

Everyday Epistemology

You are approached by a total stranger in the street, who tells you they have lost most of their money, and just need another 50p for the bus home.

A student tells you that they did their homework, but unfortunately it was in their pocket when their clothes were washed and was destroyed.

A book jacket claims that 'this is the only research methods text you will need'.

A person you are romantically involved with tells you that they love you with all their heart, and will always love you.

The national radio news reports that an airliner has crashed on landing at an airport in another part of the world, with 42 fatalities

The naughty child tells you they will not do it again.

The football pundit predicts that Chelsea will finish the season in one of the top two league positions.

The person already waiting at the bus-stop tells you that you have just missed the bus you hoped to catch.

The television meteorologist announces that there will be heavy rain tomorrow in Cambridge.

Your doctor tells you that unless you make life-style changes, there is a 35-40% chance that you will have a heart attack or stroke in the next seven years.

An email informs you that the sender has inherited a large fortune from a former national president, and that they will share this with you, if you provide details of your bank account.

A newspaper reports that educational standards are lower than 50 years ago, and that examinations are now easier to pass.

Judging knowledge claims in everyday life

Everyday you have to make judgements about knowledge claims you meet. Often you will not need to think about how you do this. The thinking often occurs pre-consciously so we just 'know' when something is worth

believing

or

seriously considering

or

treating as an outside possibility

or

simply dismissing as not plausible.

In research, however, we have to be explicit about the basis of knowledge claims.

Making the process explicit

You make judgements about the knowledge claims you come across in everyday life. How would you justify your judgements?

Consider some of the examples above - how would you explain your decisions about the status of such claims?

You are doing epistemology!

- Perhaps these are the kind of factors you would take into account:
- The kind of thing the focus of the claim is (i.e., ontology!);
- The kind of knowledge it is possible to have about that kind of thing;
- The ways in which such knowledge could be obtained, and whether that depends up special apparatus, instruments or skills;
- Whether particular informants might be in a privileged position to make certain claims;
- The basis of the claimant's authority, and the grounds they have given you to consider that they are in a position to make such a claim.