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Re-founding Psychology as Epistemic Psychology

The Science of Autonomy and Dependence under Epistemic Conditions

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Abstract

This paper advances a re-founding of psychology as epistemic psychology: the science of human autonomy and dependence under epistemic conditions. Building on earlier work, I argue that psychology has misclassified its own most robust findings. Cognitive dissonance, conformity, and obedience have been treated as anomalies—biases, irrationalities, or pathologies—because the discipline has assumed autonomy as normative and dependence as deviation. Reinterpreted, they are revealed as structural: dissonance as the affective disclosure of finitude, conformity as the exchange of autonomy for recognition, and obedience as authority redefining dissent as disobedience.

On this basis, the paper develops epistemic psychology as both diagnostic and normative. Diagnostic: it provides a three-level model (micro, meso, macro) linking neural dissonance, collective recognition, and institutional architectures of authority. Normative: it advances the concept of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds, frameworks that transform dependence from clientelist erosion into dignity. The research programme includes reinterpretation of classic experiments, new paradigms to measure epistemic exchanges, comparative cross-cultural studies, clinical applications in psychiatry, and multi-level integration of neuroscience, behavioural studies, and institutional analysis.

The claim is decisive: psychology must move from pathology to ontology, and from description to prescription. Epistemic psychology is both science and ethic, offering a discipline adequate to an age of disinformation, authoritarianism, institutional capture, and psychiatric injustice—an age in which not only the conditions of knowing, but also the conditions of care, must themselves be safeguarded.

Keywords

cognitive dissonance, epistemic clientelism, epistemic psychology, autonomy, dependence, recognition, authority, fiduciary scaffolds, epistemic justice, conformity, obedience, psychiatry, institutional architectures, disinformation

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Preface – Toward a Revolution in Psychology

This paper proposes nothing less than a re-founding of psychology. For more than half a century, the discipline has treated its strongest findings—cognitive dissonance, conformity, and obedience—as anomalies. Festinger framed dissonance as irrationality, Asch cast conformity as perceptual error, Milgram presented obedience as tragic compliance. Across these accounts, dependence was misclassified as deviation and autonomy as baseline, leaving psychology with an epistemically thin anthropology.

The evidence points elsewhere. Dissonance is not noise but the affective disclosure of finitude. Conformity and obedience are not lapses but the ordinary currencies of epistemic exchange. Institutions are not backdrops but constitutive architectures that organise recognition and authority at scale. What psychology has dismissed as error is, in fact, the grammar of epistemic life.

This paper advances *epistemic psychology*: the science of autonomy and dependence under epistemic conditions. It integrates micro-level dissonance, meso-level clientelism, and macro-level authority into a single framework. It shows that autonomy and dependence are co-constitutive, that finitude is structural, and that recognition and authority are the central currencies of cognition.

The claim is stark. Psychology can no longer define itself as the science of behaviour alone. To do justice to its own evidence, it must become the science of epistemic life. This is not an adjustment but a disciplinary revolution.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem Framing

Psychology has long defined itself as the science of cognition, behaviour, and affect. From its inception, however, this science has been tacitly underwritten by an anthropology that privileges the individual as autonomous and rational. The human subject is assumed to be fundamentally self-directing, while the influence of others is cast as an external disturbance to an otherwise independent system of cognition.

Within this frame, dependence, conformity, and submission have typically been treated as distortions or failures. They appear in the literature as biases to be corrected, pathologies to be explained, or irrationalities to be lamented. Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957) presented dissonance as an aversive drive toward internal consistency, implicitly marking inconsistency as error. Solomon Asch's (1951) conformity experiments have been interpreted as evidence of irrational submission to majority opinion, while Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority (1974) is remembered as a tragic demonstration of compliance against conscience. In political psychology, similar assumptions recur: Feldman (2003) theorises authoritarian dispositions as amplified conformity, and Stenner (2005) treats authoritarianism as the product of psychological intolerance of difference. In each case, the same evaluative pattern recurs—autonomy is normative, dependence is deviant.

The difficulty with this framing is that it marginalises precisely the phenomena most robustly observed. Evidence from developmental and comparative psychology shows that dissonance reduction arises in children and nonhuman primates alike (Egan, Santos & Bloom 2007), suggesting it is not a cultural accident but an evolutionary constant. Neuroscience demonstrates that conformity penetrates perceptual processing itself (Berns et al. 2005; Klucharev et al. 2009). To continue to categorise these phenomena as anomalies is to misdescribe the ordinary architecture of cognition. Worse, it risks what Fricker (2007) calls testimonial injustice: a systematic devaluation of epistemic experiences that do not align with the model of the autonomous rational agent.

The anthropology implicit in much of psychology is therefore epistemically thin. It presupposes autonomy as the natural baseline of human agency and relegates dependence to the status of error. Yet it is precisely in dependence—conformity, obedience, dissonance reduction—that the structures of human cognition reveal themselves most clearly.

1.2 Observation

If psychology has too often cast conformity and dissonance as deviations from rational autonomy, the evidence itself points the other way. Social psychology, neuroscience, and comparative research consistently show that these dynamics are not aberrant but ordinary—indeed, structural features of human cognition.

In Solomon Asch's classic experiments (1951), the striking point is not that a minority resisted group pressure, but that most participants conformed, even when it meant denying clear sensory evidence. The lesson, though often framed as a tale of irrational submission, is more radical: conformity is the ordinary condition of human perception and judgment. Political psychology has long confirmed this point. Feldman (2003) interprets authoritarian dispositions as extensions of the same conformist impulse, and Stenner (2005) shows how

authoritarianism thrives not at the margins of cognition but as an amplified version of everyday dependence on collective authority.

Neuroscience reinforces this interpretation. Berns et al. (2005) demonstrated that social conformity alters not only reported opinions but also neural activity in brain regions responsible for visual perception. Klucharev et al. (2009) showed that reinforcement-learning signals register divergence from group consensus, effectively retraining perception itself to align with collective judgment. Conformity, then, penetrates the mechanisms of perception: it is not merely a behavioural choice but a structural property of cognition.

Comparative psychology confirms the evolutionary depth of this pattern. Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007) found that preschool children and capuchin monkeys alike engaged in dissonance-reduction, devaluing unchosen options after decision-making. This suggests that the tendency is neither pathological nor culturally contingent but a developmentally early and phylogenetically ancient feature of agency.

Far from being residual noise in the cognitive system, these dynamics disclose what Schopenhauer (1818/1969) described as the entanglement of will and representation, and what Heidegger (1962) analysed as the finitude of *Dasein*: the human agent is never fully autonomous but always conditioned by dependence. To classify conformity or dissonance as anomalies is therefore to enact what Fricker (2007) calls testimonial injustice, misrecognising the epistemic significance of dependence. As Medina (2013) argues, such dependence is not only inevitable but also potentially productive, enabling forms of resistance and plurality.

The empirical record thus undermines the assumption that autonomy is the natural baseline and dependence the deviation. Conformity and dissonance are structural features of cognition, not exceptions to it. To persist in treating them as anomalies is to miscategorise psychology's most powerful discoveries—and it is this misclassification that calls for a redefined discipline: *epistemic psychology*.

1.3 Claim

If conformity and dissonance are structural rather than anomalous, psychology requires a different conceptual foundation. The empirical record is unequivocal: most subjects in Asch's (1951) studies conformed, Milgram (1974) showed obedience against conscience, Berns et al. (2005) and Klucharev et al. (2009) demonstrated that conformity penetrates perceptual processing, and Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007) revealed that dissonance-reduction is present in both children and primates. These findings converge on a single point: autonomy is not the natural baseline, but dependence is.

My own work reinterprets these dynamics. *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a) argues that dissonance is not a cognitive flaw but an epistemic event—the affective disclosure of finitude, solitude, and bounded freedom. Each act of knowing forecloses alternatives; unease arises not accidentally but as the body's registration of epistemic limits. This micro-foundation explains why contradiction is experienced as urgent and why collapse into conformity is the ordinary reflex.

In parallel, *Epistemic Clientelism Theory* (Kahl 2025b) describes how that unease is negotiated socially: autonomy is traded for recognition, belonging, or protection. Conformity and obedience are thus not aberrations but exchanges structured by authority. Dependence is not incidental but the grammar of epistemic life. The anxiety disclosed in dissonance motivates the very clientelist transactions that stabilise social order.

Taken together, these insights imply a new disciplinary orientation. If dissonance is the experiential signal of epistemic finitude, and clientelism the social form of responding to that finitude, then psychology's subject

matter must be reframed. As Heidegger (1962) argued, finitude is not an accident but the ground of existence; and as Fricker (2007) showed, failure to recognise dependence as epistemic leads to systematic injustice. Epistemic psychology begins from the recognition that autonomy and dependence are co-constitutive.

The core claim of this paper is therefore simple but radical: psychology must be redefined as the science of epistemic exchanges, tracing how human beings navigate recognition, authority, and belonging under conditions of bounded freedom.

1.4 Method

The argument advanced here is not a contribution to empirical psychology in the narrow sense but a conceptual and normative re-framing. What I call epistemic psychology cannot be captured by experiments alone, because the phenomena in question—conformity, obedience, dissonance, and clientelism—operate simultaneously at the levels of perception, affect, social exchange, and institutional design. A purely empirical programme risks reproducing the very misclassification I have critiqued. What is needed is an interdisciplinary synthesis capable of tracing epistemic life across its scales.

The first resource is psychology itself. Festinger's (1957) account of dissonance, Asch's (1951) conformity experiments, and Milgram's (1974) obedience studies remain indispensable, while Feldman's (2003) and Stenner's (2005) analyses of authoritarianism extend these insights to political predispositions. These works reveal the ordinary pervasiveness of dependence, even if they miscast it as pathology.

Second, neuroscience demonstrates the depth of the phenomenon. Berns et al. (2005) and Klucharev et al. (2009) show that conformity penetrates perceptual processing, altering neural pathways of visual judgment and reward prediction. These findings underscore that dependence is not merely social pressure but cognitive architecture.

Third, philosophy provides the ontological foundations. Schopenhauer (1818/1969) disclosed the tension between will and representation; Husserl (1913/1982) analysed intentionality as constitutive of appearance; Merleau-Ponty (1945/2010) insisted on the embodied texture of perception; and Heidegger (1962) showed that finitude and anxiety are not contingencies but the structure of human existence. These traditions locate dissonance and dependence within the horizon of being itself.

Fourth, epistemology supplies the critical and normative categories. Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice demonstrates how dependence is misrecognised as irrationality. Medina (2013) shows how epistemic resistance depends upon plurality and dependence. Marková (2025) advances the account of epistemic trust as a structuring feature of authority, while Raz (1986) develops the moral significance of legitimate authority. Together, these works provide the grammar for analysing dependence as constitutive rather than aberrant.

Finally, fiduciary theory offers the normative scaffold. Frankel (2011), Smith (2014), and Gold & Miller (2014) articulate fiduciary duties of loyalty, candour, and care, establishing a legal-ethical vocabulary for binding authority to responsibility. Transposed into the epistemic domain, these concepts enable us to distinguish clientelist dependence from fiduciary dependence—submission that erodes autonomy from dependence that sustains it.

The methodological claim of this paper is that epistemic psychology must emerge from the integration of these domains. Because the phenomena themselves cross levels—from neural conformity to institutional obedience—only a synthetic and fiduciary-epistemic lens can capture their structural role in human life. This is not

eclecticism but necessity: to study epistemic life requires a framework capable of spanning perception, affect, authority, and governance.

1.5 Roadmap

The remainder of this paper unfolds in seven steps.

- Chapter 2 reinterprets cognitive dissonance, moving beyond its treatment as pathology to reveal it as an epistemic event—the affective disclosure of finitude, solitude, and bounded freedom.
- Chapter 3 establishes epistemic clientelism as the baseline grammar of social life, tracing how autonomy is exchanged for recognition, belonging, or protection across intimate, institutional, and political contexts.
- Chapter 4 advances the case for epistemic psychology as a disciplinary re-foundation, reframing psychology's subject not as an autonomous agent occasionally distorted by bias but as an epistemic agent always negotiating dependence.
- Chapter 5 develops a three-level model—micro, meso, and macro—demonstrating how dissonance and clientelism operate in individuals, relationships, and institutions, from neural conformity to authoritarian regimes.
- Chapter 6 articulates the normative horizon. Drawing on fiduciary theory, it proposes fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds that transform dependence from clientelist erosion into dignified relation, binding authority to duties of candour, loyalty, and care.
- Chapter 7 outlines a research programme for epistemic psychology, reinterpreting classic paradigms, proposing new experiments and comparative studies, and mapping the institutional reforms needed to embed epistemic plurality.
- Chapter 8 concludes by drawing out the stakes of epistemic psychology for psychology, governance, and democratic life. The claim is twofold: that psychology has misclassified its most robust discoveries, and that epistemic psychology provides the framework needed to re-ground knowledge in an age of authoritarianism, disinformation, and epistemic fragility.

Together, these sections present both diagnosis and manifesto: a diagnosis of psychology's misclassification of its own most robust findings, and a manifesto for a new discipline oriented around the ordinary interdependence of epistemic life.

2. Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event

2.1 Introduction – From Pathology to Event

Few concepts in modern psychology have achieved the reach of cognitive dissonance. Since Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957), the idea that humans experience unease when holding contradictory cognitions has generated thousands of studies, spanning decision-making, attitudes, prejudice, and therapy. It

inspired a wide empirical tradition: Jack Brehm's (1956) free-choice paradigm, Elliot Aronson and Judson Mills's (1959) effort-justification experiments, and subsequent refinements such as Elliot and Devine's (1994) work on dissonance as aversive motivation. More recent syntheses (e.g. McGrath 2017) confirm its status as one of the most heavily studied phenomena in the behavioural sciences. Festinger's formulation is canonical; it belongs among psychology's most influential ideas.

Yet despite this prominence, dissonance has been persistently framed as a problem. Festinger himself described it as an aversive state, a psychological discomfort that individuals are motivated to reduce. Subsequent literature has tended to classify dissonance under the broader headings of bias, irrationality, or noise, evidence that human judgment routinely deviates from the rational ideal. In this view, dissonance is anomalous: a flaw in cognition that requires correction, or at best an error signal that nudges individuals back toward internal consistency.

This chapter proposes a different reading. Dissonance should not be understood as pathology but as event—an epistemic event. It is the affective disclosure of finitude: the lived unease that arises whenever knowing entails choice, exclusion, and closure. Far from being an error, dissonance signals the structural limits of cognition. As philosophy has long recognised, from Schopenhauer's account of restless striving (1818/1969), to Husserl's analysis of finite horizons of intentionality (1913/1982), to Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on embodiment (1945/2010), and Heidegger's disclosure of finitude in anxiety (1962), contradiction and unease are not anomalies but conditions of existence itself.

The argument proceeds in four steps. First, I revisit Festinger's paradigm and show how its framing presupposes autonomy as the baseline of agency. Second, I turn to developmental and comparative studies—most notably Egan, Santos, and Bloom (2007)—that reveal dissonance-reduction as a species-wide and evolutionarily ancient capacity. Third, I reframe dissonance drawing on my own work, *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a), situating it as the affective mark of finitude rather than as a cognitive flaw. Finally, I turn to philosophy to demonstrate how solitude and anxiety disclose the ontological ground of dissonance. The chapter closes by showing how this reorientation makes dissonance not marginal but central: a structural feature of epistemic life, and the micro-foundation for the social dynamics of epistemic clientelism explored in Chapter 3.

2.2 Festinger's Paradigm and Its Legacy

Leon Festinger's *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957) offered one of the most influential formulations in the behavioural sciences. His central claim was straightforward: inconsistency among cognitions produces an aversive state of dissonance, which in turn motivates the individual to reduce the discomfort. The model was elegant in its simplicity and fertile in its applications. It reframed everyday phenomena—rationalisation, self-justification, selective attention—as instances of a single underlying drive toward consonance.

The methodological legacy was immediate. Brehm's (1956) free-choice paradigm showed that after choosing between equally desirable alternatives, individuals devalued the rejected option. Aronson and Mills (1959) developed the effort-justification paradigm, in which subjects who endured greater initiation costs evaluated group membership more favourably. Festinger and Carlsmith (1959) demonstrated induced compliance: participants paid only one dollar to tell a lie later adjusted their attitudes more than those paid twenty, rationalising behaviour to reduce dissonance. These experiments provided a blueprint for decades of empirical work, each variation reinforcing the view that humans are motivated to preserve cognitive consistency.

Yet the interpretive bias was present from the outset. Festinger treated dissonance as a "drive," akin to hunger or thirst, to be alleviated through rationalisation or avoidance. This framing presupposed that autonomy and coherence are the natural baseline of cognition, while contradiction is an irritant—an anomaly to be corrected. Later elaborations extended this view: Elliot and Devine (1994) described dissonance as a "psychological discomfort" prompting bias correction; Harmon-Jones and Mills (1999) cast it as irrational affect regulation. Comprehensive reviews such as McGrath (2017) continue to catalogue dissonance alongside other cognitive biases, reinforcing the assumption that contradiction signals deviation from the rational-agent model. Even therapeutic applications (Axsom 1989) have tended to frame dissonance as a tool to modify maladaptive behaviour, again reducing its significance to instrumental correction.

What is missing in all these accounts is the recognition that dissonance might be more than a flaw in judgment. By construing contradiction as a problem to be solved, rather than as a structural condition of knowing, psychology positioned one of its most robust findings at the periphery of its anthropology. Festinger's discovery was not simply a "drive" but a window into the finitude of human cognition. To treat it as pathology is to obscure its deepest significance. As later sections of this chapter will argue, dissonance is better understood as an epistemic event: the affective disclosure of solitude and dependence at the edge of autonomy. Misclassified for six decades, it is time to reclaim it for what it is—structural, not incidental, to epistemic life.

2.3 Developmental and Evolutionary Extensions

The claim that cognitive dissonance is a cultural accident or irrational deviation is undermined by developmental and comparative research. Louisa Egan, Laurie Santos, and Paul Bloom (2007) provided one of the clearest demonstrations. In their study, preschool children were asked to choose between two equally attractive stickers. After making their choice, they were less likely to select the previously unchosen sticker when it was later paired with a new option. Capuchin monkeys showed the same pattern with coloured M&M's. In both cases, subjects devalued the rejected option, rationalising their earlier decision. Crucially, this occurred without instruction or exposure to socialised norms of rational consistency.

The implications are profound. Dissonance-reduction emerges very early in human development, before children internalise adult standards of reasoning, and it appears in nonhuman primates that lack cultural scaffolds altogether. This suggests that dissonance is not a pathology of judgment but a constitutive feature of agency itself: the mind's way of registering finitude when faced with mutually exclusive alternatives.

Other comparative work reinforces this conclusion. Aronson and Carlsmith (1963) demonstrated that children devalued attractive toys when only mild threats were issued, a result consistent with dissonance theory. Friedrich and Zentall (2004) found that pigeons preferred food obtained through greater effort over food delivered more easily. While some researchers argue that such findings could be explained by contrast effects or alternative mechanisms rather than by true dissonance (Zentall 2010; Hayes et al. 1985), the pattern across species adds plausibility to the idea that mechanisms of dissonance-reduction are deeply embedded in the architecture of decision-making.

The cross-species and developmental evidence finds resonance in cultural and linguistic experience. In *Speaking into Dissonance* (Kahl 2025h), I show how foreign language learning exemplifies dissonance as a lived epistemic event. The hesitation before uttering a phrase, the sting of misrecognition, and the shame of error all manifest as dissonance—yet these very moments open pathways to resilience, empathy, and democratic plurality. Language learning reveals dissonance not as deficit but as resource: an affective site where finitude becomes the condition of growth and agency.

Philosophical traditions have long anticipated this insight. Schopenhauer (1818/1969) saw striving and contradiction as woven into human will; Heidegger (1962) described anxiety as the disclosure of finitude. If dissonance is evident across species, in early childhood, and in the embodied struggle of language learning, then it cannot plausibly be dismissed as irrational deviation. It is instead the affective index of finitude, structural to cognition and culture alike.

The critical reflection is therefore straightforward: to persist in treating dissonance as bias is to misunderstand its developmental, evolutionary, and existential depth. Psychology has misclassified as error what is in fact the ordinary mark of epistemic life.

2.4 Reframing: Dissonance as Epistemic Event

The preceding discussion has shown the limits of psychology's treatment of dissonance. Festinger's paradigm cast it as an aversive anomaly, while developmental and comparative studies reveal it as a pervasive feature of cognition across ages and even species. An explanatory framework that treats dissonance as mere bias cannot account for this breadth or its evolutionary depth.

What is needed, therefore, is a reframing. In *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a), I argue that dissonance is not a cognitive flaw but an epistemic event—the affective disclosure of finitude and solitude at the edge of knowing.

The key move is simple but radical. Every act of knowing entails closure. To affirm one belief is to set aside its alternatives; to choose one course of action is to foreclose others. Dissonance is the body's affective registration of this foreclosure. It is the unease that accompanies bounded freedom: the recognition that autonomy is never complete, that every judgment carries the trace of what it excludes.

This unease manifests in different ways. At one pole, dissonance produces anxiety—the felt recognition of limits. At the other, it collapses into rationalisation, as the agent reshapes beliefs or values to restore coherence. Most often, it is this collapse that prevails, since it offers immediate relief. Yet there remains a fragile alternative: to endure dissonance without resolving it, to inhabit the discomfort of finitude. Though rare, this endurance is the condition of epistemic growth.

The contrast with Festinger is decisive. Where Festinger (1957) treated dissonance as a "drive for consistency," I interpret it as an ontological signal of bounded freedom. Dissonance is not deviation from autonomy but its disclosure: the felt reminder that human agency is always conditioned by finitude.

Reframed in this way, dissonance provides the micro-foundation for epistemic psychology. It explains why individuals collapse into conformity, why they engage in clientelist exchanges to secure recognition, and why authority exerts such epistemic force. Dissonance is not peripheral but primary: the elemental event from which the dynamics of dependence, obedience, and resistance unfold.

2.5 Ontological Turn: Solitude and Finitude

To reframe dissonance as an epistemic event is to rediscover what philosophy has long known: unease, contradiction, and finitude belong not to the margins of experience but to its very structure. Where psychology has classified dissonance as error, the philosophical tradition discloses it as truth.

Arthur Schopenhauer, in *The World as Will and Representation* (1818/1969), described human life as trapped in the ceaseless striving of the will, forever in tension with the representations through which it attempts to grasp the world. Contradiction is not an accident here but the pulse of existence itself. Dissonance can be read as the psychological trace of this tension: the felt unease whenever will and representation fail to coincide.

Edmund Husserl, in *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology* (1913/1982), analysed consciousness as intentional, always directed beyond itself. Yet each act of intentionality reveals only a partial horizon; the object is never fully given. Consciousness is thus constitutively finite, its knowledge always provisional. Dissonance corresponds to this horizonal openness: the affective pressure of unfinished possibilities that no cognition can close.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2010), insisted that perception is embodied, never detached from the lived body. The ambiguity and vulnerability of bodily life are not secondary but primary. Dissonance thus belongs to the lived body—the hesitation before speech, the discomfort of contradiction, the compulsion to resolve dissonance are felt in the body long before they are rationalised in thought.

Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time* (1962), described Angst as the disclosure of finitude: the mood in which familiar meanings collapse and existence is revealed in its boundedness. Anxiety (*Angst*) is not a passing disturbance but a structural disclosure. Dissonance can be read as its everyday correlate: the collapse of coherence in cognition that exposes the fragility of autonomy.

What Festinger treated as pathology, these traditions each recognised in their own idioms as constitutive of human life. Contradiction, anxiety, and finitude are not aberrations; they are the ground of being. Dissonance is their psychological expression—the ordinary affect through which finitude becomes manifest in cognition and action.

This ontological turn also prepares the way for normative reflection. To deny dissonance its structural place is to enact what Fricker (2007) calls epistemic injustice: the silencing of experiences that disclose fundamental truths. Medina (2013) extends this, showing that resilience and resistance depend on inhabiting plurality rather than foreclosing it. The misclassification of dissonance as error is not merely theoretical; it distorts our epistemic lives, depriving us of the chance to cultivate the very plurality on which democratic agency depends.

2.6 Structural Implications for Psychology

The claim advanced so far is simple but decisive: dissonance is not a glitch in cognition but the structural affective signal of epistemic life. It is the body's way of registering finitude, the unease that arises whenever knowing entails closure (Kahl 2025a).

The consequences for psychology are considerable. By following Festinger's framing of dissonance as a "drive" (1957) and later cataloguing it as bias or irrationality (Elliot & Devine 1994; McGrath 2017), the discipline has blinded itself to its deepest insights. Six decades of research have been spent explaining away what should have been recognised as foundational. This is not merely an oversight but a form of conceptual self-sabotage: the misclassification of structure as error.

Recognising dissonance as epistemic event reorients psychology toward interdependence. It shifts the subject of study from the autonomous agent occasionally distorted by bias to the epistemic agent always negotiating dependence, recognition, and authority. In this sense, psychology must be re-cast as epistemic psychology—the science of the ordinary conditions under which finitude is endured, evaded, or transformed.

Philosophy had long anticipated this reorientation. Schopenhauer, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger each showed in different registers that contradiction and unease are constitutive, not incidental, to human life. Psychology's misclassification is therefore doubly impoverished: empirically, it contradicts the developmental and comparative record (Egan, Santos & Bloom 2007); ontologically, it ignores traditions that already disclosed unease as structural.

This reframing also connects the micro-cognitive unease of dissonance to broader social and institutional dynamics. The same discomfort that drives individuals to rationalise beliefs also underpins collective patterns of conformity, obedience, and authority. To acknowledge dissonance as structural is to see the line that runs from the hesitation of an individual mind to the stabilisation of social order.

The next chapter will develop this point in detail. If dissonance discloses finitude at the micro-level, epistemic clientelism is the macro-form in which that unease is negotiated socially: the conditional exchange of autonomy for recognition, belonging, or protection. Together, they form the grammar of epistemic life.

2.7 Takeaway

The trajectory of this chapter has been clear. Festinger's original formulation (1957) miscast dissonance as an aversive drive, a bias to be corrected in order to restore autonomy. Developmental and comparative research has shown otherwise: dissonance-reduction emerges in children before rational norms are internalised (Aronson & Carlsmith 1963), and appears in nonhuman primates (Egan, Santos, & Bloom 2007) as well as in other species (Friedrich & Zentall 2004). Far from being an anomaly, it is a species-wide feature of cognition. Philosophical analysis deepens the point. Schopenhauer, Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger each disclosed contradiction, anxiety, and finitude as structural to existence itself. What psychology has treated as error, philosophy has long recognised as truth.

Reframed as epistemic event, dissonance is revealed not as a glitch but as the affective disclosure of finitude and dependence at the heart of human life. It is the ordinary unease through which bounded freedom becomes visible, the micro-foundation of the broader dynamics of conformity, authority, and resistance.

The closing claim is therefore stark: to understand psychology as a science of autonomy alone is untenable. Dissonance shows that dependence and finitude are constitutive. The next chapter develops this insight by tracing how the unease disclosed in dissonance is negotiated socially, giving rise to the macro-structures of epistemic clientelism.

3. Epistemic Clientelism as Grammar of Social Life

3.1 Introduction – From Dissonance to Dependence

The previous chapter reframed dissonance as an epistemic event: the affective disclosure of finitude whenever knowing entails closure. Yet dissonance is rarely endured in solitude. The unease it generates does not remain private but spills outward, producing a need for stabilisation. That stabilisation is typically sought through authority and recognition—through belonging to a group, deferring to an expert, or aligning with a figure of power.

This chapter takes up that dynamic. Conformity and obedience, far from being aberrations, are the ordinary responses to epistemic unease. They are the social mechanisms through which dissonance is negotiated, exchanged, and contained. Where psychology has often treated them as distortions of rational autonomy, I argue they are better understood as the grammar of epistemic life.

The claim is that epistemic clientelism—the conditional exchange of autonomy for recognition, protection, or belonging—is the structure underlying these dynamics. It appears in intimate relationships, classrooms, workplaces, and political regimes alike. Dissonance at the micro-level motivates individuals to seek stability; clientelism at the social level provides it.

The chapter unfolds in six steps. First, I revisit the classic evidence of conformity and obedience (Asch 1951; Milgram 1974), reinterpreting them not as cautionary tales but as demonstrations of ordinary dependence. Second, I examine how authoritarian dispositions (Feldman 2003; Stenner 2005) amplify this dependence into enforced closure. Third, I develop the theory of epistemic clientelism (Kahl 2025b), distinguishing it from trust and authority. Fourth, I explore micro-ecologies of clientelism in intimate relationships (Kahl 2025c) and related settings. Fifth, I trace the institutionalisation of clientelism across classrooms, workplaces, and regimes. Sixth, I close with a critical reinterpretation: conformity and obedience are not noise but the ordinary currency of epistemic exchange.

3.2 Classic Evidence: Conformity and Obedience

The dynamics of epistemic clientelism are nowhere clearer than in psychology's most famous experiments: Asch's studies of conformity and Milgram's studies of obedience. Each shows how the unease disclosed in dissonance is stabilised not in solitude but through alignment with recognition or authority.

Solomon Asch's (1951) line-judgment experiments revealed that the majority of participants conformed at least once to an obviously incorrect group answer. Bond and Smith's (1996) meta-analysis confirmed the robustness of this effect across cultures and decades. What is at stake here is not simple perceptual error but the fear of solitude: private perception was subordinated to group consensus because belonging resolved the unease of standing apart. Conformity functioned as an exchange—autonomy for recognition.

Stanley Milgram's *Obedience to Authority* (1974) uncovered the same logic in relation to authority. Ordinary participants, instructed by a figure in a lab coat, administered what they believed were painful electric shocks to another person. Burger's (2009) partial replication showed that the effect persists. The mechanism was not cruelty but epistemic redefinition: authority reframed dissent as disobedience, offering participants a way to resolve the dissonance between private conscience and social expectation. Unease was stabilised by exchanging autonomy for the protection of obedience.

These studies are typically presented as cautionary tales of irrational compliance, grim reminders of how easily reason collapses under pressure. Yet they can be read differently. They are empirical demonstrations of epistemic clientelism in action. Participants negotiated the unease of dissonance by surrendering autonomy in exchange for stability—recognition in Asch's paradigm, authority in Milgram's. Philosophy had long anticipated this dynamic: Heidegger (1962) described anxiety as the disclosure of finitude, and Asch and Milgram show how that finitude is managed socially through alignment with others.

It is striking that psychology's most famous findings demonstrate precisely the ordinary dependence it refuses to name. The discipline has consistently miscast its own evidence, treating conformity and obedience as

deviations from rational autonomy rather than recognising them as constitutive features of epistemic life. In truth, they are not noise but the grammar of dependence: the ordinary currency of epistemic exchange.

3.3 Amplified Conformity: Authoritarian Dispositions

If Asch and Milgram reveal conformity and obedience as ordinary responses to epistemic unease, political psychology shows how these responses can be amplified into stable dispositions. Stanley Feldman (2003) argued that authoritarianism is best understood as the enforcement of social conformity: a dispositional preference for uniformity and order over individual judgment. Karen Stenner (2005) sharpened this account with her theory of the "authoritarian dynamic," describing how exposure to difference destabilises individuals intolerant of ambiguity, prompting them to demand epistemic closure and enforced sameness.

These contributions build on an older lineage: Adorno and colleagues' *Authoritarian Personality* (1950) first proposed that deference to authority and hostility to out-groups were intertwined, while Duckitt (2001) later reframed authoritarianism as part of a broader social–ideological orientation. What appears across this literature is the same underlying logic: the collapse of unease into enforced dependence.

Read through the lens of epistemic clientelism, authoritarianism is not sui generis but an intensified form of ordinary dependence. The unease disclosed in dissonance (§2.4) is here managed by externalising its resolution: rather than confronting finitude, the individual demands closure through authority and uniformity. What philosophy recognises as the disclosure of finitude becomes, in authoritarian dispositions, a refusal of finitude through flight into dependence.

This perspective recasts authoritarianism. What psychology often treats as pathological predisposition is in fact an amplified form of the same epistemic clientelism revealed in Asch's and Milgram's paradigms. Conformity and obedience become routinised dispositions, weaponised against plurality. Authoritarianism is thus amplified clientelism: the political face of dissonance collapsed into closure, the suppression of plurality in exchange for the false comfort of enforced order.

It follows that authoritarianism is not an aberration at the margins of democracy but the magnified expression of the dependence already at work in everyday epistemic life.

3.4 Theory: Epistemic Clientelism Defined

The dynamics observed in Asch's (1951) conformity studies, Milgram's (1974) obedience paradigm, and the authoritarian dispositions described by Feldman (2003) and Stenner (2005) point to a deeper structure. In Epistemic Clientelism Theory (Kahl 2025b), I name this structure epistemic clientelism: the conditional exchange of autonomy for recognition, protection, or belonging. What appears in experiments as momentary compliance and in political psychology as durable disposition is, at root, the same transaction.

This transaction has three defining features.

First, it is asymmetrical. Dependence is structured by authority—whether the immediate pressure of peers, the commanding voice of an official, or the stabilising promise of a regime. The client occupies a subordinate position, reliant on recognition or protection to alleviate unease.

Second, it is transactional. Autonomy is not erased but conditionally surrendered. The bargain resolves dissonance by exchanging freedom for stability: the relief of belonging, the security of obedience, the comfort of uniformity.

Third, it is normalised. Clientelist exchanges are not rare distortions but ordinary patterns. They appear across micro, meso, and macro levels of life—in intimate relationships (Kahl 2025c), in classrooms and workplaces, in the dynamics of authoritarian regimes. Clientelism is the invisible grammar through which dependence is stabilised.

It is essential to contrast clientelism with trust. Trust entails fiduciary duties: loyalty, candour, and care (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014). Fiduciary dependence dignifies vulnerability by binding authority to responsibility. Clientelism, by contrast, is an exchange without fiduciary scaffolding. Authority offers stability but no duty-bound reciprocity. Autonomy is eroded precisely because responsibility is absent.

Philosophy clarifies the stakes. Joseph Raz (1986) argues, in his "normal justification thesis," that authority is legitimate only if it enables subjects to better act on reasons they already possess. Clientelism fails this test: it stabilises unease by stripping away agency, offering closure in place of reason. Ivana Marková (2025) shows that epistemic trust is the condition for authority to be accepted at all. Clientelism emerges where trust is absent—where dissonance leaves the subject with no viable alternative but to accept dependence without guarantee.

Epistemic clientelism is thus authority without responsibility, dependence without dignity. It stabilises dissonance by eroding autonomy, not sustaining it. Recognising this structure is crucial, for it provides the grammar of epistemic life. In the next section, we will see how it plays out in micro-ecologies such as intimate relationships, where recognition becomes the currency of dependence.

3.5 Micro-Ecologies of Clientelism

If epistemic clientelism explains large-scale conformity and authoritarian dispositions, it is no less visible in the ordinary fabric of everyday life. In *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl 2025c), I argued that dependence is continuously negotiated within couples, families, and friendships. Recognition becomes the currency of these exchanges. One partner concedes autonomy in return for affirmation; a child yields to parental authority in return for care; a friend subordinates their judgment to preserve belonging. Epistemic asymmetries stabilise bonds, ensuring that the unease disclosed in dissonance does not fracture the relationship.

What is traded in these contexts is relief from the discomfort of finitude. Dissonance generates unease—fear of exclusion, uncertainty, solitude—which is resolved through asymmetric exchanges of recognition. To yield to another's judgment is to purchase stability at the price of autonomy. These are not accidents but structural responses to the vulnerability of epistemic life.

The same grammar extends beyond intimate ties. In parenting, John Bowlby's attachment theory (1969) showed how a child's dependence is constitutive, not pathological: security arises from surrendering autonomy to parental recognition. In pedagogy, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) revealed how the "banking model" of education institutionalises epistemic asymmetry, with students dependent on teachers to validate knowledge. In therapy, the client accepts interpretive asymmetry in exchange for affirmation and guidance, trusting that vulnerability will be reciprocated. In each case, autonomy is conditionally surrendered; recognition stabilises the unease of not knowing.

Not every act of dependence is clientelist. Where fiduciary duties of loyalty, candour, and care bind authority to responsibility (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014), dependence can dignify rather than erode autonomy. But absent such duties, everyday exchanges easily slide into clientelism: recognition becomes conditional, authority unchecked, autonomy eroded.

The claim is therefore stark. Clientelism is not confined to the spectacular failures of authoritarianism or the laboratories of social psychology. It is the invisible grammar of everyday relational life. What psychology ignores in its fixation on autonomy is that every bond we form is already structured by epistemic asymmetry. To deny this is to cling to a fiction that no one lives. Clientelism is not the exception but the rule—the grammar through which ordinary life becomes bearable.

3.6 From Micro to Macro: Institutionalisation of Clientelism

The mechanism traced in the previous section scales seamlessly from individual unease to institutionalised authority. Dissonance generates discomfort; interpersonal exchanges of recognition stabilise it; repeated across settings, these exchanges sediment into durable structures of authority. What begins as a micro-negotiation of dependence becomes institutionalised clientelism: authority organised as the routine solution to the unease of finitude.

The classroom provides the clearest example. Students depend on teachers not only for information but for recognition: grades, approval, affirmation. The unease of not knowing is resolved by accepting the teacher's authority as arbiter of truth. Paulo Freire (1970) described this as the "banking model" of education, where knowledge is deposited by the teacher and students' contributions are validated only by asymmetric recognition. Pedagogy here becomes more than instruction; it institutionalises epistemic asymmetry.

Workplaces reproduce the same grammar. Employees conform to managerial expectations not always because they agree, but because compliance secures belonging and career security. As Robert Jackall's *Moral Mazes* (1988) showed, corporate hierarchies reward conformity with advancement and penalise dissent with exclusion. The dissonance between private judgment and organisational demand is resolved by surrendering autonomy to hierarchy. Recognition becomes wages, promotions, or the reassurance of being "on the team."

Political regimes generalise this logic at the macro scale. Citizens confronted with pluralism, conflict, or crisis stabilise their unease by deferring to governing authority. Feldman (2003) identified authoritarian predispositions as enforcement of conformity, and Stenner (2005) showed how intolerance of difference escalates into demands for epistemic closure. Authoritarian regimes intensify this bargain, but democracies too rely on clientelist stabilisations: the appeal to unity, the invocation of national security, the silencing of dissent as disobedience.

Not every form of dependence is clientelist. Where fiduciary duties of loyalty, candour, and care bind authority to responsibility (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014), dependence can dignify rather than erode autonomy. But absent such scaffolding, clientelism becomes the default grammar of institutional life.

Institutions do not simply transmit knowledge or organise labour; they domesticate unease. They transform fragile interpersonal bargains into durable architectures of dependence. In this sense, institutions are crystallised clientelism: structural forms through which societies bear the unease of finitude by conditioning the surrender of autonomy.

3.7 Critical Reinterpretation of Conformity and Obedience

It is astonishing that psychology's most cited findings—Asch's conformity effect (1951) and Milgram's obedience paradigm (1974)—have been treated as embarrassing anomalies rather than recognised as the discipline's most profound insights. Replications and meta-analyses (Bond & Smith 1996; Burger 2009) confirm their robustness, yet textbooks continue to present them as deviations from an imagined baseline of rational autonomy.

The framework developed here reveals a different picture. Conformity and obedience are not deviations but the ordinary currency of epistemic exchange. Both show how the unease disclosed in dissonance is stabilised socially. In Asch's paradigm, dissonance between private perception and collective judgment was resolved through belonging: participants traded autonomy for group recognition. In Milgram's, dissonance between personal conscience and social demand was resolved through authority: participants traded autonomy for protection and clarity. In both cases, dependence was not error but the ordinary mechanism by which finitude was borne.

Philosophy helps us see why. Schopenhauer (1818/1969) revealed contradiction as the rhythm of existence; Husserl (1913/1982) showed every act of consciousness as limited by horizons; Heidegger (1962) described anxiety as the disclosure of finitude. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2010) added that such tensions are lived bodily, not abstractly—the hesitation before dissent, the discomfort of standing apart, the bodily pull toward alignment. Conformity and obedience are their social correlates. They disclose finitude not in the solitude of cognition but in the interdependence of collective life.

Seen this way, psychology's most famous findings cease to be cautionary tales of irrationality and become windows into the ordinary grammar of epistemic life. To persist in treating them as noise is to misclassify the discipline's own most powerful evidence. Conformity and obedience are not deviations from rational autonomy; they are the structural ways in which autonomy is traded, dependence normalised, and dissonance rendered bearable.

3.8 Takeaway

The trajectory of this chapter is clear. Asch (1951) and Milgram (1974) show that ordinary individuals, confronted with epistemic unease, stabilise it through dependence—whether by seeking group recognition or deferring to authority. Feldman (2003) and Stenner (2005) extend this logic, showing authoritarianism as the amplified form of the same grammar: dissonance collapsed into enforced conformity. Epistemic Clientelism Theory (Kahl 2025b) gives this structure its name, and Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships (Kahl 2025c) demonstrates how it unfolds in the micro-ecologies of everyday life.

The closing claim is stark. Conformity and obedience are not errors but the ordinary grammar of epistemic life. They stabilise the unease disclosed in dissonance by exchanging autonomy for recognition, belonging, and protection. To persist in treating them as anomalies is to miss their significance: they are the very mechanisms by which human beings bear finitude in social life.

This sets the stage for Chapter 4, which argues that psychology must be re-founded as epistemic psychology: a discipline centred not on the fiction of autonomous agents but on the ordinary interdependence of epistemic life.

4. From Psychology to Epistemic Psychology

4.1 Introduction – Naming a Discipline

The previous chapters developed a diagnosis. Psychology has systematically misclassified some of its most robust findings. Festinger (1957) cast dissonance as a drive toward rationalisation, Asch (1951) treated conformity as a cautionary lapse of perception, Milgram (1974) framed obedience as tragic compliance, Feldman (2003) reduced authoritarianism to a predisposition, and Stenner (2005) described the authoritarian dynamic as intolerance of difference. Across these accounts, dependence is treated as deviation, autonomy as baseline. The result is an epistemically thin anthropology that fails to recognise the structural conditions of human life.

The evidence, however, tells a different story. Dissonance is not a glitch but the affective disclosure of finitude (§2). Conformity and obedience are not anomalies but the ordinary currencies of epistemic exchange (§3). Authoritarianism is not pathology at the margins but amplified clientelism. What psychology has dismissed as error, pathology, or noise are in fact its most profound discoveries: the ordinary dependence by which human beings bear finitude.

To do justice to its own evidence, psychology must be re-founded. What is needed is epistemic psychology: the science of human autonomy and dependence under epistemic conditions. This new discipline begins from the recognition that autonomy and dependence are co-constitutive, that finitude is structural, and that authority and recognition are the ordinary currencies of epistemic life.

This chapter names the discipline. It proceeds in six steps. Section 4.2 turns to neuroscience, drawing on Berns et al. (2005) and Klucharev et al. (2009) to show how conformity penetrates the brain itself. Section 4.3 examines institutions, drawing on *The Epistemic Architecture of Power* (Kahl 2025d) to show how knowledge is structured socially. Section 4.4 contrasts psychology's descriptive behaviourism with the epistemic structuralism I propose. Section 4.5 defines epistemic psychology formally. Section 4.6 explores its normative stakes, linking it to fiduciary theory and epistemic justice. Section 4.7 concludes with a manifesto claim: that re-founding psychology is not optional but required by the evidence it already possesses.

4.2 Evidence Beyond the Behavioural – Neuroscience of Conformity

The claim that conformity is structural rather than anomalous finds striking support in neuroscience. Where psychology once cast conformity as a behavioural distortion, brain imaging reveals it as a process inscribed in perception and learning themselves.

Berns and colleagues (2005) used fMRI to study group influence on visual perception. When participants aligned their judgments with an incorrect group consensus, activity in brain regions associated with visual processing shifted accordingly. Conformity here was not a matter of conscious rationalisation after the fact but a modulation of perception itself. The group's voice penetrated neural representation, altering what participants literally saw.

Klucharev and colleagues (2009) extended this finding by showing that deviations from group consensus triggered a reinforcement learning signal in the brain. Social disagreement activated the striatum, producing neural "error signals" that predicted subsequent conformity. The brain encoded deviation from the group as a form of cognitive error, guiding behaviour back toward alignment.

Later research has reinforced this pattern. Campbell-Meiklejohn et al. (2010) demonstrated that social influence shapes value-based decision-making at the neural level, while Izuma and Adolphs (2013) reviewed converging evidence that conformity effects are embedded in the brain's circuitry for reward, learning, and social cognition.

The implication is decisive. Conformity is not a post hoc bias layered onto otherwise autonomous cognition. It is built into the neurobiology of perception and learning. Dependence on recognition is not external to thought; it is constitutive of how the brain processes experience.

This has philosophical resonance. If, as Heidegger (1962) argued, anxiety discloses finitude, then these neural findings show that finitude is inscribed in cognition itself: the brain treats dissent as error, encoding plurality as unease. Autonomy cannot be psychology's baseline when recognition is already written into the brain's most basic operations.

Psychology can no longer sustain the fiction of autonomy when its own neuroscientific evidence reveals dependence as primary. Conformity is structural. The next section shows how this dynamic extends beyond individual brains to the architectures of institutions, where dependence is stabilised at scale.

4.3 Institutions as Epistemic Architectures

If the brain itself encodes conformity, institutions magnify and stabilise it. In *The Epistemic Architecture of Power* (Kahl 2025d), I argued that institutions structure knowledge by distributing recognition and authority. What appears in Chapters 2 and 3 as micro-level exchanges—dissonance stabilised through group belonging or obedience—becomes scaled and routinised through institutional scaffolds. Institutions are not neutral containers of knowledge but architectures that channel dependence, determine visibility, and stabilise authority. They are crystallised responses to the unease of finitude: social mechanisms for managing the dissonance that cognition alone cannot bear.

Academia provides the clearest example. Peer review, credentialing, and citation systems are presented as neutral mechanisms of quality control, yet they function as exchanges of recognition. An article is not accepted because its truth is self-evident but because it passes through the gatekeeping of reviewers; a scholar is not recognised because of pure autonomy but because their credentials validate participation. Pierre Bourdieu (1988) showed that academic life is structured by symbolic capital, where recognition is the currency of authority. The unease of epistemic solitude is resolved by institutional validation, which in turn reproduces hierarchy.

Media perform a similar function. Editorial gatekeeping concentrates epistemic authority in the hands of a few who determine which voices achieve public visibility and which remain unheard. Recognition is rationed through publication and broadcast, stabilising institutional authority rather than individual autonomy. Jürgen Habermas (1989) described how the public sphere itself has been transformed by such mechanisms, where access to recognition is conditioned by editorial power.

Law demonstrates the same architecture in a different register. Precedent and judicial hierarchy organise recognition vertically: lower courts defer to higher courts, judges cite established authority to stabilise rulings, dissent is framed as deviation from precedent. Niklas Luhmann (2004) showed that law is a self-referential system, stabilising meaning by recursive appeals to authority. The unease of judicial dissonance is resolved not by pure reason but by institutional scaffolds of deference.

Not every form of dependence, however, is clientelist. Where fiduciary duties of loyalty, candour, and care bind authority to responsibility (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014), dependence can dignify rather than erode autonomy. But absent such scaffolding, institutions default to clientelism: recognition becomes conditional, authority unchecked, and autonomy systematically eroded.

The implication is stark. Human cognition is inseparable from the architectures that organise epistemic life. Academia, media, and law each show the same logic: recognition distributed conditionally, authority stabilised, autonomy constrained. Institutions do not simply transmit knowledge or organise labour; they are the architectures through which finitude is managed, recognition rationed, and dependence institutionalised.

4.4 From Descriptive Behaviourism to Epistemic Structuralism

Psychology's dominant paradigm remains behaviourist in scope, even where it has formally moved beyond classical behaviourism. From Skinner's Science and Human Behavior (1953) through its cognitive successors, the discipline has studied behaviour, cognition, and affect largely in experimental isolation. Laboratory designs abstract the subject from context, presuming that the essential unit of analysis is the autonomous individual. Dependence, when it appears, is treated as distortion: conformity as bias, obedience as pathology, dissonance as error. Autonomy is the baseline; dependence the deviation.

The limitation of this framing has long been apparent. Chomsky's (1959) critique of behaviourism showed that language could not be explained without innate structures; Vygotsky (1978) argued that cognition is always mediated by social interaction; Bruner (1990) advanced a cultural psychology in which meaning is inseparable from context. Yet mainstream psychology has remained wedded to autonomy as its normative baseline. As Chapters 2 and 3 demonstrated, this is no longer tenable. Dissonance, conformity, and obedience are not aberrations but structural; §4.2 showed conformity inscribed in the brain; §4.3 revealed it stabilised by institutions. To continue treating dependence as deviation is not scientific caution but conceptual blindness.

The proposed reorientation is what I call *epistemic structuralism*. Epistemic structuralism studies exchanges, dependencies, and authority as constitutive of epistemic life. It differs from sociology of knowledge, which often treats institutions as external contexts, and from social psychology, which catalogues situational effects. Epistemic structuralism treats authority and recognition as internal to cognition itself: not environmental modifiers but structural conditions of knowing. It begins from the ontological recognition that finitude is structural—autonomy is never unconditioned but always negotiated.

This shift carries disciplinary consequences. It requires psychology to move beyond descriptive behaviourism —the charting of stimulus and response, cognition and affect—toward a structural account of epistemic life. Behaviour is not merely individual; it is always mediated by recognition, belonging, and authority. Cognition is not merely perceptual; it is structured by institutional scaffolds. Affect is not merely private; it is the affective disclosure of finitude negotiated in social exchange.

The manifesto claim is simple. Behaviourism reduced life to variables; epistemic structuralism restores its grammar. Psychology must redefine itself not as the science of behaviour alone but as the science of epistemic life. To persist in behaviourism is to remain blind to its own evidence; to embrace epistemic structuralism is to re-found the discipline around the truth that dependence is not noise but structure: the ordinary architecture of autonomy under conditions of finitude.

4.5 Defining Epistemic Psychology

The reorientation can now be stated directly. *Epistemic psychology* is the science of human autonomy and dependence under epistemic conditions. It studies the ways in which finitude is negotiated through exchanges of recognition and authority, and how these negotiations structure cognition, affect, and behaviour across levels of life.

Three commitments distinguish this discipline.

First, autonomy and dependence are co-constitutive, not opposites. Human agency is not a self-sufficient baseline from which deviations occur but a fragile equilibrium continually negotiated through others. Every act of knowing is simultaneously an act of dependence.

Second, finitude and dissonance are structural, not anomalies. The unease disclosed by cognitive dissonance is not noise but signal—the affective reminder of bounded freedom. Heidegger (1962) described anxiety as the disclosure of finitude, and Husserl (1913/1982) showed that consciousness always opens onto unfinished horizons. Epistemic psychology recognises dissonance as their psychological correlate.

Third, authority and recognition are central currencies of cognition. To know is not simply to perceive or infer but to occupy a position within webs of recognition and deference. Raz (1986) argued that legitimate authority enables subjects to act on reasons they already possess; Marková (2025) emphasised epistemic trust as the condition of authority's acceptance. Absent such fiduciary scaffolds (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014), dependence easily becomes clientelist.

This orientation makes epistemic psychology distinctive. Sociology studies macro-structures; cognitive science analyses individual processing. Epistemic psychology bridges levels: from micro-events of dissonance, to meso-relational exchanges of recognition, to macro-institutional architectures of authority. Its object is not "social context" in general but the transaction of recognition through which cognition itself is stabilised.

The implication is stark. Psychology can no longer remain blind to the conditions that constitute its subject. Epistemic psychology is not a supplement but a re-founding—demanded by its evidence, confirmed by its failures, and required if the discipline is to take seriously the truth that autonomy is always negotiated under conditions of finitude.

This definition also foreshadows the three-level model developed in Chapter 5, which articulates epistemic psychology across micro, meso, and macro dimensions.

4.6 Normative Stakes

The re-founding of psychology as epistemic psychology is not merely descriptive; it carries normative weight. To misclassify dissonance, conformity, and obedience as anomalies is not only a theoretical mistake but an injustice. As I argued in *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a), the unease disclosed in dissonance is the affective signal of finitude. When psychology dismisses this unease as error, it enacts what Miranda Fricker (2007) calls epistemic injustice: silencing or downgrading experiences that reveal structural truths. José Medina (2013) extends this point: resilience and resistance depend on cultivating plurality, not foreclosing it. To deny the structural role of dissonance is to foreclose precisely the plurality that sustains democratic agency.

Epistemic psychology therefore entails a normative horizon. Dependence need not always collapse into clientelism. As I argued in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl 2025f) and *Toward Academia's*

Own Hippocratic Oath (Kahl 2025g), institutions can dignify dependence when authority assumes fiduciary duties of loyalty, candour, and care (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014). Where such scaffolding is honoured, authority sustains rather than erodes autonomy. Ivana Marková (2025) shows that epistemic trust is the condition for authority to be accepted at all; fiduciary scaffolds are what transmute that trust into dignity.

The implication is stark. The unease disclosed in dissonance becomes injustice when institutions misrecognise it as pathology. Without fiduciary scaffolding, dependence collapses into clientelism; with it, finitude can be borne with dignity. Epistemic psychology is therefore not optional. It is a normative demand: to distinguish clientelism from fiduciary responsibility, erosion from dignity, exploitation from trust. It is not just a new science but a new ethic—one that orients inquiry toward the conditions under which human beings can endure finitude without being subjugated by it.

4.7 Takeaway – A Re-founded Discipline

The argument of this chapter can be summarised in four steps. Neuroscience has shown that conformity operates at the level of perception and learning itself: the brain encodes deviation from consensus as error (Berns et al. 2005; Klucharev et al. 2009). Institutions magnify and stabilise these dynamics, distributing recognition and authority through peer review, editorial gatekeeping, and judicial hierarchy (Kahl 2025d). Psychology, to make sense of its own evidence, must move beyond descriptive behaviourism and embrace epistemic structuralism: the study of exchanges, dependencies, and authority as constitutive. On this basis, I have defined epistemic psychology as the science of human autonomy and dependence under epistemic conditions.

The closing claim is stark. This re-founding is not optional; it is demanded by psychology's own evidence. To persist with autonomy as baseline and dependence as anomaly is to perpetuate a conceptual misclassification that has crippled the discipline for decades. To embrace epistemic psychology is to acknowledge what philosophy long disclosed—that finitude is structural, that dissonance is its affective signal, and that dependence is its ordinary resolution. As §4.6 showed, the stakes are normative as well as theoretical: misclassification enacts epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013). Only by recognising the fiduciary scaffolds that can dignify dependence (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014) can psychology become the science not just of behaviour, but of human life under epistemic conditions.

Epistemic psychology is not a supplement but psychology's own unrecognised truth, demanding its name at last. Chapter 5 makes this re-founding operational. It develops a three-level model—micro, meso, and macro—through which dissonance, clientelism, and institutional authority can be integrated into a coherent framework. This model provides not only conceptual clarity but a programme for research: a way to study, test, and build the grammar of epistemic life.

5. Levels of Epistemic Psychology

5.1 Micro-level

At the micro-level, epistemic psychology begins with the most immediate affective-cognitive events: dissonance, conformity, and obedience. These are not marginal anomalies but the ordinary ways in which

finitude is registered and negotiated in individual life. Dissonance discloses the unease of bounded freedom; conformity and obedience are the everyday strategies through which this unease is stabilised.

Cognitive dissonance, as reframed in *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a), is the affective signal that every act of knowing entails foreclosure: to affirm one belief is to exclude alternatives. This unease is structural, not accidental. Conformity and obedience are its primary micro-resolutions. In Asch's (1951) paradigm, conformity offered recognition in exchange for private judgment, a finding confirmed across cultures (Bond & Smith 1996). In Milgram's (1974) obedience studies, participants surrendered autonomy to authority, with later replications (Burger 2009) showing the persistence of this pattern. From the controlled laboratory to everyday life, the same grammar recurs: unease arises, and autonomy is conditionally surrendered for stability.

These dynamics are not confined to experiments. As I argued in *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl 2025c), micro-negotiations of dependence pervade ordinary life. Within couples, families, and friendships, recognition becomes the currency through which dissonance is managed. A partner defers in order to preserve harmony; a child accepts parental authority in return for care, echoing what attachment theory has long observed (Bowlby 1969); a friend conforms to group expectations to secure belonging. Each is a micro-transaction in which autonomy is surrendered to bear finitude.

This picture must be qualified. Not every act of dependence is clientelist. Where fiduciary duties of loyalty, candour, and care bind authority to responsibility (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014), dependence can dignify rather than erode autonomy. But absent such scaffolds, these micro-exchanges easily become clientelist, trading stability for diminished agency.

At this level, epistemic psychology treats dissonance, conformity, and obedience as the grammar of individual cognition-in-relation. They are not noise but the affective-cognitive events through which finitude is lived and managed moment by moment. This descriptive account foreshadows Chapter 6, where fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds at the micro-level—such as fiduciary oaths in intimate relationships—show how these fragile exchanges can be dignified rather than exploited.

5.2 Meso-level

At the meso-level, the grammar of dissonance, conformity, and obedience extends beyond dyads to collective settings such as classrooms, workplaces, and protest movements. Here, micro-exchanges of recognition and authority are scaled into group dynamics. The unease of finitude does not disappear; it is borne collectively, negotiated through norms, rituals, and identities.

Classrooms illustrate this vividly. Students' dependence on teachers for recognition structures their epistemic agency. To question a teacher is to risk exclusion from the collective order of the classroom; to conform is to secure belonging and validation. Paulo Freire (1970) showed how pedagogy can either reproduce clientelism through authority-as-domination or dignify dependence through dialogical care.

Workplaces follow the same grammar. Jackall (1988) described how professional life often requires conformity to organisational norms, even when privately dissonant, in exchange for career security and group membership. Compliance here is not aberration but the everyday negotiation of autonomy within hierarchies. Yet where fiduciary responsibilities are honoured—by leaders who embody loyalty, candour, and care—dependence can stabilise without eroding autonomy.

Protest movements reveal the other side of meso-structures: the possibility of collective resistance. In *Lessons from the Hong Kong Unrest* (Kahl 2025e), I analysed how dissonance at the individual level—between lived experience and state authority—scaled into collective mobilisation. Protesters resisted epistemic clientelism by refusing to trade autonomy for recognition from the state. But the same movement showed how fragile this refusal could be: the unease of dissonance, when uncontained, collapsed into polarisation, exposing the limits of resistance under authoritarian capture. Classic group psychology confirms the dynamics at play: Lewin (1947) on group fields, Tajfel & Turner (1979) on social identity, and Turner et al. (1987) on self-categorisation theory all show that belonging and authority structure collective cognition.

Whether in classrooms, workplaces, or movements, the same grammar recurs: recognition is sought, authority stabilises unease, and autonomy is negotiated under pressure. Where fiduciary scaffolds are absent, these exchanges collapse into clientelism or coercion; where present, they dignify dependence and make collective life sustainable. Chapter 6 will return to this level normatively, showing how scaffolds in pedagogy, workplaces, and professional life can transform dependence into stewardship rather than subordination.

5.3 Macro-level

At the macro-level, the grammar of epistemic life is stabilised into regimes, authoritarian systems, and knowledge institutions. The dynamics traced at the micro- and meso-levels—dissonance, conformity, obedience, and clientelism—are not left behind but crystallised into architectures of authority that structure entire societies.

In *Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience* (Kahl 2025f), I argued that authoritarian regimes function by amplifying ordinary clientelism. The state offers protection and stability in exchange for obedience, redefining dissent as disobedience. What appears at the micro-level as a personal trade of autonomy for recognition becomes, at the macro-level, the organising principle of the political order. Michel Foucault (1977) captured this in his analysis of disciplinary regimes, where surveillance and normalisation institutionalise dependence. Authoritarianism is thus not sui generis but the routinisation of ordinary epistemic unease into a system of obedience.

Knowledge institutions provide a parallel example. Academia, journalism, and law all stabilise recognition through structured processes: peer review, editorial gatekeeping, judicial precedent. Pierre Bourdieu (1988) showed how academia operates as a hierarchy of symbolic capital, where recognition is the currency of authority. Jürgen Habermas (1989) described how the public sphere is shaped by media institutions that ration visibility and legitimacy. In each case, authority and recognition are distributed conditionally, organising epistemic life at scale. To participate in these institutions is to enter systems where autonomy is mediated by authority, finitude stabilised by collective scaffolds.

Yet the macro-level also offers the possibility of scaffolds that dignify dependence. In *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism* (Kahl 2025g), I proposed fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds as conditions for agency: duties of loyalty, candour, and care that bind authority to responsibility. Where such scaffolds are institutionalised, dependence does not collapse into obedience but sustains plural agency. Institutions, in this sense, are not merely systems of control but collective devices for managing the unease of finitude—either exploitatively, through clientelism, or responsibly, through fiduciary scaffolding.

Whether in regimes, academia, media, or law, the same grammar recurs: dependence is stabilised through authority, and autonomy is mediated by recognition. Psychology can no longer end at the individual. Its true subject is epistemic life structured at scale: the architectures through which societies bear finitude, distribute

recognition, and stabilise authority. The normative task, as Chapter 6 argues, is to embed fiduciary scaffolds into these macro-architectures—ensuring that political representation, judicial authority, and media power dignify rather than erode plurality.

5.4 Takeaway – The Three-Level Model

The argument of this chapter can now be drawn together. At the micro-level, epistemic life is structured by affective-cognitive events—dissonance, conformity, obedience—that reveal finitude and are negotiated through exchanges of recognition (Kahl 2025a; 2025c). At the meso-level, these exchanges scale into collective dynamics in classrooms, workplaces, and movements, where belonging and authority structure recognition and resistance (Kahl 2025e). At the macro-level, regimes and knowledge institutions crystallise the same grammar into durable architectures of authority, distributing recognition conditionally and stabilising dependence at scale (Kahl 2025f; 2025g).

The three levels are not discrete but co-constitutive. Micro-level dissonance does not vanish in collective life; it is scaled into meso-level exchanges and institutionalised at the macro-level. Meso-level practices, in turn, both reproduce and contest macro-structures. Macro-level institutions condition the very terms in which micro-level cognition unfolds. To study one without the others is to miss the grammar that unifies them.

The model thus defines epistemic psychology as a three-level science of epistemic life:

- **Micro**: the affective disclosure of finitude in individual cognition-in-relation.
- **Meso**: the negotiation of recognition and authority in collective settings.
- **Macro**: the institutional architectures that stabilise dependence and authority at scale.

The implication is decisive. Psychology can no longer limit itself to isolated individuals or small groups. To understand human life under epistemic conditions, it must integrate micro, meso, and macro into a single framework. Only then can it grasp autonomy and dependence as co-constitutive across the whole spectrum of epistemic life.

This integration sets the stage for Chapter 6, which develops the normative horizon of epistemic psychology through the concept of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds. These scaffolds mark the line between dependence that erodes autonomy and dependence that dignifies it, providing the conditions under which human beings can bear finitude without subjugation.

6. Normative Horizon: Fiduciary–Epistemic Psychology

6.1 Introduction – From Diagnosis to Design

The argument so far has been diagnostic. Chapter 2 reframed cognitive dissonance as the affective disclosure of finitude rather than an anomaly. Chapter 3 showed conformity and obedience not as lapses but as the ordinary currencies of epistemic exchange. Chapter 4 argued for a re-founding of psychology as epistemic psychology, centred on autonomy and dependence as co-constitutive. Chapter 5 developed a three-level model—micro,

meso, macro—that integrates individual unease, collective negotiation, and institutional architectures into a single framework.

But diagnosis alone is insufficient. If epistemic life is always lived under conditions of dependence, the crucial question becomes normative: under what conditions does dependence dignify autonomy rather than erode it? When does reliance on others enable plurality, and when does it collapse into clientelism or domination? The difference between these outcomes is decisive, for it determines whether finitude is borne with dignity or exploited as vulnerability.

This chapter turns to design. Drawing on fiduciary theory (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014) and epistemic justice (Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; Marková 2025; Raz 1986), I argue that psychology's task is not only to describe how dependence collapses into clientelism but to develop fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds that sustain plurality. In doing so, epistemic psychology becomes both science and ethic: a discipline that studies the conditions of human knowing and prescribes the responsibilities that allow it to be lived with dignity.

6.2 Fiduciary Theory as Normative Baseline

Fiduciary law provides a model for thinking about dependence that dignifies rather than erodes autonomy. Tamar Frankel (2011) identifies the core fiduciary duties as loyalty, care, and candour—obligations that arise precisely because one party is vulnerable and must rely on another. Fiduciary responsibility exists not to eliminate dependence but to ensure that dependence is not exploited.

Lionel Smith (2014) sharpened this point by insisting that fiduciary relationships demand undivided loyalty. They cannot be reduced to contractual exchanges of benefit for benefit. A fiduciary is bound not by transaction but by trust: the recognition that authority must be exercised for the benefit of the dependent party rather than for personal gain.

Andrew Gold and Paul Miller (2014) extended this into a general account of fiduciary law as a structure of accountability beyond contract. Fiduciary responsibility binds not merely through agreement but through principle: authority is legitimate only when tethered to loyalty, care, and candour. This is an ancient intuition. In *Keech v Sandford* (1726), Lord King held that fiduciary responsibility is so strict that even the faintest possibility of conflict must be ruled out. Justice Cardozo echoed this in *Meinhard v Salmon* (1928), describing fiduciary duty as "the punctilio of an honour the most sensitive."

The application to psychology is direct, but it requires nuance. Not every epistemic role is fiduciary, but where asymmetry and reliance are strong—teachers with students, scientists with lay publics, journalists with audiences, judges with citizens—the relationship must be understood in fiduciary terms. Without such scaffolds, dependence degenerates into clientelism; with them, it can be dignified. Fiduciary duties are institutionalised responses to the unease of finitude, preventing dependence from collapsing into domination.

Fiduciary theory thus provides epistemic psychology with a normative baseline: the grammar of responsibility under conditions of dependence. It names the difference between exploitation and dignity, between authority as domination and authority as stewardship.

6.3 Epistemology and Authority

If dependence is structural, then authority cannot be avoided. The question is not whether authority exists, but under what conditions it becomes legitimate rather than oppressive. Epistemology provides the conceptual resources to answer this.

Miranda Fricker (2007) shows that epistemic injustice takes two forms: testimonial injustice, when a speaker's credibility is unjustly withheld, and hermeneutical injustice, when interpretive resources are unequally distributed. Both reveal how authority, when unchecked, distorts the distribution of recognition. José Medina (2013) pushes further, arguing that epistemic courage and resistance are necessary virtues for sustaining plurality. His broader project of epistemic activism insists that only through resilience against dominant authority can silenced perspectives gain voice.

Ivana Marková (2025) adds the relational precondition: epistemic trust is the very condition for authority to function. Authority cannot be imposed unilaterally; it operates only because those subject to it extend trust. When trust is betrayed, authority collapses into coercion. Joseph Raz (1986) clarifies the criteria of legitimacy: authority is justified only when it enables subjects to act on reasons they already possess. Authority that severs this link does not guide but dominates.

Taken together, these insights form a cumulative picture. Fricker diagnoses injustice, Medina prescribes resistance, Marková identifies trust as the precondition, and Raz defines the terms of legitimacy. Authority is thus not accidental but structural: it is the social scaffold through which the unease disclosed in dissonance is managed. Its justice or injustice turns on whether fiduciary–epistemic duties—loyalty, candour, care, and trust—are honoured or betrayed.

The synthesis is decisive. Authority can never be avoided, but its legitimacy depends on fiduciary scaffolds. Where these are absent, dependence collapses into clientelism and domination. Where they are present, dependence dignifies autonomy, allowing plurality to flourish under conditions of finitude.

6.4 Fiduciary–Epistemic Scaffolds

If dependence is structural, the normative task is to distinguish conditions under which it erodes autonomy from those under which it dignifies it. Across my works—from *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a), through *The Epistemic Architecture of Power* (Kahl 2025d), *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl 2025c), *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (Kahl 2025f), and *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism* (Kahl 2025g)—I have developed the concept of fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds: institutional, relational, or procedural frameworks that bind authority to responsibility. Scaffolds do not eliminate dependence; they channel it so that autonomy is sustained rather than undermined.

Micro-level scaffolds: Intimate and relational oaths

At the smallest scale, scaffolds take the form of ethical pledges within intimate relationships. In *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl 2025c), I argued that couples, families, and friendships are structured by asymmetrical exchanges of recognition. Without safeguards, such asymmetry collapses into clientelism. A fiduciary oath—a pledge of loyalty, candour, and care—operates as a relational scaffold, ensuring that dependence within intimacy, parenting, or pedagogy is dignified rather than exploited.

Meso-level scaffolds: Organisational practices

At the level of classrooms, workplaces, and professional communities, scaffolds appear as procedural norms. In academia, peer review must be redesigned with transparency and fiduciary candour: reviewers declaring conflicts of interest, decisions justified openly, and duties of care owed not to journals but to knowledge itself. In workplaces, managerial authority must be bound to epistemic openness: obligations to disclose reasons, to hear dissent without reprisal, and to treat subordinates as co-agents in shared inquiry. These practices stabilise dependence without coercion, transforming conformity into stewardship.

Macro-level scaffolds: Institutional architectures

At the broadest scale, scaffolds must be formalised in law, politics, and governance. Representation cannot remain a loyalty to party or state; it must be reconceived as loyalty to constituents. Fiduciary duties of candour in communication, care in deliberation, and accountability for decisions are essential to prevent citizens from being reduced to clients in a patronage economy. Similarly, judicial and media institutions require scaffolds of transparency and candour to ensure that authority sustains plurality rather than silencing it.

The claim is decisive. Fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are not optional refinements but conditions for sustaining plurality under finitude. They transmute dependence from clientelist erosion into fiduciary dignity, making it possible for authority to exist without domination. In this way, scaffolds provide the normative architecture of epistemic psychology: a three-level grammar of responsibility—micro, meso, and macro—through which human beings can bear finitude without exploitation.

6.5 Psychology's Normative Task

Traditional psychology has largely confined itself to description. Conformity is catalogued as bias, obedience as irrational compliance, dissonance as error. Even when robustly demonstrated, these findings are treated as anomalies rather than as structural features of epistemic life.

Epistemic psychology must move further. If autonomy and dependence are co-constitutive, the task is not only to describe how dependence operates but to prescribe the conditions under which it dignifies rather than erodes autonomy. To stop at description is to misrecognise the very grammar of epistemic life; to move toward prescription is to meet psychology's true responsibility.

At the micro level, the task is to recognise when intimate relationships collapse into clientelism and when trust dignifies. As I argued in *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl 2025c), asymmetry within couples, families, or pedagogical bonds is inevitable. A fiduciary oath—loyalty, candour, and care as relational commitments—functions as a scaffold that preserves dignity even amid dependence. The unease of finitude, disclosed in dissonance (Kahl 2025a), is thus borne without exploitation.

At the meso level, the task is to identify pedagogical, workplace, or activist practices that stabilise plurality without coercion. Classrooms that protect dissent, workplaces that foster epistemic openness, and movements that resist authoritarian capture all exemplify fiduciary scaffolding in practice (Medina 2013; Fricker 2007). Psychology's role is not only to observe but to theorise and test these practices, clarifying the conditions under which collective life sustains rather than suppresses plurality.

At the macro level, the task is to support institutional reforms that embed fiduciary scaffolds into knowledge systems, law, and governance. As fiduciary theorists have shown (Frankel 2011; Smith 2014; Gold & Miller 2014), duties of loyalty, candour, and care transform authority into stewardship. Epistemic psychology cannot

enact reforms itself, but it can supply the conceptual and empirical tools that guide them—ensuring that peer review, judicial precedent, and political representation dignify rather than erode autonomy (Kahl 2025f; 2025g).

Across all levels, the task is the same: to distinguish dependence that sustains from dependence that subjugates, and to design scaffolds that secure the former against collapse into the latter. The normative horizon of epistemic psychology is thus to prevent the unease of finitude from being misclassified as error or exploited as vulnerability, and to secure it instead as the ground of dignity.

6.6 Implications for Democracy and Plurality

The stakes of fiduciary–epistemic psychology extend beyond individuals and institutions to the fabric of democratic life itself. Without fiduciary scaffolds, plural agency collapses into authoritarian capture. As I argued in *Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience* (Kahl 2025f), regimes amplify ordinary clientelism, offering stability and protection in exchange for obedience while redefining dissent as disobedience. In such systems, the unease of dissonance is neutralised not by recognition but by coercion. Plurality is extinguished.

With scaffolds, by contrast, plurality can be sustained. Voices are recognised, dissent is dignified, and autonomy is supported even amid dependence. Miranda Fricker (2007) demonstrates how credibility injustices distort epistemic life; José Medina (2013) calls for epistemic courage as a virtue of resistance that sustains plurality; Ivana Marková (2025) shows that trust is the precondition for authority to function at all. Elizabeth Anderson (2006; 2009) adds the systemic perspective: democracy itself is an epistemic system, pooling diverse perspectives to generate more reliable knowledge than any individual could achieve. Democracy succeeds only when scaffolds of loyalty, candour, and care sustain the circulation of voices and prevent the capture of authority by a few.

The implication is that democratic resilience depends not only on free speech or formal rights but on fiduciary–epistemic architectures. Laws and constitutions may guarantee liberty in principle, but without scaffolds that dignify dependence, these guarantees remain brittle. Democracy must provide collective scaffolds through which the unease of finitude can be borne without silencing plurality.

The manifesto claim is clear. Democracy's resilience is measured not only by its constitutions but by its scaffolds. Where fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds are absent, plural agency collapses into domination; where they are present, plurality is sustained as the ordinary dignity of human finitude shared in common.

6.7 Takeaway – The Normative Horizon

The argument of this chapter is straightforward. Psychology must shift from merely diagnosing how dependence collapses into clientelism to designing fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds that dignify it. Fiduciary theory provides the normative baseline: Tamar Frankel (2011) identifies loyalty, candour, and care as the core duties owed under asymmetry; Lionel Smith (2014) insists that fiduciary loyalty must be undivided; Andrew Gold and Paul Miller (2014) shows that fiduciary law creates structures of accountability beyond contract. These principles articulate how authority can function as stewardship rather than exploitation.

Epistemic justice provides the complementary grammar. Miranda Fricker (2007) distinguishes testimonial injustice, where credibility is unjustly withheld, and hermeneutical injustice, where interpretive resources are unequally distributed. José Medina (2013) develops epistemic courage and activism as virtues that resist domination and sustain plurality. Ivana Marková (2025) demonstrates that trust is the precondition for

authority itself. Joseph Raz (1986) adds that authority is legitimate only if it enables subjects to act on reasons they already possess. Together, these insights clarify the line between authority that dignifies and authority that subjugates.

Across my own works—from *Cognitive Dissonance as Epistemic Event* (Kahl 2025a) to *Beyond Epistemic Clientelism* (Kahl 2025g)—I have developed fiduciary–epistemic scaffolding as the institutionalised response to the unease disclosed in dissonance. These scaffolds are not refinements but necessities: without them, dependence collapses into domination; with them, it becomes the basis of dignity and plurality.

The closing claim is decisive. Epistemic psychology is both science and ethic. Its task is not only to describe how finitude is borne—in dissonance, conformity, obedience, and institutional authority—but to design the scaffolds that transform dependence into the dignity of plurality.

This prepares the way for Chapter 7, which outlines a research programme for epistemic psychology. There, the task will be to operationalise this normative horizon into concrete questions, methods, and agendas: how to study scaffolds empirically, how to test their effects, and how to institutionalise them across micro, meso, and macro levels.

7. Research Programme for Epistemic Psychology

7.1 Introduction – From Concept to Programme

The preceding chapters have established the conceptual foundation for epistemic psychology. Chapter 2 reframed cognitive dissonance as an epistemic event rather than an anomaly. Chapter 3 demonstrated that conformity and obedience are not errors but the ordinary currencies of epistemic life. Chapter 4 argued that psychology must be re-founded as epistemic psychology, while Chapter 5 set out a three-level model—micro, meso, macro—that integrates affective unease, collective negotiation, and institutional architectures. Chapter 6 then advanced the normative horizon, showing how fiduciary–epistemic scaffolds can transform dependence from clientelist erosion into dignity.

The next task is to set out a concrete research programme. If epistemic psychology is to establish itself as a discipline, it must move beyond conceptual diagnosis and normative design to empirical inquiry. The question is not only how to understand dissonance, conformity, and obedience differently, but how to study them anew —through experiments, comparative research, and clinical testing.

The claim of this chapter is clear. Epistemic psychology must be pursued along five lines of research: (1) reinterpretation of classic experiments through the lens of epistemic exchanges; (2) design of new empirical studies to measure autonomy-for-recognition trade-offs; (3) comparative and cross-cultural work linking unrest and conformity across regimes; (4) clinical applications in psychiatry, where therapeutic alliances and dependency patterns can test the framework; and (5) integration of neuroscience, behavioural psychology, and institutional analysis into a single architecture. Only by advancing along these axes can epistemic psychology establish itself as both a diagnostic and a normative science.

7.2 Reinterpretation of Classic Experiments

The first step in a research programme for epistemic psychology is to revisit the discipline's own canonical studies. These classics have long been interpreted within the paradigm of autonomy-as-baseline, dependence-as-deviation. Yet if autonomy and dependence are co-constitutive, their findings require a new reading.

Festinger (1957). Cognitive dissonance has been treated as evidence of irrationality—a drive for internal consistency that distorts rational judgement. Later debates, such as the controversy around the free-choice paradigm (Chen & Risen 2010), often sought to resolve anomalies methodologically, but such efforts misrecognise dissonance as noise. Reinterpreted through epistemic psychology, dissonance is not a pathology but an epistemic event: the affective disclosure of finitude. Each act of choice forecloses alternatives, producing unease that is managed not as error but as the ordinary burden of bounded freedom.

Asch (1951). The line-judgement experiments have been read as evidence of perceptual error under group pressure, though critics have noted their artificiality and limited ecological validity. Yet the deeper lesson is that subjects were trading autonomy for recognition. Conformity is not irrational distortion but an epistemic exchange: authority and belonging are weighed against private perception, revealing recognition as a core currency of epistemic life. Here too, dissonance is managed externally through group belonging rather than internally through consistency.

Milgram (1974). Obedience has been portrayed as tragic evidence of blind compliance, sparking ethical debates about harm to participants. But reframed, the experiments show how authority redefines dissent as disobedience, transforming dissonance into subordination. What emerges is not anomaly but clientelism at scale: the ordinary grammar of dependence under asymmetric authority. Again, dissonance is managed not by private rationalisation but by aligning with authority's terms of recognition.

Across these experiments, the common thread is clear: dissonance is not suppressed error but the engine of epistemic exchange. Subjects negotiate unease not in isolation but through recognition and authority, revealing that autonomy is always mediated by dependence.

The research question follows: How would these experiments look if analysed through the lens of epistemic clientelism rather than autonomy-as-baseline? To answer, epistemic psychology must conduct archival reanalysis of existing data, and where possible, replication studies redesigned to measure recognition, trust, and authority explicitly. For instance, replications could track willingness to trade accuracy for group belonging, measure perceived candour of authority figures, or use neuroimaging to map conformity effects alongside reported trust. Only then can the discipline reclaim its most powerful findings as evidence not of deviation but of the very grammar of epistemic life.

7.3 Designing New Experiments

If epistemic psychology is to establish itself as an empirical discipline, it must operationalise the concept of epistemic exchanges. Rather than treating dissonance, conformity, and obedience as anomalies, experiments must be designed to measure how autonomy is negotiated through recognition, trust, and authority. These designs can build on established methods in social psychology and behavioural economics—such as trust games, ultimatum games, and public goods tasks—while reorienting their focus from material to epistemic exchange.

Example 1: Autonomy for recognition trade-offs. Participants are asked to make judgements independently or align with group consensus, with explicit rewards tied to either accuracy or peer approval. This paradigm, building on Asch, would track willingness to sacrifice private judgement for group belonging. Dependent measures might include self-reports of unease, behavioural choices, and physiological indicators of dissonance such as galvanic skin response or heart rate variability.

Example 2: Trust under asymmetry. Building on trust games, experiments could simulate authority figures who either disclose their reasoning (candour) or withhold it (opacity). Participants' willingness to share information, comply with directives, or challenge decisions would be measured under these conditions. Physiological and neural indices could capture the affective dimension of trust or distrust, testing whether fiduciary signals stabilise dependence.

Example 3: Fiduciary oath simulations. Authority figures would deliver instructions framed either as neutral/transactional or as accompanied by a fiduciary pledge of loyalty and candour. The hypothesis is that explicit fiduciary signals increase participants' willingness to cooperate without collapsing into blind obedience. This could be modelled on real-world analogues such as professional oaths, codes of conduct, or informed consent protocols.

Taken together, these designs trace a continuum: from peer-level exchanges of recognition, through hierarchical relations of authority, to fiduciary scaffolding as a stabilising framework. Each experiment operationalises how the unease disclosed in dissonance is managed—whether through conformity, obedience, or fiduciary responsibility.

The outcome of such work would be the establishment of measurable indices of epistemic clientelism and fiduciary scaffolding. By quantifying how autonomy is traded, stabilised, or dignified under different conditions, epistemic psychology would open a new empirical frontier: not simply documenting anomalies, but charting the structural dynamics of epistemic life itself.

7.4 Comparative and Cross-Cultural Studies

A second line of inquiry for epistemic psychology is comparative. The hypothesis is that epistemic exchanges vary across contexts of authority: how recognition, obedience, and dissent are negotiated depends on political regimes, moments of unrest, and cultural traditions. In each case, dissonance discloses finitude; the difference lies in whether scaffolds dignify or suppress it.

Authoritarian vs democratic systems. In authoritarian contexts, recognition is granted conditionally and dissent redefined as disobedience, producing what I described as an architecture of obedience (Kahl 2025f). In democratic systems, recognition can be dispersed, dissent legitimised, and fiduciary scaffolds stabilise plurality. Political psychology reinforces this contrast: Feldman (2003) treats authoritarianism as enforced conformity, while Stenner (2005) shows how the authoritarian dynamic intensifies the demand for closure. Comparative research could test whether autonomy-for-recognition trade-offs or trust-under-asymmetry paradigms yield different results when replicated across regimes.

Unrest vs conformity. In Lessons from the Hong Kong Unrest (Kahl 2025e), I argued that dissonance can collapse into resistance rather than clientelism. Protest movements reveal how collective unease is managed differently: either neutralised by coercion or stabilised by solidarity. Here, scaffolds take the form of networks of peer recognition, which allow dissonance to be endured without capitulation. Comparative work could

examine how protests in differing political contexts—Hong Kong, Belarus, Chile—resolve dissonance into either conformity or resistance, and what scaffolds make the difference.

Cross-cultural psychology. Traditions of fiduciary scaffolding differ across cultures. Markus and Kitayama (1991) demonstrated that Western contexts emphasise independence, while East Asian contexts emphasise interdependence. Confucian traditions frame fiduciary obligations in hierarchical but care-laden terms; liberal traditions stress rights and autonomy; collectivist traditions conceive recognition as communal rather than individual. These are not rigid categories but repertoires of scaffolding. Cross-cultural studies—through surveys of institutional trust, ethnographic observation of relational authority, or experimental replications of trust and recognition paradigms—could test how scaffolds are enacted differently across traditions, and under what conditions they dignify dependence.

The goal of this line of research is to map the conditions under which fiduciary scaffolds succeed or fail. By comparing across regimes, protest movements, and cultural repertoires, epistemic psychology would reveal not only the universality of dependence but also the plurality of ways in which finitude is borne—with dignity in some contexts, with domination in others.

7.5 Integration Across Levels

A third strand of the research programme is integration. Epistemic psychology insists that autonomy and dependence are not confined to any one level of analysis but operate simultaneously in neural processing, group dynamics, and institutional structures. To study them in isolation is to miss the grammar that unites them. At each level, dissonance is the affective disclosure of finitude—registered neurally, negotiated socially, and institutionalised politically.

Neuroscience. Studies by Berns et al. (2005) and Klucharev et al. (2009) show that conformity is not merely a post hoc adjustment but penetrates perception and learning. Brain activity aligns with group consensus, and reinforcement learning signals predict conformity. These findings reveal that epistemic exchanges are embedded at the micro-level of neural processing, where unease is already mediated by recognition.

Meso-level dynamics. At the level of groups and organisations, recognition and authority are negotiated collectively. Classic group conformity tasks (Asch 1951) show how perception is stabilised by peer recognition; organisational psychology demonstrates how compliance is traded for security in workplaces; and protest movements, such as those analysed in *Lessons from the Hong Kong Unrest* (Kahl 2025e), reveal how dissonance can be resolved into either resistance or capitulation. Here, scaffolds take the form of practices—dialogue, solidarity, transparent authority—that determine whether dependence is dignified or eroded.

Institutional analysis. In *The Epistemic Architecture of Power* (Kahl 2025d), I argued that institutions structure knowledge by distributing recognition and authority; in *Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience* (Kahl 2025f), I showed how regimes crystallise obedience as a structural solution to dissonance. At the macro-level, authority is scaled and stabilised through architectures that either dignify or erode dependence.

Integration. The task is to connect these levels systematically. Neural signals of unease (micro) scale into group behaviours of recognition and conformity (meso), which in turn are crystallised by institutions into enduring architectures of authority (macro). The levels are not discrete but scaled expressions of the same grammar: the negotiation of finitude through recognition, trust, and authority.

Method. Multi-level integration requires designs that link lab-based and field-based data. For example: neuroimaging of dissonance paired with group decision-making tasks, followed by longitudinal surveys of institutional trust. Multi-level modelling could then test how patterns of neural conformity predict group behaviour and how both are conditioned by institutional scaffolds. In this way, epistemic psychology would produce a layered analysis that moves from neurons to societies without reductionism.

The promise of integration is a systemic science that traces how the unease of finitude travels across levels—registered in neural signals, stabilised in group practices, and institutionalised in authority.

7.6 Normative Research Agenda

The final strand of the research programme is normative. Epistemic psychology is not only diagnostic—mapping how autonomy and dependence co-constitute epistemic life—but also prescriptive: testing and refining the scaffolds that dignify dependence. The aim is to move from description to design, from observing collapse into clientelism to cultivating fiduciary–epistemic architectures that sustain plurality.

Diagnostic aim. At every level—micro, meso, and macro—psychology must identify how autonomy and dependence are woven together. This involves clarifying how dissonance is disclosed, how recognition stabilises or unsettles it, and how authority redefines dissent.

Normative aim. Beyond diagnosis, epistemic psychology must design and test scaffolds. Normativity here is not an abstraction but an empirical challenge: to discover the practices, commitments, and structures that allow dependence to sustain autonomy rather than corrode it. This task begins from the unease of finitude itself, treating dissonance not as error but as the ground from which scaffolding is required.

Research questions.

- *Micro*: Which scaffolds most effectively dignify dependence in intimate relationships? Can explicit ethical pledges or "fiduciary oaths" alter how partners, parents, or teachers manage asymmetry? How do psychiatric or therapeutic alliances (Bordin 1979) protect against epistemic injustice (Crichton et al. 2017) while still acknowledging authority?

- *Meso*: How can workplaces, classrooms, and clinics be experimentally redesigned to foster epistemic openness? Which practices—transparent decision-making, protection for dissent, or solidarity networks—stabilise plurality without coercion? Can clinical settings test whether fiduciary–epistemic duties of candour, loyalty, and care improve therapeutic trust?

- *Macro*: What institutional reforms demonstrably reduce clientelism and sustain plurality? How can redesigns of peer review, political representation, or psychiatric governance embed fiduciary scaffolds into authority itself?

Implication. Across all levels, the agenda converges on a single task: to distinguish dependence that dignifies from dependence that subjugates, and to build the scaffolds that secure the former against collapse into the latter. By incorporating psychiatry into this agenda, epistemic psychology shows its breadth: it is both an empirical and prescriptive science, capable of guiding how finitude is borne with dignity in clinical encounters as well as in institutions, workplaces, and democracies.

7.7 Takeaway – Toward a Disciplinary Foundation

The research programme for epistemic psychology is now clear. First, the classics of psychology must be reinterpreted: Festinger, Asch, and Milgram are not anomalies in rational autonomy but demonstrations of the epistemic structures through which dependence and authority are lived. Second, new experiments must be designed to measure epistemic exchanges directly—testing autonomy-for-recognition trade-offs, trust under asymmetry, and fiduciary scaffolding effects. Third, comparative and cross-cultural work must examine how scaffolds succeed or fail across authoritarian and democratic regimes, in contexts of unrest and conformity, and within different cultural repertoires. Fourth, integration is required to connect neuroscience, behavioural dynamics, and institutional architectures into a multi-level account of epistemic life. Finally, psychiatry offers a clinical horizon: therapeutic alliances, diagnostic practices, and patterns of dependence can be tested as concrete cases of epistemic negotiation.

The closing claim is decisive. Epistemic psychology is not simply a reclassification of familiar phenomena. It is a programme for building a discipline that is both diagnostic and normative, extending from laboratory studies to psychiatric practice and institutional reform. It identifies the grammar of autonomy and dependence and prescribes the scaffolds that sustain plurality under finitude.

This sets the stage for the paper's conclusion, where the implications of epistemic psychology are drawn together—not only for psychology as a discipline but for psychiatry, governance, and democracy as practices that depend on it.

8. Conclusion

8.1 Synthesis

The argument of this paper has unfolded step by step, but its core insight can now be stated simply. Cognitive dissonance is not a pathology of irrationality but an epistemic event—the affective disclosure of finitude and bounded freedom (Kahl 2025a). Epistemic clientelism is not a deviation from autonomy but the ordinary grammar of social life—the negotiation of recognition, protection, and belonging through asymmetry and dependence (Kahl 2025b–c). Institutional architectures are not background contexts but the structures that stabilise or distort these exchanges at scale, shaping how knowledge, trust, and authority circulate across societies (Kahl 2025d–g).

Taken together, these insights redefine psychology. They reveal that autonomy and dependence are not opposites but co-constitutive; that dissonance, conformity, and obedience are not anomalies but the grammar of epistemic life; and that institutions are not secondary influences but primary architectures of human cognition and sociality. The trajectory is therefore decisive: from pathology to ontology; from description to fiduciary–normative task; from experimental psychology to psychiatry and the human sciences.

8.2 Contribution

The contribution of this work lies in reorienting psychology at its foundations. Where the discipline once treated dissonance, conformity, and obedience as pathologies, this book has shown them to be ontological disclosures: signals of finitude, expressions of dependence, and the ordinary currencies of epistemic life. Where

psychology once confined itself to description—cataloguing biases, anomalies, and errors—it must now assume a fiduciary–normative task: to design and test scaffolds that dignify dependence rather than exploit it.

This reframing not only shifts psychology as a discipline but equips psychiatry to distinguish dependence that dignifies from dependence that erodes. Clinical encounters, therapeutic alliances, and diagnostic practices become sites for testing how authority, trust, and recognition can be exercised without collapsing into epistemic injustice.

In short, the move is from pathology to ontology, and from description to prescription. Psychology becomes epistemic psychology: the science of human autonomy and dependence under epistemic conditions.

8.3 Cross-Disciplinary Horizon

The implications of epistemic psychology are not confined to psychology. By redefining autonomy and dependence as co-constitutive, it offers a common grammar that reshapes how other disciplines interpret their own subjects of study. In this sense, epistemic psychology functions as a unifying framework — almost a "theory of everything" in socialisation.

Sociology must integrate the micro-affective unease of dissonance into its analyses of norms, institutions, and collective life. Political science gains a new lens for understanding authoritarianism, legitimacy, and resistance. My own works — *Lessons from the Hong Kong Unrest* (Kahl 2025e) and *Authoritarianism and the Architecture of Obedience* (Kahl 2025f) — have already shown how epistemic clientelism explains the fragility of protest, and how obedience can be institutionalised into architectures of capture. Law, too, acquires a psychological foundation for fiduciary duties: authority can no longer be theorised only in legal terms, but must be tested against its capacity to dignify dependence under conditions of epistemic vulnerability. Here my proposals in *Directors' Epistemic Duties and Fiduciary Openness* (2025) and *Epistemic Justice and Institutional Responsibility in Academia* (2025) demonstrate how fiduciary scaffolds might operate across corporate boards and universities.

Education must also be re-theorised. Pedagogy is not a neutral transfer of knowledge, but an epistemic exchange in which recognition, authority, and trust are continually negotiated. And in the field of technology studies, especially AI governance, epistemic psychology reveals algorithmic systems as new sites of epistemic authority. My essay *Is Artificial Intelligence Really Undermining Democracy?* (2025) framed this problem as one of auditability, institutional trust, and epistemic sovereignty — concerns that can now be embedded in a broader disciplinary foundation.

Taken together, these extensions show that epistemic psychology does more than re-found one discipline. It provides a structural grammar that cuts across the human sciences, offering a coherent framework for understanding socialisation, dependence, and legitimacy from the most intimate exchanges to the largest political orders.

8.4 Implications for Psychiatry and Mental Health

The re-founding of psychology as epistemic psychology carries significant implications for psychiatry and mental health. If dissonance, conformity, and obedience are recognised not as pathological anomalies but as structural features of epistemic life, psychiatry may benefit from reconsidering how it interprets and treats these phenomena.

Traditional psychiatry often frames dependence, compliance, or dissonance as symptoms of maladaptive functioning. From the standpoint of epistemic psychology, however, such responses are ordinary manifestations of finitude, uncertainty, and the human need for recognition. The clinical challenge is not to eliminate dependence but to discern under what conditions it sustains autonomy and under what conditions it erodes it.

This reorientation connects directly with established psychiatric concepts. Bowlby's Attachment Theory (1969/1982) showed that dependence is not pathological but foundational to development. Later work (Mikulincer & Shaver 2007) extended this into adulthood, revealing how recognition and support structure resilience. In the therapeutic setting, Bordin's (1979) notion of the working alliance highlights how psychiatry is always an asymmetrical epistemic exchange: the psychiatrist's recognition validates the patient's experience, while its absence can undermine trust. Crichton, Carel, and Kidd (2017) have sharpened this insight by diagnosing psychiatry itself as a site of epistemic injustice, where patients' credibility is often discounted.

Fiduciary–epistemic theory brings these threads together. It suggests that psychiatric authority, precisely because it operates under asymmetry, should be bound by duties of candour, loyalty, and care. Diagnoses, too, might be reinterpreted: patterns of dependence or compliance need not be viewed as failures, but as intensified forms of epistemic clientelism that become clinically significant when they collapse into domination or paralysis. My work on Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships (Kahl 2025c) demonstrates how dependency patterns stabilise bonds in everyday life; psychiatry faces analogous dynamics when those patterns become sources of distress or exploitation. Finally, therapeutic approaches that mobilise cognitive dissonance (Axsom 1989) can be reframed not as correcting irrationality but as supporting patients in enduring and reinterpreting the unease of finitude.

In this light, epistemic psychology offers psychiatry not a replacement but a compass. It clarifies when dependence is dignified through trust and recognition, and when it collapses into exploitation or epistemic injustice. By situating clinical work within this broader framework, psychiatry can be reoriented toward sustaining autonomy and dignity under the unavoidable conditions of epistemic vulnerability.

8.5 Call to Action

The re-founding of psychology is not an academic luxury. It is a civic necessity in an age marked by disinformation, authoritarianism, and institutional capture. Disinformation exploits the unease of dissonance, offering false recognitions in exchange for obedience. Authoritarian regimes amplify epistemic clientelism, redefining dissent as disobedience and stabilising obedience through coercion. Institutions hollowed by capture no longer provide fiduciary scaffolds but collapse into gatekeeping and domination.

Against these forces, epistemic psychology offers a different horizon. It insists that autonomy and dependence must be studied together, that recognition and authority must be bound by fiduciary duties, and that scaffolds can be designed to sustain plurality even under finitude. The task is urgent: to build a science that does not merely describe how human beings know, but prescribes the conditions under which knowing can remain free, plural, and dignified.

Epistemic psychology is therefore both science and ethic. Its object is not only the mind in isolation but the architectures of trust, recognition, and authority through which human beings bear finitude together. It calls for a psychology adequate to the age we live in.

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Author Contact

Email: peter.kahl@juris.vc
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1616-4843
LinkedIn: https://www.linkedin.com/in/peter-kahl-law/
ResearchGate: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Kahl

PhilPapers: https://philpeople.org/profiles/peter-kahl
GitHub: https://github.com/Peter-Kahl
Google Scholar: https://scholar.google.com/citations?hl=en&user=z-yfRRYAAAAJ
Blog: https://pkahl.substack.com/

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Edition	Description of Changes	Epistemic Impact	Date
—	Initial release under title *Re-founding psychology as epistemic psychology: From pathology to ontology: Dissonance, clientelism, and authority*	None	2025-09-21
2	Title revised to *Re-founding psychology as epistemic psychology: The science of autonomy and dependence under epistemic conditions: Dissonance, recognition, and authority as the grammar of social life*. New sections added, including §7.6 Normative Research Agenda with expanded psychiatric research questions, and §8.4 Implications for Psychiatry and Mental Health. Conclusion (§8.1–§8.2) updated to integrate psychiatry alongside governance and democracy. Abstract and keywords revised accordingly.	The 2nd edition strengthens the work's claim as a foundational re-framing of psychology. By incorporating psychiatry, it extends epistemic psychology beyond theory and institutional analysis into clinical practice, demonstrating its relevance to mental health and therapeutic authority. The changes clarify that epistemic psychology is not only diagnostic and normative at disciplinary and institutional levels, but also directly applicable to psychiatry, making the framework broader, more practical, and more consequential across the human sciences.	2025-09-22

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