Epistemic and identity concerns in the social construction of knowledge

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Mugny Gabriel & Butera Fabrizio

There is a large body of work in social psychology suggesting that high-status sources often achieve influence only at a manifest level (Mugny, Butera, Sanchez-Mazas & Pérez, 1995). People yield because the status of the source is supposed to guarantee the validity of the dissenting opinion, information or knowledge, and not because the target has assimilated the message content. Conversely, it has been recently demonstrated that low-status sources can induce internalised and constructivist changes (cf. Moscovici, Mucchi-Faina & Maass, 1994). However, this is not the whole picture. Conflict Elaboration Theory contends that, in order to study social influence, attention must be paid to the meaning individuals attribute to the judgmental divergence that takes place in most social influence situations (cf. Pérez & Mugny, 1996). It is argued that various effects of social influence (manifest and latent) may derive from specific conflicts that are determined by the target's representation of the source's characteristics and by the representation of the specific knowledge involved. This contribution specifically presents an approach to the construction of knowledge as a form of social influence (cf. Butera, Mugny, Legrenzi & Pérez, 1996) in tasks involving aptitudes.

When aptitudes are at stake (as for instance in problem solving), targets are motivated to evaluate their own competence. Targets know that there is a correct answer; they don't know a priori which one it is but they assume that it is possible to reach it at the end of the problem solving, or of the learning process. This generates a feeling of uncertainty that motivates the target to evaluate to what extent the source may constitute informational support. Moreover, aptitude tasks are socially anchoring: judgements can be erroneous, and avoiding error brings in social evaluation in terms of competence. People are motivated to be correct, but also to give the best image of themselves.

The question is to determine what kind of conflicts will be elaborated in such aptitude tasks. In line with genetic social psychology (cf. Doise & Mugny, 1984), conflicts arising in these tasks can be either of a relational kind, mainly based on the social comparison of performances, or of a socio-cognitive kind, mainly based on the epistemic concern to reach the correct answer. Which kind of conflict is at work in any specific situation will be determined by the relation between the source's perceived competence and the target's self-perceived competence.

The model presented here considers eight different dynamics resulting from the comparison of a high vs low competent source with high vs low competent targets in contexts in which the social comparison of competencies is more vs less threatening to self-esteem. Identity threat varies with the nature of the social comparison: most of the time social comparison concerns the difference in level of competence, rather than the intrinsic validity of the different judgements. This implies that a threatening social comparison will focus the subject's activity on self-enhancement rather than on the epistemic aspects inherent in the processing of the task. Table 1 summarises the social mechanisms supposedly at work as a function of the identity threat involved in social comparison of (in)competencies. Let us now consider the dynamics involved in each cell, especially those that have already received substantial experimental support.

Absence of conflict

If the targets of influence believe they have a high degree of competence and are confronted with a low-competence source, no conflict will arise from the divergence between them and the source (cf. Maggi, Butera & Mugny, 1996). In this case, the targets will neither accept the source's proposition, nor will they be motivated to engage in deep processing of the task. In fact, such cognitive activity would be unnecessary because of the absence of any doubt concerning self-competence. It should be noted that in such situations, no instance of threatening social comparison has been so far identified.

Conflict between incompetencies

When individuals are confronted with the solution to a problem in which they are not competent, and the solution is proposed by a supposedly incompetent source, they experience a conflict between incompetencies (cf. Maggi et al., 1996). Faced with a task to solve, they are uncertain. To adopt the unlikely solution offered by a low-competence source may result in fear of invalidity, which leads them openly to keep their distance. Nonetheless, they remain uncertain, because rejecting the source's answer in no way guarantees the validity of their own answer. It is the conflict between incompetencies, that of the source and that of the target, that induces a process of validation (i.e. a search for the conditions and limits of validity of the answers) resulting in detachment from a single response, and in the evaluation of alternate solutions. This accurate processing of the elements of the task - but also of the alternative elements - can lead to constructivism, namely the construction of an adequate answer from two supposedly incompetent answers. In this situation, individuals would be engaged in what has been called a "construction process" aimed at obtaining information they lack about the object of judgment. This shows a more epistemic concern, typical of the conflict between incompetencies.

Downward comparison

Under threatening conditions (e.g. in the case of competition), social comparison between a low-competence target and a low-competence source may imply a risk for the target's self-esteem. In this case, downward comparison will focus the individual on the necessity to prevail, and undermine the constructivist effects otherwise at work (cf. Butera & Mugny, 1995).
Table 1: Hypothesised effects of threatening vs non-threatening social comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>High-competence source</th>
<th>Low-competence source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Threatening</td>
<td>Non-threatening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict between competencies</td>
<td>Threat of identity</td>
<td>Source invalidation</td>
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<td>Informational interdependence</td>
<td>Informational constraint</td>
<td>Imitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High-competence target</td>
<td>Informational interdependence</td>
<td>Integration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low-competence target</td>
<td>Informational constraint</td>
<td>Imitation</td>
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Informational dependence
When the source of influence is more competent than the target, then imitation will occur, as the source has informational power with respect to the target. Furthermore, targets may use the source's information and generalize it. Informational dependence takes place in situations where imitation derives from a non-threatening relation with a positively evaluated source (i.e., a beloved teacher, a trustworthy friend, ...), and therefore leads to attention, deep processing and generalization. This is typically the case for learning.

Informational constraint
It is often observed, on the other hand, that imitation does not lead to generalisation, and takes the form merely of yielding (cf. Maggi et al., 1996). This dynamic occurs when people may rely on the source's judgment by virtue of the heuristic of the credibility of a competent source. In this case, a kind of socio-cognitive disengagement can be anticipated, in which people imitate the model as long as it is present, but without any subsequent elaboration. Such a disengagement would result from a constraining relationship in which people feel themselves compelled to adopt the source's judgment (cf. Mugny, Tafani, Butera & Pigiars, in press).

Conflict between competencies
If the targets of influence believe themselves to have a high degree of competence and are confronted with a high-competence source, then the divergence between them and the target may induce the perception of a competitive threatening relation; this is particularly likely to happen in situations in which success leads to a positive or valued identity, which is often the case for aptitude tasks.

In this case, a conflict between competencies occurs when individuals feel that another's competence will upstage their own competence. In this situation, people will tend to invalidate the source of influence, by trying to discount the validity of his or her proposition. In fact, confrontation with a high status source can threaten self-esteem; making salient a context for the production of negative self-affirmation increases individuals' tendency to self-affirm. In conflicts between competencies, social comparison will then be the only mechanism activated, in an attempt to confirm the higher competence of the self. In this competitive situation, divergence between judgements will produce greater social than cognitive conflict. This, of course, will be detrimental to the processing of the task.

Informational interdependence
The notion of conflict between competencies implies that two competent individuals holding different views can only have a competitive and disruptive relation with one another. However, there are situations where competent people can work together, integrate the different information available to them—even if it conflicts—and in some cases elaborate new knowledge, as in scientific constructivism. This can be the case when the two competent individuals realize that different views can be complementary and that they can be integrated, in a sort of informational interdependence.

References


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