



Reconceptualising Knowing as Care

The New Science of Epistemic Intimacy

PETER KAHL



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About the Publisher

Lex et Ratio Ltd provides research, advisory, and strategic consulting in governance reform, fiduciary accountability, and epistemic ethics, integrating legal analysis, institutional theory, and practical reform strategies across public, corporate, and academic institutions.

Abstract

This concept paper synthesises a decade of research culminating in *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl 2025a), presenting a concise overview of epistemic psychology—a new moral-cognitive framework uniting developmental, social, and clinical evidence under one relational grammar of knowing. It argues that knowledge emerges not from cognition alone but from fiduciary relations of trust, recognition, and moral reciprocity. Drawing on empirical studies across psychology and neuroscience, the paper shows that epistemic autonomy and dependence are co-regulated through patterns of recognition (ρ) and suppression (σ) established in early attachment and re-enacted in adult intimacy.

Longitudinal research (Ferreira et al., 2022; Nelson et al., 2014) links maternal frustration and sensitivity to children's self-control and later social competence; cross-cultural work (Blair & Liu 2020; Wang & Chen 2023) demonstrates how moral grammars of recognition vary across familial and cultural systems; and neuro-affective evidence (Jakubiak & Feeney 2018) confirms that affectionate touch buffers stress and restores trust. These findings converge on a single insight: epistemic stability arises not from emotional compatibility but from ethical containment—the fiduciary regulation of asymmetry within relationships.

For psychology and psychiatry, this framework reframes trauma, dependency, and conflict as epistemic injuries: moral failures of recognition rather than affective disorders. By integrating empirical research with fiduciary ethics, epistemic psychology lays the groundwork for a science of mind rooted in care, candour, and moral reciprocity.

Keywords

epistemic psychology, fiduciary ethics, epistemic clientelism, recognition, suppression, fiduciary containment, epistemic autonomy, dissonance tolerance, attachment, trauma, relational trust, developmental psychology, cross cultural research, moral cognition

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This essay serves as a conceptual digest and gateway to *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (Kahl, 2025a)—the third and most comprehensive edition of a study that defines epistemic psychology as the moral science of knowing. Its purpose is to present the model’s central insights in accessible form for scholars and practitioners in psychology, psychiatry, and moral philosophy. Whereas the full paper develops the formal structure of the *Kahl Model of Epistemic Dissonance* (KMED-R) through equations and simulation, this synthesis distils its ethical and developmental implications: that knowing is not merely cognitive but fiduciary—a moral act of care by which one consciousness safeguards another’s access to truth.

This edition marks a decisive advance in epistemic psychology—a field emerging at the intersection of cognitive science, moral philosophy, and relational theory. Building on the *Kahl Model of Epistemic Dissonance* (KMED), the paper situates *KMED-R (Relationships)* within a broader developmental continuum initiated by *KMED-I (Infancy)* (Kahl, 2025e). KMED-I models the cry–response dyad of early life—the infant’s first epistemic act, where recognition (ρ) and suppression (σ) first acquire moral meaning. KMED-R then extends this relational architecture into adulthood, showing how these same parameters evolve into fiduciary containment (φ): the ethical regulation of asymmetry that enables mutual knowing without coercion. Together, the two models describe the human epistemic lifecycle, from the infant’s first cry for recognition to the adult’s capacity to hold another’s truth in trust.

At its centre lies a redefinition of knowledge itself: knowing is a fiduciary act. It begins in trust, is sustained through recognition, and decays under suppression. This shift moves epistemology from cognition to morality, presenting knowledge not as an individual capacity but as a fiduciary relation—one consciousness holding another’s perception in trust.

1. A Unified Framework for Epistemic Psychology

While KMED-R is primarily theoretical and computational, its structure synthesises a broad corpus of empirical research across developmental, relational, and cross-cultural psychology. The model translates findings from quantitative studies into an integrated moral grammar of cognition, thereby uniting behavioural observation with philosophical principle.

Developmental research by Ferreira, Cadima, Matias, Leal and Mena Matos (2022) demonstrated that maternal relational frustration predicts later teacher–child conflict, showing that early emotional asymmetry propagates as epistemic tension. Within KMED-R, this dynamic is expressed through the parameters of recognition (ρ) and suppression (σ), which determine an individual’s lifelong tolerance for contradiction. Authoritarian orientations, as observed by Guidetti, Carraro and Castelli (2017) and theorised more broadly by Feldman (2003), restrict epistemic agency through patterns of obedience and vigilance. Kagitcibasi (2017), by contrast, demonstrated that autonomy and relatedness can develop as complementary rather than oppositional capacities when nurtured under reciprocal authority. Together, these findings substantiate KMED-R’s central claim that fiduciary containment (φ)—the ethical regulation of asymmetry—governs whether dependence becomes care or coercion.

Attachment studies reinforce this view. Nelson, O’Brien, Grimm and Leerkes (2014) identified relational styles within mother–child dyads predicting later social competence, while Pettit, Hellwig, Costello, Hunt and Allen (2024) traced blame-oriented “you-talk” in family discourse as a predictor of adult relational aggression.

KMED-R generalises these results by showing how early asymmetries of recognition and suppression evolve into adult relational ethics, turning the grammar of childhood dialogue into the grammar of love.

Cross-cultural studies extend the framework's reach. Blair and Liu (2020) examined bicultural adoptees negotiating competing moral grammars of recognition, while Wang and Chen (2023) demonstrated that in Chinese contexts, filial piety moderates the relation between autonomy and intimacy quality. Both confirm that epistemic intimacy is universal but culturally coded, its fiduciary expression dependent on the moral structure of the surrounding social world.

Neuro-affective research further grounds the model. Jakubiak and Feeney (2018) found that affectionate touch buffers physiological stress during conflict, precisely the dynamic that KMED-R models as fiduciary containment (φ) sustaining systemic equilibrium. These converging lines of evidence support the model's claim that epistemic stability arises not from emotional compatibility but from moral reciprocity—the ethical containment of dissonance within trust.

2. Diagnosing Epistemic Pathology

The paper introduces two analytic instruments that extend this theoretical architecture into diagnostic practice. *The Fiduciary Boundary Test* (FBT) provides a criterion for distinguishing fiduciary openness from clientelist closure, while the *Trust–Authority–Clientelism Matrix* (TACM) maps how power orientation and epistemic reciprocity determine relational integrity. These conceptual tools offer clinicians and researchers a vocabulary for interpreting relational breakdowns such as gaslighting, coercive control, and epistemic silencing.

Gaslighting, in particular, exemplifies the collapse of fiduciary containment: recognition is weaponised into suppression, transforming care into domination. The KMED-R model formalises this collapse by tracing the shift from fiduciary equilibrium to epistemic corrosion, allowing dependency disorders and trauma patterns to be understood as moral, not merely affective, injuries.

3. The Intimate Epistemic Oath: Moral Praxis for Relational Life

To complement its theoretical structure, the paper introduces the *Intimate Epistemic Oath*—a normative framework for relational ethics modelled on the Hippocratic Oath and informed by fiduciary law. It reinterprets love and trust as fiduciary institutions that bind care to candour, loyalty to transparency, and authority to non-domination. The Oath proposes that every relationship, whether romantic, therapeutic, or familial, entails a duty to preserve the other's epistemic agency. It translates fiduciary ethics into a lived discipline of stewardship: to guide without coercing, to speak truth without silencing, and to hold power only through accountability.

This conception transforms intimacy from sentiment into governance. Each partner becomes trustee of the other's interpretive integrity, exercising authority as a reversible act of care. The moral structure of intimacy thus mirrors the fiduciary logic of institutional governance: transparency sustains trust, reciprocity sustains autonomy, and accountability prevents collapse into domination.

4. Implications for Psychology and Psychiatry

For psychology, KMED-R provides an integrative model linking affective regulation, cognitive dissonance, and moral reasoning within a single epistemic grammar. For psychiatry, it offers a theory of mental injury grounded in epistemic corruption rather than affective instability. Disorders of dependency, coercion, or trauma appear not merely as failures of attachment but as collapses of fiduciary containment—moments where the moral infrastructure of recognition fails to support the individual’s epistemic selfhood.

Recent research strengthens this interpretation. DiGiovanni, Gresham, Yip-Bannicq and Bolger (2024) identified temporal trajectories of relational conflict that anticipate stress adaptation, while Dermody, Earle, Fairbairn and Testa (2025) demonstrated that time-varying patterns of partner interaction predict resilience or rupture depending on the quality of mutual regulation. Both findings align with KMED-R’s claim that systemic stability arises from ethical containment rather than affective intensity.

Epistemic psychology thus reframes the therapeutic encounter itself as fiduciary relation: the clinician holds the patient’s worldview in trust, facilitating recognition without appropriation. This shifts psychiatry from correction toward stewardship—a science of restoring epistemic agency through moral repair.

5. Toward a Fiduciary Science of Mind

If traditional psychology asks what the mind knows, epistemic psychology asks how minds permit knowing to occur between them. KMED-R extends this question into ethics, proposing that cognition is not mere computation but fiduciary co-operation—a moral event sustained through care. The epistemic self, under this view, is a relational construct maintained by the integrity of recognition loops across developmental, affective, and institutional scales.

Psychology and psychiatry stand to benefit from this reconceptualisation. By reframing attachment, dependence, and conflict as fiduciary rather than purely affective phenomena, they gain a language for diagnosing moral injuries at the cognitive level. This approach opens a new research frontier: a fiduciary science of mind, where epistemic justice and psychological health converge.

Concluding Note

This essay serves as a bridge between formal theory and applied understanding. Readers seeking the full technical, computational, and cross-domain development of the KMED-R model will find it in *Epistemic Clientelism in Intimate Relationships* (2025a), while *Re-founding Psychology as Epistemic Psychology* (2025b) and *The Newborn’s First Cry as Epistemic Claim* (2025c) provide its developmental and theoretical antecedents. The companion simulator *KMED-I (Infancy): Cry–Response Dyad Simulator* (2025e) models the earliest fiduciary architecture of recognition and dependence on which all later epistemic life depends. Together, these works form the foundation of a fiduciary–epistemic psychology: a discipline devoted to understanding how trust, recognition, and moral care sustain the very possibility of knowing.

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Author Metadata

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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