

PERSUASION, EPISTEMIC PROCESS AND DEVELOPMENT: COMMENTS TO LEMAN'S ARTICLE

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The article "Social relations, social influence and the development of knowledge" by Patrick Leman attempts to establish an important difference between epistemic and status forms of authority on the route of knowledge construction by children. He views epistemic authority as a pure influence of logical arguments, "unrelated to the social organizational and status features of social relations", whereas status authority is based on power or status in social relations. According to Leman, the reliance on epistemic authority constitutes a developmental advance, in Piagetian terms. He then proceeds to connect between social psychological theories of social influence and the child's development by proposing that majority influence indicates influence of status authority, while minority influence indicates influence of epistemic authority. Making value judgment, Leman views the later influence superior since it implies divergent thinking and leads to recognition of its own identity and sociocentric perspectives.

First of all, it should be stated that the differentiation proposed by Leman is not new in social psychology, but it does not relate to the influence process of minority and majority. It relates to process theories of attitude formation and change – the elaboration likelihood model proposed by Petty and Cacioppo, 1981, 1986) and the heuristic-systematic model proposed by Chaiken (1980, 1987). Both models posit that individuals adopt attitudes in two different ways. In one, they are persuaded through their understanding and evaluation of persuasive argumentation and in the other, they are persuaded with the help of various psychological mechanisms that do not implicate argument processing. According to Petty & Cacioppo (1986), these peripheral mechanisms include cognitive ones such as heuristic processing and attributional reasoning, affective mechanisms such as classical and operant conditioning, and social role mechanisms such as maintaining social relationships, power status or favorable self identities. Basically, the central route

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corresponds to the epistemic form of persuasion, while the peripheral route corresponds to status authority influence. But, the peripheral route, as conceptualized by the dual-process models of persuasion, is more general than the specific case of status authority influence, since it encompasses more possibilities of the absence of considering issue-relevant information. Also, it should be noted that the central route of persuasion (i.e., epistemic form) does not guarantee objectivity. This route can be biased, as well, since it may be "governed by a relevant attitude schema which guides processing in a manner leading to the maintenance or strengthening of the schema" (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986, p. 136).

Recently, however, Kruglanski and Thompson (in press) proposed that the two routes do not differ in the epistemic process of persuasion, but rather, in the informational contents relevant to a conclusion. In effect, they suggested that the two routes succumb to the principles of the same epistemic process proposed by Kruglanski (1989) in his Lay Epistemic Theory, which explains the formation of subjective knowledge. According to the theory, "*evidence* refers to information *relevant* to a conclusion. Relevance, in turn, implies a prior linkage between general categories such that affirmation of one in a specific case (observation of the evidence) affects one's belief in the other (e.g., warrants the conclusion). Such a linkage is assumed to be mentally represented in the knower's mind, and it constitutes a premise to which he or she subscribes". This conditional belief linking the evidence to the conclusion is dependent on epistemic motivations, cognitive abilities (capacities and capabilities), and epistemic authorities.

It was in this context that the concept epistemic authority was introduced by Kruglanski (1989), developed by Bar-Tal and Raviv (e.g., Bar-Tal, Raviv, Raviv, & Brosch, 1991; Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv, & Houminer, 1990) and borrowed by Leman and Duveen (1996), who used it in a different way. Originally, epistemic authority was defined as a source that exerts a determinative influence on the formation of knowledge. Individuals attribute high confidence to information provided by epistemic authority, consider it often as truth, assimilate it into their own repertoire, and rely on it. Moreover, such information frequently causes temporary freezing, since once individuals absorb and consider it as valid, they cease to search for alternatives, at least temporarily. Thus, epistemic authority serves as an enlightening mechanism in the process of knowledge acquisition and constitutes an important factor for determining the state of the individual's knowledge. It defines what to various persons may be considered as legitimate social evidence for their opinion. The study of epistemic authority is of interest since knowledge is often formed on the basis of information coming from social sources. Individuals construct their reality, especially social reality, through social influence.

The concept of epistemic authority places a focus on subjective beliefs concerning the source. A source can become an epistemic authority only to the extent that individuals believe that he/she possesses characteristic(s) which turn him/her into such an authority. In principle, any characteristic may turn a source into an epistemic authority, and any source, in potential, can serve as an epistemic authority. Thus, individuals and groups may differ with regard to the epistemic authorities they select as a result of such factors as age, culture, knowledge domain, or personality.

After presenting the social psychological theorizing regarding persuasion, it is time to draw developmental implications. First, it is assumed that the epistemic process as described by Kruglanski (1989) is not different from that of adults. Children, as adults, infer conclusions from subjectively appropriate evidence. But, this process is influenced

by capacity of the individual, which refers to the individual's cognitive load, creativity, degree of alertness, level of understanding, etc. Children differ in their cognitive capacity from adults, and therefore, their contentual conclusions differ. They also differ in cognitive capability, which refers to available mental representations in the cognitive repertoire and their accessibility at any given time. Therefore children may come to conclusions different from those of adults via the same epistemic process.

Children, as adults, often rely on epistemic authorities in their knowledge formation. Obviously, an adult, a parent or a teacher, frequently serves as epistemic authority for children. Adults, in turn, have their own list of epistemic authorities which may include a leader, a priest, a scientist or television anchor broadcaster. It is human and universal to rely on epistemic authorities in knowledge formation. Nevertheless, it is greatly desired to develop in human beings skepticism and critical thinking, in order to encourage consideration of various alternatives, in individual's epistemic process. But the reliance on epistemic authorities will always be part of social influence, since the volumes of information are endless, and human beings have limited information processing capacities. On the other hand, it should always be remembered that neither forms of reaching a conclusion, that is, via considering arguments nor via relying on epistemic authority, prevents biases and mistakes.

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