

Reading Group

Sociology of Scientific Knowledge: The Strong Programme

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Introduction

This reading group focuses on the Strong Programme in the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) – a sociological approach that treats all knowledge, scientific or otherwise, as socially produced. Developed by David Bloor and others in the 1970s, the Strong Programme challenges traditional ideas of objectivity by emphasising the social conditions that shape belief and justification. Over eight weeks, we will read key texts by Bloor, Barnes, and Wittgenstein, exploring how concepts like rationality, rule-following, institutions, and relativism redefine our understanding of science as a social practice.

Prerequisites

It should be noted that the texts are highly philosophical, so a background in philosophy is usually required, but a background in sociology is also desirable. Some general knowledge in philosophy of science and/or Wittgenstein and/or philosophy of language and/or sociology of knowledge is expected.

Key Texts

- Bloor, D. (1991) *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. 2nd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bloor, D. (1983) *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bloor, D., Barnes, B. and Henry, J. (1996) *Scientific Knowledge: A Sociological Analysis*. London: Athlone Press; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Bloor, D. (1997) *Wittgenstein: Rules and Institutions*. London: Routledge.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953) *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Supplementary Texts

- Baker, G.P. and Hacker, P.M.S. (1984) *Scepticism, Rules and Language*. New York: Blackwell.
- Boghossian, P. (2006) *Fear of knowledge: Against relativism and constructivism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Durkheim, É. and Mauss, M. (1963) *Primitive Classification*. London: Cohen and West.
- Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. (eds.) (1982) *Rationality and relativism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kripke, S. (1982) *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kuhn, T.S. (2012) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 4th edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Kusch, M. (2002) *Knowledge by agreement: The programme of communitarian epistemology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kusch, M. (2021) *Relativism in the Philosophy of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Latour, B. (1993) *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Latour, B. and Woolgar, S. (1986) *Laboratory life: The construction of scientific facts*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Seidel, M. (2014) *Epistemic Relativism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Acknowledgement

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Week 1: Introduction to the Strong Programme

Key Readings

- Bloor, D. (1991) *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. 2nd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Chapter 1.

Supplementary Readings

For an analysis of the Strong Programme's core theses, read the following piece:

- Collin, F. (2011) 'David Bloor and the Strong Programme', in *Science studies as naturalized philosophy. Synthese Library*, vol. 348. Dordrecht: Springer.

Worrall has also written on the Strong Programme's symmetry thesis:

- Worrall, J. (1990) 'Rationality, sociology and the symmetry thesis', *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 4(3), pp. 305–319.

Also, have a read of Lewens and Kochan's exchanges on the Strong Programme's epistemology:

- Lewens, T. (2005) 'Realism and the Strong Program', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 56(3), pp. 559–577.
- Kochan, J. (2008) 'Realism, reliabilism, and the "Strong Programme" in the sociology of scientific knowledge', *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, 22(1), pp. 21–38.

Questions

1. What are the four key tenets of the Strong Programme? How does it contrast with other schools in philosophy of science (Kuhn, falsificationism, logical positivism...)?
2. How does the symmetry postulate stand out in the Strong Programme? Is it convincing? Does it render the Strong Programme 'anti-science'?
3. What is the Strong Programme's theory of knowledge? How does it contrast with traditional epistemology (e.g., JTB)? (We will further explore this in the following weeks)

Week 2: Case Studies

Key Readings

- Barnes, B., Bloor, D. and Henry, J. (1996) *Scientific Knowledge. A Sociological Analysis* (London, Athlone and Chicago: Chicago University Press), Chapter 2.

Supplementary Readings

Have a read of a classic analysis of phrenology by another leading member of the Strong Programme:

- Shapin, S. (1975) 'Phrenological knowledge and the social structure of early nineteenth-century Edinburgh', *Annals of Science*, 32(3), pp. 219–243.

Also have a read of Bloor's defence of the Strong Programme against Latour, especially pp.93-97:

- Bloor, D. (1999) 'Anti-Latour', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 30(1), pp. 81–112.

Questions

1. What is the Strong Programme's analysis of the Millikan-Ehrenhaft controversy? How is the symmetry postulate embodied in the Strong Programme's case studies?
2. Is their analysis convincing? What role does the water-bucket-villagers analogy play?

Week 3: Rationality

Key Readings

- Barnes, B. and Bloor, D. (1982) 'Relativism, rationalism and the sociology of knowledge', in Hollis, M. and Lukes, S. (eds.) *Rationality and Relativism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Supplementary Readings

Read Bloor's classic analysis of the Azande logic:

- Bloor, D. (1991) *Knowledge and Social Imagery*. 2nd edn. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. pp.138-145.

Also have a read of Luke and Hollis's discussions on rationality:

- Lukes, S. (1967) 'Some Problems about Rationality', *European Journal of Sociology*, 8(2), pp. 247–264.
- Hollis, M. (1967) 'The Limits of Irrationality', *European Journal of Sociology*, 8(2), pp. 265–271.

For some general discussions of historicist theories of scientific rationality, see:

- Nickles, T. (2021) 'Historicist theories of scientific rationality', in Zalta, E.N. (ed.) *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Spring 2021 edition). Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/rationality-historicist/>

Lastly, have a read of Prior's iconic paper on the 'tonk' logic:

- Prior, A. (1967) 'The runabout inference ticket', in Strawson, P.F. (ed.) *Philosophical logic*. London: Oxford University Press, pp. 38–39.

Questions

1. What is the Strong Programme's conception of rationality? How does it differ from our conventional understanding of rationality?
2. Does this conception of rationality undermine scientific objectivity?
3. Is there still any possibility for a shared rationality?

Week 4: Meaning Finitism

Key Readings

- Bloor, D. (1983) *Wittgenstein: A Social Theory of Knowledge*. London: Macmillan; New York: Columbia University Press. Chapter 3.
- Bloor, D. (1997) *Wittgenstein: Rules and Institutions*. London: Routledge. Chapter 2.

Supplementary Readings

Read Kusch's exposition of meaning finitism:

- Kusch, M. (2002) 'Meaning finitism', in *Knowledge by agreement: The programme of communitarian epistemology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Have a read of Haddock's analysis of the Strong Programme's two aspects:

- Haddock, A. (2004) 'Rethinking the "Strong Programme" in the sociology of knowledge', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 35(1), pp. 19–40.

Questions

1. What is 'meaning finitism' according to Bloor? How does it contrast with the traditional theory of meaning?
2. *Is Bloor doing justice to Wittgenstein's original text?

Week 5: Rule-Following

Key Readings

- Wittgenstein, L. (2009) *Philosophical investigations*. 4th ed. Translated by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte. Edited by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell. §§184-243.
- Kripke, S.A. (1982) *Wittgenstein on rules and private language: An elementary exposition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Chapter 1-3.

Supplementary Readings

For a quick overview of Kripke's Wittgenstein, see:

- Khani, A.H. (2025) 'Kripke's Wittgenstein'. In Fieser, James; Dowden, Bradley (eds.). *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Available at: <https://iep.utm.edu/kripkes-wittgenstein/>.

For an individualist reading of Wittgenstein, see:

- Baker, G.P. and Hacker, P.M.S. (1984) 'On misunderstanding Wittgenstein: Kripke's private language argument', *Synthese*, 58, pp. 407–450.
- Baker, G.P. and Hacker, P.M.S. (2009) *Wittgenstein: Rules, grammar and necessity: Essays and exegesis of §§185–242*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. pp.98-168.

Read Kusch's defence of the communitarian view:

- Kusch, M. (2002) 'Normativity and Community', in *Knowledge by agreement: The programme of communitarian epistemology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Questions

1. What is the rule-following paradox according to Wittgenstein? What is his own answer to that?
2. What is Kripke's Wittgenstein? What are the two demands that a theory of meaning must meet, according to him? What is his solution?
3. Does Kripke's Wittgenstein provide a convincing solution to the paradox?

Week 6: Social Institutions and Normativity

Key Readings

- Bloor, D. (1997) *Wittgenstein: Rules and Institutions*. London: Routledge. Chapter 3, 5, 7-8.

Supplementary Readings

Read the following critique of the Strong Programme's normativity:

- Calvert-Minor, C. (2008) 'The "Strong Programme", normativity, and social causes', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 38(1), pp. 1–22.

Read Kemp's critique of the Strong Programme's idea of institutions:

- Kemp, S. (2005) 'Saving the Strong Programme? A critique of David Bloor's recent work', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 36(4), pp. 707–720.

Searle has some very good discussions on institutions. Read the following piece, and be mindful of how his idea of institutions differs from the Strong Programme's:

- Searle, J.R. (2005) 'What is an institution?', *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 1(1), pp. 1–22.

Questions

1. What is a social institution according to Bloor? Is the definition sound?
2. What is the Strong Programme's solution to the rule-following paradox? Does it work?
3. What is the Strong Programme's response to Kripke's Wittgenstein? Is it valid?
4. What makes a sentence true according to the Strong Programme?
5. Can social institutions really guarantee us normativity of meaning?

Week 7: Classification

Key Readings

- Barnes, B., Bloor, D. and Henry, J. (1996) *Scientific Knowledge. A Sociological Analysis* (London, Athlone and Chicago: Chicago University Press), Chapter 3.

Supplementary Readings

If you are interested in the Strong Programme's inspiration (Durkheim & Mauss), read:

- Bloor, D. (1982) 'Durkheim and Mauss revisited: Classification and the sociology of knowledge', *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part A*, 13(4), pp. 267–297.

For broader discussions about natural kinds, read:

- Bird, A. and Tobin, E. (2025) 'Natural kinds', in Zalta, E.N. and Nodelman, U. (eds.) *The Stanford encyclopedia of philosophy* (Winter 2025 edition). Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2025/entries/natural-kinds/>

For general discussions on social constructionism, see:

- Hacking, I. (1999) *The social construction of what?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Chapter 3.

Questions

1. What is the Strong Programme's account of classification? How is it associated with meaning finitism? (Recall Bloor and Barnes's paper in week 3)
2. *How is the Strong Programme's account of classification associated with the legacy of Wittgenstein, Durkheim and Mauss?

Week 8: Relativism

Key Readings

- Bloor, D. (2010) 'Relativism and the sociology of scientific knowledge', in Hales, S.D. (ed.) *A Companion to Relativism*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 431–455.

Supplementary Readings

Read §4.4 of the following:

- Baghramian, M. and Carter, J.A. (2025) 'Relativism', in Zalta, E.N. and Nodelman, U. (eds.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025 Edition). Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2025/entries/relativism/>.

Seidel has an entire book addressing the problem of relativism in the Strong Programme. Read the first chapter of the book, although the whole book will be relevant:

- Seidel, M. (2014) *Setting the stage: Epistemic relativism in the strong programme and beyond*. In: Seidel, M. (ed.) *Epistemic relativism*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kusch has a whole chapter dedicated to the problem of relativism in the Strong Programme:

- Kusch, M. (2021) *Relativism in the Philosophy of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (Elements in the Philosophy of Science). Chapter 5.

Questions

1. What is relativism according to the Strong Programme? Does it threaten scientific objectivity?
2. Recall what we have covered in previous weeks – how are the Strong Programme's commitments embodied in its relativism? Is this stance tenable?
3. *Which types of relativism (alethic, methodological, conceptual, epistemic...) do you think the Strong Programme's relativism belongs to?