

# **Credibility is in the Eye of the Beholder: Minimal Models and Feminist Epistemology**

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## **Abstract:**

This paper explores recent debates over formal or "minimal" models through a lens of feminist epistemology. Sugden (2000) asks how formal economic models, often presented without specific empirical justification, can be useful; Till Grüne-Yanoff (2009) and Fumagalli (2016) characterize minimal models as those lacking similarity relations to the world and disagree over whether, and what, we can learn from them. Sugden's answer focuses on credibility: useful models provide a description of the way the world "could be" (2000, 2013). Grüne-Yanoff argues that useful minimal models present "relevant" possibilities (2009). For an example illustrating both, the much-discussed Schelling checkerboard model describes moving coins according to contextual rules; it is often interpreted as informing us that sharp racial segregation *can* arise through shared weak preferences to be close to people like ourselves.

As Sugden acknowledges, credibility is in the eye of the beholder: what seems possible depends on a person's background beliefs and thus on their experiences, values, etc. (2013). Grüne-Yanoff and Verreault-Julien distinguish between epistemic and merely logical possibility; the latter concerns possibility in our world and is evaluated through knowers' background knowledge (2021). Feminist standpoint theory and epistemologies of ignorance have long emphasized that perspectival differences have epistemic consequences (Collins 1990, Grasswick 2018, Mills 2014, Sullivan and Tuana 2007). Using Schelling's model, I explore these consequences: knowers with different sets of background beliefs and experiences about the causes of segregation will come to different conclusions about whether Schelling's model seems credible in a given context and also about whether it is an epistemic or merely objective possibility. I argue 1) both views of minimal models show new dangers of homogeneous epistemic communities, 2) credibility faces challenges in contexts where the causal factors are complex and multi-faceted, and 3) development of new how-possibly explanations may contribute to agnotology -- the production of ignorance -- and is thus not an unalloyed epistemic good.

## **References**

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