



## Are Personal Experiences More Valuable Than Shared Knowledge in Understanding the World?

Personal experiences often feel immediate and convincing. They are lived, emotional, and difficult to dismiss. Shared knowledge, by contrast, is distant - filtered through language, institutions, and collective agreement. In Theory of Knowledge, this contrast raises an important question: are personal experiences more valuable than shared knowledge when it comes to understanding the world? By examining the human sciences and the natural sciences, this essay argues that personal experience can deepen understanding in limited, context-dependent ways, but shared knowledge remains more valuable for building reliable, transferable understanding beyond the individual.

In the human sciences, personal experience plays a visible role in shaping understanding. Fields such as psychology and sociology often rely on first-person accounts, interviews, and self-reported data to explore human behavior. A person's lived experience of anxiety, migration, or social exclusion can reveal aspects of reality that statistics alone cannot capture. These experiences add depth and nuance, helping researchers understand how individuals interpret and respond to their environments.

From this perspective, personal experience strengthens knowledge by grounding abstract theories in lived reality. For example, psychological theories about trauma gain credibility when they align with recurring personal accounts from different individuals. Shared knowledge in the human sciences often begins with personal experience before being organized into broader patterns. In this sense, experience acts as a starting point for understanding.

However, a counterclaim is that personal experience is limited by subjectivity. Experiences are shaped by memory, emotion, and cultural background. Two people may experience the same event yet describe it in entirely different ways. Without shared frameworks for analysis, personal experiences cannot easily be evaluated or compared. In the human sciences, this is why individual accounts are rarely treated as knowledge on their own. They gain value only when placed within shared methods, such as peer review, ethical guidelines, and theoretical models. Here, shared knowledge provides structure and reliability that personal experience alone cannot offer.

In the natural sciences, the balance shifts even further toward shared knowledge. Scientific understanding depends on observation, measurement, and replication. While personal experience may inspire inquiry, it does not carry much weight unless it can be tested and verified by others. A scientist's personal observation becomes meaningful only when it can be communicated clearly and reproduced under similar conditions.



For instance, an individual might experience an unusual physical phenomenon, but without shared methods and language, that experience remains anecdotal. Natural sciences prioritize shared knowledge because it allows claims to be checked, challenged, and refined. This process reduces the influence of bias and error that personal experience can introduce. As a result, shared knowledge in science offers a more stable and dependable way of understanding the world.

That said, personal experience still has a limited role. Many scientific discoveries begin with an unexpected observation made by an individual. Curiosity often grows out of experience. Yet once investigation begins, personal experience gives way to shared evidence and collective scrutiny. In this area of knowledge, experience sparks inquiry, but shared knowledge determines acceptance.

Comparing these two areas highlights an important pattern. Personal experience tends to matter more in areas where meaning, emotion, and interpretation are central. Shared knowledge becomes more valuable where precision, consistency, and reliability are required. Neither operates in isolation. Personal experience without shared knowledge risks becoming isolated and untestable. Shared knowledge without attention to experience can become detached from lived reality.

Overall, personal experiences are not more valuable than shared knowledge for understanding the world as a whole. They enrich understanding and provide insight at the individual level, especially in the human sciences. Shared knowledge, however, allows understanding to extend beyond the individual, making it more reliable and widely applicable. Recognizing the relationship between the two helps explain why personal experience can inform knowledge, but shared knowledge ultimately shapes how the world is understood collectively.