

PROBLEMS IN ASSESSING EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY OF UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

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Abstract. *The authors provides reasons for the significance of assessment of epistemic authority of university professors, explicates the concept of epistemic authority and the issues related to research into this concept. In English, epistemic or epistemological means “of, relating to, or involving knowledge; cognitive”. An epistemic authority is a source of information who has a determining role in the process knowledge formation (Kruglanski, 1989). Authors analysed conceptual approaches to problems related to assessment of epistemic authority of university professors and to expand on the explanations to the problems in view of the results of the research study on student-perceived epistemic authority of university professors. The article includes the results of students (N=152) and graduates (N=210) of institutions of higher education located in Riga (Latvia).*

Keywords: *epistemic authority, problems assessing epistemic authority.*

Introduction

The significance of this research lies within the fact that, in the contemporary study environment, research is more about the interactions between professors and students with regard to the power of professors and authority of professors perceived by students (Pounder, 2008; Bozalek & Matthews, 2009; Chiang, 2009); defending the professor’s brand which is defined as prevalence where students are willing to spend their time and effort on active assessment of and support to the brand of the professor (Jillapali & Wilcox, 2010). Practice shows that the socio-epistemic rights exercised by one individual (such as professor) are not necessarily acknowledged or approved by another individual (such as student) (Heritage & Raymond, 2005).

An essential question in psychology studies is the question about scientific experts as epistemic authorities (Subramaniam, 2010; Sismondo, 2011). A topical field of research is knowledge in the discourse of communication of knowledge, argumentation as an epistemically normative concept (Habermas, 1989; Geiger, 2009), learning and understanding (Gherardi, 2000). The volume and complexity of knowledge in the modern world make it absolutely impossible for one individual to know everything. Therefore, in many situations, experts become highly significant sources of knowledge (Hardwig, 1991). It is typical that expertise is the social form of knowledge (Goldman, 2002), it is knowledge which is ratified in the relationships between the expert and the individual or a group of individuals seeking advice or assistance. Thus, also between professor and a student. These questions are reasons for the significance of research into epistemic authority of university professors.

Purpose of the research: to analyse conceptual approaches to problems related to assessment of epistemic authority of university professors and to expand on the explanations to the problems in view of the results of the research study on student-perceived epistemic authority of university professors. The empirical study uses the Epistemic Authority Research Methodology (Raviv et al., 1993) adapted by the authors and including three interrelated surveys: Epistemic Authority Scale, Reliance Question, Reasoning Questionnaire.

A source of information may become an epistemic authority only to the extent individuals acknowledge them as having the properties which make them such authority (Raviv et al., 1993). Therefore, it is essential to study the factors which determine why students perceive a certain professor as an epistemic authority.

Materials and Methods

The methodological basis of the research includes: 1) the concept of content of epistemic authority which includes four components: professor's knowledge, student's trust in the professor's knowledge, student's readiness to change their opinion and behaviour under the influences of the information provided by the professor (Raviv, et al., 1993); 2) A. Petrovski's concept of personal interaction plan, cognitive, emotional and behavioural components of interaction; (Петровский, 1982); 3) concept of personalisation which substantiates the influences of an authority also in time-remote interaction (Петровский, 1982; Кондратьев, 1988; Воробьев, 1997). During the research study conducted by the authors, the idea of time-remote interaction is realised by researching not only student-perceived, but also graduate-perceived epistemic authority of university professors.

Since epistemic authority implies a social context, interaction within this context (Raviv, Bar-Tal, Raviv & Peleg, 1990), an important part of research into epistemic authority is the social epistemology concept of knowledge transmission and sharing (Jacobson, 2007). Researchers emphasise that, in a socially epistemological project (also in research), it is essential to define the scope: universal knowledge or a certain knowledge area (Goldman, 2002; Buehl & Alexander, 2005). Professors should function as epistemic authorities for students to be able to perceive them as trustable sources of information at least in the area of science they teach (Raviv et al., 2003). This determines the necessity to research epistemic authority in consideration of study areas, which can be defined as academic domains. The sample of the research study conducted by the authors consisted of students and graduates of social sciences, the arts, and the sciences.

Conceptually, any property may turn a source of information into epistemic authority, and any source of information may potentially serve as epistemic authority (Raviv et al, 1993). An essential factor in the concept of epistemic authority is trust in (or "reliance on" if we use the terminology of social

epistemology) the information received from the epistemic authority (Kruglanski, 1989; Kruglanski et al., 2005). In the perspective of interaction, the necessity to research epistemic authority in the context of aims, acquisition of knowledge, experience, and rights is emphasised (Zimmerman, 2007).

In Schommer's concept, the system of views on acquisition of knowledge, which is defined as epistemic beliefs, includes 5 dimensions, one of which is the dimension of authority which explores whether knowledge is taken from experts or acquired through individual reasoning and empirical observations. (Schommer-Aikins, 2004). Empirically, this concept is being verified by exploring also the epistemological views of students (Ordonez, Ponsoda, Abad & Romero, 2009). Such approach helps to explain the degree of acknowledgement of the professor as an epistemic authority.

The necessity for research into the factors of trust in the professor is determined by the conceptual approach (Bar-Tal, et al., 1991) that research into epistemic authority identifies the reasons to explain reliance, i.e. the reasons which determine the choice of the epistemic authority. In a wider context, this means unveiling the psychological reality behind the authority (Кондратъев, 1988). Therefore, one of the most essential components in research into epistemic authority is identification of the potential ways of assessing the expert's "statement" to increase the possibility that such statements reflect (and also support) a justified, true view (Goldman, 2002; Schmitt, 1994). Experts' statements may be justified by their own argumentation as well as by third party (e.g., student) assessments, studying of the interests of the experts, and experts' work notes (Goldman, 2002). 12 reasons for reliance have been identified in the concept of epistemic authority: 1) expertness, 2) objectivity, 3) understanding of needs, 4) subjective sympathy, 5) acquaintance, 6) similar thinking, 7) intuition, 8) transfer, 9) associations, 10) friendship, 11) opinion (acceptance of opinion), 12) personal characteristics. At the same time, these reasons represent reasoning to explain reliance, i.e. what the degree is to which each of the reasons determines the student's decision to trust the information provided by the professor.

Students (N=152) and graduates (N=210) of various institutions of higher education located in Riga (Latvia) took part in the study (Figure 1).

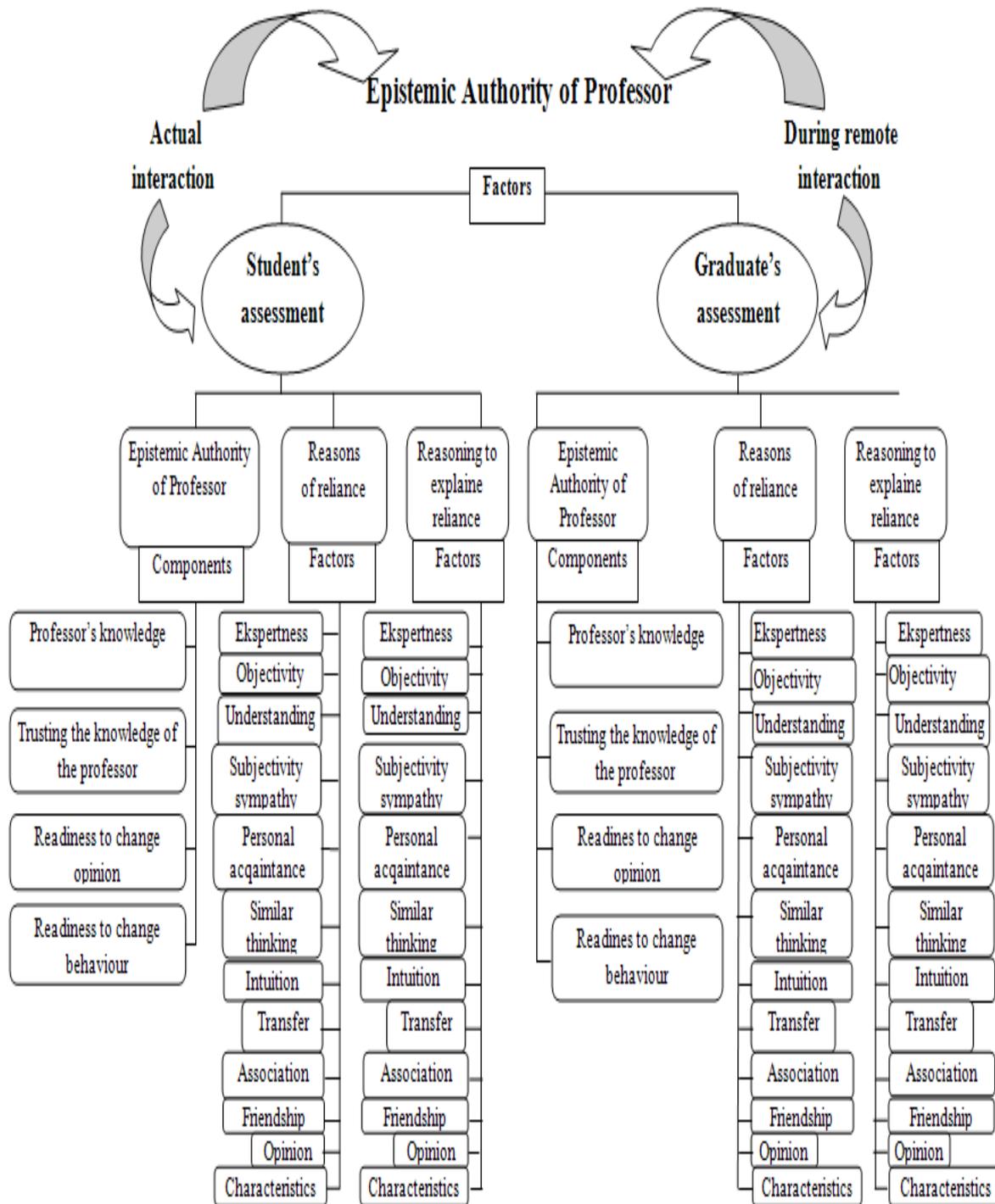


Figure 1. Model of Content of Professor's Epistemic Authority

Results

When explaining the results of the study, the author addresses the empirical results implying problems in assessing epistemic authority of professors and emphasises the problems occurring when interpreting such results.

The descriptive statistics revealed that the assessment provided for the knowledge component of **professors' epistemic authority** suggests a high level

of epistemic authority of the professors (M=5.27(students); M=5,13 (graduates), trust in knowledge – a medium high level of epistemic authority (M=4.49 (students); M=4.55 (graduates), readiness to change opinion in the student sample suggests a medium high (M=4.01) and a medium level (M=3.76) of epistemic authority in the graduate sample, and the assessments provided for the readiness to change behaviour suggest a medium level of epistemic authority (M=3.22 (students); M=3,09 (graduates). This brings forward the following problem: the cognitive component of authority (knowledge) has higher ratings than the cognitive-emotional one (trust in knowledge), and lower ratings have been provided to the cognitive-behavioural components (readiness to change opinion and behaviour). Based on a research study (Bar - Tal et al., 1991), the author makes an assumption that, in the readiness to change behaviour, a significant role is played by the student's choice of how much of the information provided by the professor he/she is willing to use in real life.

The assessments provided for reliance on the epistemic authority revealed that **the main reasons** which determine that students accept the professor as an epistemic authority include the professor's ability of being an expert, i.e. knowledgeable and experienced in their professional field (M=5.56 (students); M=5,45 (graduates) and the professor's objectivity (M=5.09; M=5,01). **The assessments provided for reasons for reliance on the professor's epistemic authority** revealed that, in the student and graduate samples, the reliance of students and graduates on the professor's epistemic authority is largely influenced by the professor's expertness, i.e. their ability of being an expert (M=5.21; M=5.27); medium levels – the professor's objectivity (M=4.40; M=4.94); the professor's character traits which are significant to the students (M=4.57); M=4.44); similarities between the opinions of the professor and the students/graduates (M=4.43); M=4.45).

The obtained results confirm the conclusions, drawn during other earlier research studies, that, in a successful interaction in a study environment, an essential role is played by the professor's objectivity (impartiality), which relates to the professor's fairness, being honest, which determines voluntary acceptance of requirements, and authority is being perceived as legal (Bar- Tal et al., 1991; Raviv et al., 1993; Schmidt, Houston, Bettencourt & Boughton, 2003; Goodman, 2010). Essential is similar thinking (Bar-Tal et al., 1991; Raviv et al., 1993), and this may conceptually relate to „acceptance of opinion – the professor has opinions the student accepts, i.e. similarity of opinions” and „personality traits – the professor has character traits which are essential to the student). These reasons to explain reliance are to be included in the concept of changing attitudes which explains that information influences individuals to the degree to which they perceive it as coming from a source of information which is similar to themselves (McGuire, 1985; Bar-Tal, 1990).

The empirical results outline a problem: medium level ratings have been provided to similar thinking (M=3.99; M=3.87), and, even though similarity of

opinions and similarity of character traits have received higher ratings, the Spearman's rank correlation coefficients showed that the links between this reasoning to explain reliance (similar thinking, opinions, character traits) and readiness to change opinion under the influence of the professor's epistemic authority is weak or medium strong ($r=.199 - r=.382$; $p<.05$).

Another problem defined by the author is the medium ratings given to the reason of reliance and the reasoning to explain reliance „understanding of needs” ($M= 4.08$; $M=4.03$), because understanding of needs contributes to the effect of facilitation of epistemic authority (Asmuß & Svennevig, 2009).

A problem arises with regard to the opinion that: the professor's live presence may intensify perceived authority which researchers position as a determinant in the social context and communication. However, there are studies which have discovered that it was specifically in time-remote interaction that the perceived authority was higher (Tremayne, Chen, Figur & Huang, 2008). There were also several instances in the study conducted by the author when graduates provided higher ratings to the professor's epistemic authority, e.g. trust in professor's knowledge, perception of professor's being an expert, objectivity, similarity of opinions to trust the information provided by the professor.

A possible explanation to the higher ratings given in time-remote interaction might be that time-remote influence of the personality may manifest in several tendencies: 1) influence becomes stronger – both positive and negative influence may become stronger depending on what it has been in the actual interaction; 2) both positive and negative influence may lessen (fade, vanish) if the assessments have been intentional and the non-conformity has been unintentional in the actual interaction; 3) the influence may polarise along with a stronger positive influence if non-conformity between assessments has been intentional, but the conformity has been unintentional in the actual interaction (Воробьев, 1997). Essential are also students' skills of accepting the knowledge provided by the epistemic authority (Mugny, Chatard & Quiamzade, 2006), which graduates may improve as they get more experienced in their lives and have had opportunities to verify in practice that the knowledge provided by the professor can be trusted.

Conclusions

The results obtained using the developed (Raviv et al., 1993) methodology showed a generally significant link between the components of student- and graduate-perceived epistemic authority of professors, reasons for trusting the professor, and the role of these reasons in taking the decision to trust the professor's knowledge, experience, attitude. Nevertheless, problems were identified in assessing professors' epistemic authority: lower ratings have been given to readiness to change opinion and behaviour under the influence of professor's epistemic authority; medium ratings to understanding of students'

needs and similar thinking, professor's epistemic authority sometimes rated higher in time-remote interaction.

Therefore, further research into professors' epistemic authority is necessary, including also in-depth interviews, metaphors, essays. It is useful to research student-perceived epistemic authority from three perspectives: how students perceive professors, how professors perceive themselves, and professors' perception of how students perceive them.

To have a more detailed picture of the influence of the professor's epistemic authority, it is additionally necessary to study the professor's personality traits, the ways the professor handles errors in their interaction with the students, the factors which determine protection of the professor's brand, i.e. satisfaction with the professor which might have a significant influence on the perception of the epistemic authority. In explaining professors' epistemic authority, a significant role might be played by research studies to explore the degree of students' epistemic dependence which determines the degree of reliance on own knowledge and that provided by the authority.

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