy in a Digital Age and a Transnational World," *Intelligence and National Security* 34, no. 3 (2019); Hager Ben Jaffel, "Britain's European Connection in Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Cooperation: Everyday Practices of Police Liaison Officers," *Intelligence and National Security* 35, no. 7 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2020.1778857; Hager Ben Jaffel, Alvina Hoffmann, Oliver Kearns, and Sebastian Larsson,

"Collective Discussion: Toward Critical Approaches to Intelligence as a Social Phenomenon," *International political sociology* 14, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olaa015; and Ronja Kniep, "From the 'Five Eyes' to the 'Sigint Seniors Europe': The Intelligence Community as a Transnational Field," *Selected Papers of AoIR*, 2016.

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18. ibid., 250.
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29. Cristina Ivan, Irena Chiru, and Rubén Arcos, "A Whole of Society Intelligence Approach."
30. Pepijn Tuinier, "Explaining the Depth and Breadth of International Intelligence Cooperation"; Damien Van Puyvelde, "European Intelligence Agendas and the Way Forward," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 33, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1080/08850607.2020.1754666; Ben Jaffel, "Britain's European Connection in Counter-Terrorism Intelligence Cooperation"; Aviva Guttmann, "Combatting Terror in Europe: Euro-Israeli Counterterrorism Intelligence Cooperation in the Club De Berne (1971–1972)," *Intelligence and National Security* 33, no. 2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1080/02684527.2017.1324591; and Didier Bigo, "Sociology of Transnational Guilds," *International political sociology* 10, no. 4 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olw022; Didier Bigo, "Shared Secrecy in a Digital Age and a Transnational World;" Ronja Kniep, "'Herren Der Information': Die transnationale Autonomie digitaler Überwachung," *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft*, (2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/s41358-021-00286-z.
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40. Haas, "Introduction," 19.
41. Ibid., 16, 18.
42. Ibid., 21–23.
43. Ibid., 27.
44. Ibid., 3.
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49. Michael G. Fry and Miles Hochstein, "Epistemic Communities."
50. Nicolae Sfetcu, "Epistemic Intelligence Communities. Counterintelligence" (2019).
51. Sfetcu, "Epistemic Intelligence Communities. Counterintelligence."
52. Michael Herman, "Diplomacy and Intelligence," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 9, no. 2 (1998), https://doi.org/10.1080/09592299808406081; and Arash H. Pashakhanlou, "Intelligence and Diplomacy in the Security Dilemma: Gauging Capabilities and Intentions," *International Politics* 55, no. 5 (2018): 521–22, https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-017-0119-8.
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55. Michael Herman, *Intelligence Power in Peace and War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 200–203.
56. ibid., 5.
57. Despite the frequently encountered assumption that East Germany was an important intelligence partner for Iraq, archival evidence clearly shows that East Germany's foreign intelligence repeatedly rejected intelligence cooperation with Iraq (Hoffmann, 2022; Sassoon, 2014; Sittmann, 2018; Trentin, 2008).
58. Bundestagsdrucksache 7/3246: 10. Originaltext: "Dabei werden diejenigen Dienststellen um Auskunft gebeten, in deren Bezirk der Bedienstete innerhalb der letzten zehn Jahre seinen Wohn- oder Aufenthaltsort hatte (. . .) Sicherheitsermittlungen sind aktive Nachforschungen über den Bediensteten (. . .) durch *grundsätzlich mündliches Befragen von Auskunftspersonen über das Vorleben und die persönlichen Verhältnisse des Betroffenen*."
59. BArch, MfS, HA I 13758, p.87. Originaltext: "Bei Tätigkeiten, die mit dem Umgang von vertraulichen Unterlagen verbunden sind, erfolgen weitergehende Sicherheitsüberprüfungen wie die Befragung von Referenzpersonen sowie verdeckte oder auch offene Ermittlungen, Befragung von Nachbarn und Funktionären im Wohngebiet."
60. Gerhard Sälter, "Kameraden. Nazi-Netzwerke und die Rekrutierung hauptamtlicher Mitarbeiter," in *Die Geschichte Der Organisation Gehlen Und Des BND 1945–1968: Umrisse Und Einblicke: Dokumentation Der Tagung Am 2. Dezember 2013*, ed. Jost Düffler, Klaus-Dietmar Henke, Wolfgang Krieger, and Rolf-Dieter Müller (UHK Studien Nr. 2, 2013): 40–52; and Ibrahim Al-Marashi, "The Family, Clan, and Tribal Dynamics of Saddam's Security and Intelligence Network," *International Journal of Intelligence and CounterIntelligence* 16, no. 2 (2003), https://doi.org/10.1080/08850600390198724.
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64. Jenkins, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 85.
65. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge studies in social and cultural anthropology 16 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2010), 78–85.
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70. Bigo, "Security"; and Bigo, "Sociology of Transnational Guilds."
71. Bigo, "Security," 124.
72. Christian Schmidt-Wellenburg and Stefan Bernhard, "How to Chart Transnational Fields: Introduction to a Methodology for a Political Sociology of Knowledge," in *Charting Transnational Fields*, ed. Christian Schmidt-Wellenburg and Stefan Bernhard (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020): 20.
73. Bigo, "Adjusting a Bourdieusian approach to the study of transnational fields," 65–67.
74. Kniep, "From the 'Five Eyes' to the 'Sigint Seniors Europe'"; and Kniep, "Herren der Information."
75. Kniep, "From the 'Five Eyes' to the 'Sigint Seniors Europe'" 3–4.
76. Kniep, "Eine nicht mehr ganz so geheime Welt," 23–24.
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