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Abstract

Focusing on imagination and the social context in the generation of conviction narratives, we propose that these elements are dynamically related to one another, and crucially that it is the nature of this relationship that determines individuals' level of epistemic openness and capacity to respond adaptively to update their narratives in a way that increases the possibility of more successful decision-making.

Main Text

Johnson, Bilovic and Tuckett have taken a radical step in relation to 'radical uncertainty'. They have created a model for understanding the wide body of research demonstrating that individuals tend to overestimate their own rationality and decision-making capacities, including, according to the authors, academics, politicians and economists, who collectively tend to have overestimated human rationality. Their case is profound in arguing that the network of norms and institutions society gathers into a system of rules for identifying truth – what Jonathan Rauch, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, recently termed *a constitution of knowledge* (Rauch, 2018) – is mistaken in relation to understanding how decisions are made.

Here we seek to extend the implications of conviction narrative theory in relation to the role of imagination and its relationship with the social context. Johnson and colleagues argue that both factors are insufficiently incorporated into decision-making theory: we additionally propose that they are dynamically related to one another, and that it is the nature of this relationship that determines individuals' capacity to respond adaptively to

new information. One defining difficulty with conviction narratives is that, notwithstanding evidence that challenges their position, individuals are often unable to adjust their narratives. One way of understanding this is irrationality; another way is through petrification of the narrative in the light of epistemic mistrust: new information that challenges the narrative is understood but not adopted into what Polanyi (1959/2014) calls “personal knowledge”, the sum total of what any individual knows, because it is not regarded as relevant (Fonagy et al., 2015). Inflexible, dysfunctional conviction narratives are indications of a lack of trust in incompatible but pertinent information. We understand the possible reasons for this epistemic closure and unwarranted certainty as inter-relational in nature (Fonagy et al., 2021). In a developmental psychopathology context, we described the factors that drive this entrenchment as early relational insecurity (Fonagy et al., 2017a, 2017b). But we have also more broadly come to understand this epistemic shut-down as an outcome of functioning within a social environment in which the individual does not feel recognised in the communications they receive. We have suggested that such lack of experience of recognition in others’ narratives in relation to the self may constitute something of the “missing link” in understanding the relationship between socio-economic deprivation and/or alienation and psychopathology (Fonagy et al., 2021).

Epistemic dysfunction does not exclusively manifest as outright mistrust, it also presents as lack of discrimination in relation to the communication of knowledge, rendering the individual vulnerable to exploitation or misinformation, which we have termed epistemic credulity (Campbell et al., 2021). In a state of epistemic credulity, individuals misread or are misled by the narratives presented by others, imagining that they are being recognised and understood, and thus reducing adaptive epistemic vigilance towards the information they receive (Sperber et al., 2010). We might think here of a populist politician

who, despite their blatant self-interest, creates a powerful narrative of being able to represent the sense of betrayal and injustice felt by the ordinary person, to the extent that obvious misinformation about election results is believed.

It is easy to pathologize these processes as they manifest in their most egregious forms, perhaps partially driven by a social media-escalated breakdown in epistemic consensus. In fact such ways of thinking together hold important functions in maintaining social stability (Mercier & Sperber, 2017) in an expectable environment (Cicchetti & Lynch, 1995). Community and collaboration are supported by a set of mental processes reserved for shared cognition or relational mentalizing, also described as the “we-mode”. When we intend to accomplish an outcome jointly with others, we adopt a “first person plural perspective” – the we-mode (Gallotti & Frith, 2013 p.160). The we-mode may be organized around cognitive and neural structures that are intrinsic to individual make-up and are the product of a distinct developmental and evolutionary history (Tomasello, 2019). Building on joint intentionality, the *joint agent* emerges where mental states are aligned to achieve a common goal, grounded in respect born of each having a role in the collaborative activity (Tomasello, 2016). The route by which the we-mode is triggered may be understood thus: (1) the learner’s *imagined* sense of self (their personal narrative) (2) is imagined by the instructor, establishing a prospect for the we-mode and (3) this image is perceived by the learner, reinforcing the potential we-mode and (4) compared with the learner’s personal narrative and (5) in case of a match, co-representation is created: the we-mode removes the I-mode’s protection from change and the channel for rapid, efficient modification of personal knowledge is opened. Relational mentalizing is thus key to establishing epistemic trust, it is dependent on both instructor and learner taking an imaginative leap in relation to the other’s mind, but using that imagination in a manner that is contained within a

reasonably accurate assessment of both one's own and the other's mental state. Mistrust might be understood as a failure of imagination, credulity as manipulated or untethered imagination.

Johnson and colleagues describe narratives as representations in individual minds; shared narratives as being formed by the common elements fragmentarily shared across a social group (p.16). We suggest that it is harder to separate individual from shared narratives and knowledge than this conceptualisation suggests. Conviction narratives are particularly relevant for social contexts where strong boundaries around social groups exist and information incompatible with current beliefs are discarded if it comes from individuals who are members of an out-group to whom epistemic trust is not extended (Tong et al., 2020). As information incompatible with beliefs accumulates, paradoxically mistrust increases as beliefs come to serve to identify the social group who hold them. This is an outcome of epistemic vigilance (sometimes hypervigilance) precluding the integration of socially conveyed information into knowledge schemata. We have recently argued that models for understanding social processes and social cognition have failed to learn from developmental psychopathology (Campbell & Fonagy, Forthcoming); here we perhaps make a bolder point, that the psychopathology of everyday life – the lapses in communication, ruptures and the outcomes of inhibited or disorderly imagination – are the engine of culture, because these processes create the narratives that hold (or fail to hold) groups together.

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