

Epilogue

Our aim in preparing this volume was, in one sense, quite limited. We set out to identify a few variables that interact to shape how and why individuals seek out other people for influence in making decisions and forming judgments about issues and events. But in another sense, our aim was very ambitious. We attempted to establish, in minimalist terms, the common denominator underlying the fundamental processes that combine to generate the whole spectrum of ways in which the individual is related to others in a social system. This lofty goal, though, should be viewed as an attempt to create a scaffold that sets the agenda for future research to pursue. In this sense, the theory and research we have presented should be viewed as heuristic rather than comprehensive.

Like any heuristic model, what we propose in this book is open to tweaking and possible subject to revision, as new empirical research critically examines and builds upon the ideas we have presented. The scientific literatures on social influence and group dynamics are extensive, having been generated over several decades, so it is naïve to expect that a few simple rules cannot capture the complexities and intricacies of all the empirical findings.

In an important respect, our theory pays homage to the classic insight of Allport (1954), who argued that the basic agenda of social psychology is to understand how the thoughts and actions of an individual are influenced by the real or imagined action of other people. Allport's framing of social psychology as the study of social influence is widely acknowledged by everyone, but widely under-appreciated by the very scholars who appreciated his insight. Indeed, when social psychologists discuss social influence, they confine their efforts to investigating how people manipulate one another and attempt to overcome the resistance of others in doing so. Rather than looking at how social influence underlies social phenomena of all kind, most psychologists have defined influence as essentially synonymous with manipulation, involving strategies that are overt (e.g., obedience) or subtle (e.g., compliance strategies). Asymmetrical influence in service of achieving personal goals in a zero-sum sense is hardly what Allport had in mind.

The RTSI perspective elevates social influence by suggesting that it is the fundamental underpinning of the individual in his or her attempt to navigate multiple forces in social life. Influence, broadly considered, goes to the very heart of complexity science. Thus, any complex system involves influence among the elements comprising the system. In a social system, the elements are individuals that influence each other through verbal and non-verbal means. So what looks like asymmetric manipulation or overcoming resistance when only two elements are singled out,” misses the forest for the trees.” When one broadens the scope to view the system more globally, one recognizes that asymmetric influence is a special case of the widespread influence that percolates throughout the system. Indeed, were it not for the system-wide nature of influence, one could argue that the system would not exist in the first place.

We have argued that social groups can be looked upon as highly efficient distributed information processing systems. This is not to deny the vast and diverse lines of theory and research exposing the problematic nature of influence in groups of all kinds. Research has shown, for example, that judgments produced by groups of interacting individuals are less accurate than the average of judgments of independent individuals (Lorenz, Rauhut, Schweitzer, & Helbing 2011). There is convincing evidence, too, that when groups of individuals with impressive expertise discuss important matters, they may converge on very poor decisions (Janis 1972). Simply forming a group and asking them to arrive at a joint decision does not guarantee that it will function as an efficient and effective information processing system.

Recognizing the potential for problematic functioning in groups, we propose that socially distributed information processing needs balanced mechanisms of regulation to function properly. In this view, trust is not just an asset or a form of social capital that leads to efficient and smooth functioning of social systems, but rather represents a crucial control parameter in the regulation of distributed social information processing. An insufficient degree of trust hinders or terminates the delegation of information processing to others, stalls the flow of information in social systems, and as a consequence, impairs the performance of individuals and groups. Too much trust, in turn, removes the negative feedback loops from the system, removes checks on information processing, and makes the system a victim of runaway dynamics of trust that promotes full reliance on unchecked and potentially false information.

Optimal individual and group functioning thus require some level of trust, but also some degree of distrust or doubt, such that there is reliance on others along with sensitivity to, and checking for incoherence that can signal malfunctioning of the system. The processing resources of individuals and groups, moreover, should be devoted to processing information concerning matters with the greatest importance. These control parameters are not static, but rather should be dynamically adjusted to accommodate changes in the system’s performance and in the context. The challenge for future research is to find the optimal configuration of these key parameters and how they change across time and across conditions.

Pending the outcomes of such research, we may be in a position not only to enhance the functioning of human groups and avoid the pitfalls that have been identified in research, but also to design artificial agents that will function in techno-social systems in an efficient and effective manner. We hope the ideas we have presented in this volume help chart these research agendas. Such efforts will not only contribute to science but will also improve the cognitive and interactive abilities of human groups and societies.

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