

THE LIVING EPISTEME: PRELIMINARY CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

This research responds to deep social needs of reconnecting knowledge with lived meaning, human relationship, and authentic transformation of life – both individually and collectively. Its aim was the formulation of an epistemological framework based on relation and becoming. The research methodology integrated conceptual analysis, autoethnography, validation through resonance, and dialectical confrontation, within a transdisciplinary approach. The results included: (1) the formulation of a new epistemological framework – the Living Episteme – which proposes a balance between scientific rigor and human, ethical and reflexive engagement; (2) the configuration of 8 principles of this episteme which reflect the values: dignity, contextualization of truth, relation as a way of knowing, validation through practice and transformation through learning. The originality of the approach lies in the way it interweaves traditional perspectives into a relational, contextualized and transformative vision.

Keywords: reflexive qualitative research, relational epistemology, theoretical autoethnography, reflexive validation, transdisciplinary education

The understanding of the nature of knowledge has evolved from modernity's view of it as a static set of objective truths, to contemporary thinking which sees it as a dynamic, context-dependent process. This shift shaped the need for an integrative conceptual framework that could connect diverse perspectives on the genesis, transmission, and renewal of knowledge. In this context, the concept of the Living Episteme emerges as a response to the complex and dynamic character of contemporary knowledge.

Thomas Kuhn showed that science progresses through paradigmatic shifts that deeply restructure the vision of the scientific community, undermining the idea of an absolute and immutable truth (Kuhn T.S., 1962). Furthermore, Michael Polanyi emphasized that people always know more than they can express explicitly, and that knowledge is never fully explicit, being significantly embedded in personal experience, practical skills, and individual intuition. The socio-historical context and the subject's personal involvement are integral to the process of generating knowledge (Polanyi M., 1966).

According to the theory of the social construction of reality, everyday reality and knowledge itself are social constructs, resulting from institutionalized human interactions. Knowledge takes the form shaped by the social and historical context. Language, values, and practices

of a community give form to accepted truth (Berger P.L. and Luckmann T., 1966).

In pedagogy, there has been a shift from authoritarian transmission of information to a participatory and emancipatory approach, from students as passive receivers to their involvement as active subjects in the co-creation of knowledge. Thus, the act of knowing cannot be separated from the human context, enhancing the ethical and transformative dimension of education (Freire P., 2000). It has also been argued that the act of knowing is a fundamental trait of living entities, a perspective which blurs the boundary between life and knowledge, integrating knowledge into the living phenomenon (Maturana H.R. and Varela F.J., 1987).

Today's global issues have highlighted the need for concepts such as transdisciplinarity, as a unifying vision between the sciences of nature, society and culture (Nicolescu B., 2002), and for epistemological pluralism, in which diverse cultures are valued in a global dialogue rather than subjected to a universal set of rules (Santos B. de S., 2014).

The aim of the research presented here was to propose a preliminary conceptual framework for an emerging epistemology – the Living Episteme – which sustains a lived, relational, contextual, and transformative knowledge. The derived objectives are: (1) to clarify the term “living” as a distinct

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epistemological stance; (2) to compare the Living Epistema with other paradigms in order to shape its uniqueness; (3) to outline the principles that ground it. The publication of this research is an act of repositioning and balancing the logic of efficiency with the ethics of lived experience.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The methodology used reflects the epistemological nature of the proposed concept: the Living Epistema. It involves a reflexive, relational, and shared experiential approach, in which the researcher is part of the knowledge process. In the spirit of interpretative qualitative research (Denzin N.K. and Lincoln Y.S., 2011; Stake, 1995), this study combined four essential methodological dimensions:

1. Reflexive conceptual analysis, through which the central terms – “episteme” and “living” – were investigated starting from existing theoretical frameworks (Kuhn, 1962; Polanyi, 1966; Varela F.J. *et al.*, 1991), and confronted with the researcher’s experience in scientific contexts.

2. Theoretical autoethnography, which combined personal narrative with theoretical reflection (Ellis C. and Bochner A.P., 2000; Adams, Holman Jones S., and Ellis C., 2015), to integrate the author’s own epistemological becoming as part of the conceptual construction.

3. Dialogical resonance was used for epistemological validation, replacing classical criteria of objectivity or replicability. Thus, the proposed ideas were calibrated through their transformative effect on dialogue partners and on the researcher himself (Freire, 2000; Biesta, 2006).

4. Epistemological dialectical analysis, through which each principle was subjected to reflexive confrontation between divergent theoretical positions (pro and con) identified from current scientific literature. This analysis enabled the articulation of the principles in a critical and justified manner.

The research design is aligned with recent initiatives in transdisciplinary research proposing contextual, situated, and responsible knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Santos, 2014), in dialogue with a digital conversational agent calibrated for epistemological research and integrated in a human reflexive process. The Living Epistema remains deliberately in progress because it offers an open methodological positioning, in line with its principles of relationality and transformation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

1. The central terms “episteme” and “living” between existing theoretical frameworks and the researcher’s experience

- 1.1. The term “episteme” was consecrated by Michel Foucault (1966) as the set of conditions

of possibility for knowledge in a given historical era. The episteme is a deep structure that shapes what is known, how, and what can be known.

The reflexive critical approach leads to the idea that these definitions maintain a structuralist, even impersonal, view of knowledge. Lacking is the ethically responsible subjectivity, the researcher’s own reflection, and epistemic awareness in methodological choices. For example, in a project dedicated to identifying barriers to rural youth entrepreneurship (World Bank 7200142/08.04.2021), an integrated methodology was applied: semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires. This approach succeeded in capturing external barriers: lack of funding, bureaucracy, poor infrastructure. The epistemological approach was assumed, positioned, and contextualized.

- 1.2. The concept of “living” is usually associated with biology or with humanistic metaphors, with some relevant exceptions: enactivism proposed by Varela F.J. (1991) as an emergent, embodied, interactive process; process philosophy; or relational epistemologies (Bateson G., 1979) that recognize the dynamism of experience as an epistemic source. Typically, “living” appears as a decorative metaphor, and lived knowledge is considered subjective and excluded from scientific methodology. From this, the need emerged for it to be understood epistemologically as a condition in which knowledge is: relational; emergent (not fixed); transformed through presence; contextual and embodied (not abstractly universalizable). Thus, it becomes a term of epistemological positioning, comparable to “situated” (Haraway D., 1988), “tacit” (Polanyi M., 1966), or “embodied” (Varela F.J. *et al.*, 1991), but proposed as a distinct and foundational term. For example, in the same research, without being explicitly stated, young people also experienced internal barriers: fear of failure, lack of confidence, absence of curiosity, or inability to imagine another life. These internal barriers were captured through tone, hesitation, and gestures, noticed through the researcher’s affective attention and relational intuition. Here, the episteme became living because it recognizes the value of knowledge lived in relationship, accepts the affective dimension as legitimate, and embraces the transformation of both the researched object and the researching subject.

2. The epistemological transformation of the author as part of the conceptual construction highlighted by theoretical autoethnography. Reflexive dialogue, as a space of epistemic co-creation where dialogue becomes a research tool if it is also a framework for relational transformation,

implies a double commitment: of affective presence and shared critical thinking. This approach explored: the way reflexive dialogue produces emergent meanings; the nature of the researcher–participant relationship; and the forms of validation that appear in the process.

The application scenario is from the same research: the interviewee, a young man who had returned to his now-empty parental home after several years, said: “When I left the country, I had trust that people here knew what was good, what was bad, that there was a kind of common foundation. Now, after I came back, I feel like something has broken. I no longer have the same trust — neither in others, nor in myself as someone from this village. And I wonder: can we do something to rebuild that trust? Or was it just a youthful illusion?”

At that moment, I felt it was not the time to ask for explanations. I asked nothing. That shared silence was a form of respect for a wound spoken aloud for the first time. It was a living silence, which marked the beginning of a new relationship based on shared vulnerability. It was also a question for me: what does it mean to be worthy of someone’s trust, in a world where trust falls apart so easily?

The emerging analysis highlights the fact that trust is also an epistemic element. Without trust, mutual knowledge becomes fragile, and shared meanings unstable. The participant’s insight emerges in the form of an emotional question: “Can we still rebuild trust?” It is a question about the possibility of reconnection. The researcher’s silence is not a lack of reaction. It is the acknowledgment of spoken vulnerability. In this space, trust is rebuilt through ethical presence. Validation appears in the fact that the participant hears himself and accepts the rupture.

This example shows how the relationship of trust becomes a source of meaning. Reflexive dialogue produces data, transforms the researcher’s positioning, and opens a space for shared epistemic construction.

3. Calibration of proposed ideas through their transformative effect on dialogue partners – dialogical resonance

The focus group conducted within the project Cooperation for Holistic Agricultural Innovation Incubators in Sub-Saharan Africa (1010822963-ERASMUS-EDU-2022-CBHE) was a relational space where emergent forms of knowledge arose through dialogue and collective interaction (Kamberelis G. & Dimitriadis G., 2005; Brumă *et al.*, 2022). This type of focus group emphasizes the pedagogical and reflexive dimension of the meeting (Buber M., 1971). The

research aimed to understand the perceptions and challenges faced by rural youth in Kenya in starting a business. The discussion group consisted of 24 participants from the Kisumu region, Kenya, distributed into 3 groups representing the diversity of the agricultural ecosystem: researchers, farmers, consumers, entrepreneurs, investors, NGO representatives, public authorities, and cultural/religious institutions. The facilitator’s role was to observe the emergence of moments of resonance and rupture (Freire P., 2000; Lincoln Y.S. & Guba E.G., 1985).

Representative dialogical fragment (thematized): Participant 1: “The business idea sounds good, but we have no capital, and the bank asks for guarantees we don’t have.” Participant 2: “Maybe the bank isn’t the only solution. Maybe we could make a cooperative.” (collective pause) Participant 3: “That way, we could support one another. We wouldn’t have to wait for help from outside anymore.” At that moment, the group moved from data collection to a relational framework of collective initiation. A new vision emerged – the local cooperative as a viable alternative – through horizontal co-reflection. This became an epistemic scene.

Through this method, participation becomes a practice of thinking together; knowledge is co-created when participants recognize their own experience in the voice of the other; transformation emerges through emotional and conceptual resonance, and relationality is multiplied among participants, researchers, and community. Thus, the transformative focus group becomes a living tool for the genesis, transmission, and renewal of knowledge.

4. Epistemological analysis of the principles of the Living Epistema was structured around epistemological questions that challenge each principle in terms of the validity of knowledge, as well as an analysis of major positions in the literature, both opposing and supporting.

Principle 1 (P1): Human dignity is the cardinal value – To what extent should the recognition of human dignity as a cardinal value determine knowledge? How does respecting the dignity of those involved influence the necessity, validity, and legitimacy of the knowledge obtained?

The researcher has the right to full intellectual freedom even if there is no immediate practical application. (Polanyi M., 1962) argued for the autonomy of research as a premise for authentic discoveries. According to classical positivism, knowledge is conceived as axiologically neutral, based on facts (Weber M.,

1919), and ethics is seen as a source of bias. Hence, participants are treated as means to obtain data, with no concern for their dignity (Merton R.K., 1942). In contrast, humanist traditions recognize knowledge as authentic only if it respects dignity. The human being must be treated as an end in itself; knowledge gains meaning when it contributes to the improvement of the human condition (Dewey J., 1938); learning is a humanizing cognitive and educational process (Freire P., 2000); and the neglect of marginalized voices constitutes epistemic injustice (Fricker M., 2007).

P2: Truth is contextual – Is truth univocal and absolute, or does it depend on the context of the knower? How does context affect interpretation and the validity of truth?

In classical epistemology, truth is absolute and universal. In the realist perspective, truth corresponds to objective reality, regardless of the observer or context. Hence, hypothesis testing uses universally valid criteria, independent of socio-cultural circumstances (Popper K., 1963). Contextualist approaches, on the other hand, reject absolute truth and tie it to the dominant scientific paradigm (Kuhn T., 1962). In social sciences, truth is socially constructed (Berger P.L. & Luckmann T., 1966); meanings depend on local cultural context (Geertz C., 1973); regimes of truth are shaped by power and discourse (Foucault M., 1980); and no truth is complete independent of the observer's position (Haraway D., 1988).

P3: Knowledge has a transformative role – What is the relationship between knowledge and transformation? Is knowledge a neutral endeavor of describing reality, or one that generates personal and social change?

The traditional-positivist perspective sees knowledge as descriptive and neutral, a way of explaining the world. A transformative mission is seen as ideological contamination. Michel Foucault (1975) warned that knowledge can become a tool for power and control or for legitimizing hidden interests (Lyotard J.F., 1979). However, critical thinking ties authentic knowledge to usefulness and transformation. Philosophy must change the world (Marx K., 1845); in consciousness-raising pedagogy, learning is an act of liberation (Freire P., 2000); it creates space for critical freedom (Habermas J., 1971); and according to transformative learning theory, critical reflection leads to shifts in one's frame of reference. The epistemic value of research increases when it contributes to social, personal, or community transformation (Lewin K., 1946).

P4: Knowledge is multimodal – Are there more legitimate ways of knowing than through

scientific concepts and data? Are storytelling, art, metaphor, dialogue, and personal reflection valid in knowledge?

The classical positivist model validates only knowledge that is logically or empirically verifiable. Logical empiricism accepts only empirically tested statements. Scientism and reductionist views deem narrative, artistic, or intuitive contributions epistemically illegitimate (Wilson E.O., 1998). In contrast, an expanded epistemology is proposed that includes experiential, symbolic, conceptual, and practical modes (Heron J. & Reason P., 1997). A distinction is made between narrative and paradigmatic thinking (Bruner J., 1986); the concept of tacit, lived knowledge becomes fundamental (Polanyi M., 1966); and cultural anthropology and indigenous epistemologies include myth, ritual, art, and relationship as part of authentic knowing (Smith L.T., 1999).

P5: The researcher is transformed in the process – Is the researcher an objective and unchanged observer, or does he evolve with the research process? How does involvement transform the researcher?

According to classical positivism, the researcher is a neutral, uninvolved observer, unaffected by emotional or personal interference (Durkheim E., 1895). Researcher influence must be minimized because transformation is seen as a source of bias. However, qualitative, reflexive, and interpretive research asserts that the researcher is deeply influenced and that transformation is an epistemic resource. Autoethnography values experience, interaction with subjects, and the fieldwork that brings emotional, cognitive, and spiritual changes (Ellis C. & Bochner A.P., 2000). In naturalistic research, transparency about personal transformation becomes part of scientific rigor (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); the researcher must examine their own position, values, and influences (Bourdieu P., 2004).

P6: Knowledge is relational – Is knowledge independent of others or born in dialogue? Is it indifferent to or shaped by social interactions?

In objectivist tradition, knowledge is rational and solitary. Beginning from certain truths obtained independently from others (Descartes R., 1641), the modern model of science promoted controlled experiments, standardized methods, and the principle of universalism (Merton R.K., 1942). In contrast, constructivist and relational perspectives claim that research arises from life and returns to it (Boyer E., 1996); social reality is built and sustained through interaction (Berger P. & Luckmann T., 1966); cognitive development

begins in the relational space (Vygotsky L.S., 1978); and true understanding emerges in dialogue, as an encounter of perspectives (Gadamer H.-G., 1960). Indigenous epistemologies affirm the studied reality as a relationship between researcher and subject (Wilson S., 2008). In this light, knowledge cannot be built without authentic human participation. Living research is a form of accompaniment — an act of epistemic, ethical, and communal sharing. Truth arises in dialogue, presence, and mutual transformation (Lewin K., 1946; Smith L.T., 1999; Wilson S., 2008).

P7: The value of knowledge also lies in the way it is acquired – How much does the method by which we reach knowledge matter compared to the result? Is a conclusion valuable regardless of how it was obtained?

From a consequentialist perspective, if a statement is true and verified, the way it was obtained becomes secondary. Thus, methods that were ethically questionable have sometimes been accepted because the results saved lives. Any method seems valid if it leads to knowledge (Feyerabend, 1975). However, especially due to inhumane deviations, the scientific community has established, for example through the Nuremberg Code, that no result justifies the violation of human rights. We cannot sacrifice integrity for progress (Jonas H., 1969), and true knowledge implies a process guided by honesty, rigor, and responsibility (Zagzebski L., 1996).

P8: Learning is grounded in active accompaniment and shared reflection – Is authentic learning a one-way transmission of information or shared reflection in a learning community? What is the role of cooperation in assimilating knowledge?

In classical educational tradition, learning is often the transfer of information from expert to beginner, with clear structures, sequencing, and individual effort. Collaboration or introspection are seen as inefficient (Kirschner P.A. *et al.*, 2006). The classical behaviorist model reinforces learning through repetition and feedback. In contrast, contemporary learning theories support knowledge as a deeply social and relational process. Collaboration among students is important (Vygotsky L.S., 1978), as are activities in communities of practice, informally guided by experienced members (Lave J. & Wenger E., 1991). Teacher and student are equals in the search for meaning, and shared reflection and inquiry into lived experience are sources of transformation (Freire P., 2000; Dewey J., 1916).

Thus, in the logic of the Living Epistema, human dignity is a condition of epistemic

validation. Knowledge is legitimate if it also means recognition. It becomes a space for healing, wisdom, and the shared creation of meaning that transforms both individually and collectively. It includes the logical-empirical register, but also story, symbol, metaphor, spiritual reflection, practice, and dialogue—necessary to understand the complexity of human life. It sees truth as an open, relational construct anchored in experience. It is built in and through relationship, and truth becomes visible in dialogue, empathy, and mutual contextualization.

Valuable research is grounded in and validated by applicability—when it concretely supports the lives of those involved. And its value lies in the result, but also in the method, relationship, intention, and integrity with which it was obtained. The researcher participates with presence, empathy, and responsibility. They are consciously transformed—spiritually, socially, emotionally, cognitively—and learning comes alive through active accompaniment and shared reflection.

CONCLUSIONS

The Living Epistema is an epistemological proposal that responds to the need to rethink knowledge beyond objectivist and efficiency-driven paradigms. It has been shown that the act of knowing is inseparable from the human, relational, and affective context, and that values such as dignity, reflection, and transformation become epistemic sources. Within this framework, the researcher is an involved participant, and their positioning, relationships, and personal transformation strengthen the meaning and validity of the knowledge produced.

This work proposes an open and evolving framework that invites epistemological dialogue and co-creation. It is a starting point for future research in fields such as education, economics, sociology, and rural development.

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