"Why should I listen to <u>you</u>?" -- Self-Reinforcing Processes in the Negotiation of Expert Status

by

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Abstract:

A self-reinforcing process is at the core of how decision makers in government and business have -- after decades of scientific research -- come to believe that climate change is a real threat. That process also occurs when you select which physician to visit, which mechanic to work on your car, or whether to accept a particular paper for a conference session. The process of deciding which "expert" to listen to and which to heed I have characterized as the "negotiation of expert status." This paper describes the negotiation of expert status and its role in the "social construction of reality", with particular examples drawn from the environmental arena. The focus on expert status is employed to argue for an expanded view of factors to be addressed in research on decision making – not just information but aspects of identity, relationship, and process. These factors have dialectical relationships, which produce self-reinforcing dynamics that are worth further research.

I. Introduction – explanation of the topic of the paper

When faced with uncertainty, we select a voice of authority. Often enough, we do not really decide what to do so much as we decide whom to listen to. We do so via a process that can be called the "negotiation of expert status." This selection of whom to listen to and heed can be described in terms of a self-reinforcing dynamic rooted in the classic concepts of the "social construction of reality" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This negotiation of expert status has influence

ranging from individual choice of a physician to government decisions on what to do about global warming.

As a result, a compulsive focus in research on how decisions are made on the use of information represents a dangerous neglect of two interrelated factors. These factors are prominent in discourse analysis, where one must focus not only on "text" – meaning information -- but also on "actors" and "context'. The "actor'-related factors include our perceptions of others' identities and our sense of relative status, amity, and alignment of interests. The "context" factors encompass processes of decision making and the related allocation of responsibility in the face of uncertainty. Such processes can be seen to become ritualized in order to steady our nerve and drive us toward resolution.

This paper outlines the interplay of text, actor, and context to provide an explanation of self-reinforcing dynamics that occur in face-to-face interactions when we are trying to decide whether the person we are listening to really is a qualified, relevant, and trustworthy "expert', one whose advice we will heed. The paper invites extrapolation about how these face-to-face dynamics can affect a range of processes and issues at more macroscopic levels than the individual conversation, such as in markets, organizations, and institutions. As such, this paper is a work in progress, an introduction to empirically supported theory addressing a micro- level of analysis with implications for mezzo- and macro-level dynamics.

This characterization of the negotiation of expert status, which I derived two decades ago (Rifkin, 1990), draws on insights from fields such as sociolinguistics, pragmatics, conversation analysis, ethnography of communication, and organizational behaviour as well as interdisciplinary studies of decision making, allocation of responsibility, risk perception, and risk communication.

The self-reinforcing processes evident in this "expert status" perspective have been nibbled at by researchers from a range of disciplinary traditions. Despite such efforts, the negotiation of expert status has been only roughly defined, key features having been identified, but more complete characterization

is still needed. As a result, this paper represents a call for research at the microscopic level – systematic analysis of conversations and their consequences.

A description in general terms of the negotiation of expert status begins the discussion below and is followed by evidence of this negotiation in the environmental arena. Discussed briefly are specific kinds of expert-nonexpert relationships that occur in a range of arenas that can be seen to involve a negotiation of expert status, such as between scientist and policymaker and between teacher and student. A concluding summary offers implications for practice and further research, with a call for acknowledging the impact of the dynamics of identity, relationship, and emotion-taming ritualisation when scientific and technical information plays a role in decision making processes.

II. Description of the negotiation of expert status as a self-reinforcing process

A self-reinforcing process is at the core of how decision makers have -- after decades of scientific research -- come to believe that climate change is a real threat. That process also occurs when you select which physician to visit, which mechanic to work on your car, or whether to accept a particular paper for a conference session. The process of deciding which "expert" to listen to and which to heed has been characterized as the "negotiation of expert status" (Rifkin, 1994).

The notion that an individual who has specialized knowledge can gain power can be traced back beyond Weber (1957 *translation*). Insight into this process of gaining expert status has grown, from the reflective observations of Evans-Pritchard (1963) observing Zande witchdoctors in Africa in the 1930s to more recent progress in training physicians in "bedside manner" (Mishler, 1985) and analysis of which scientific experts have their opinions aired in the media, in court, or in policymaking (Rifkin, 1997).

Central to the process of negotiation of expert status is the sociolinguistic and anthropological notion that we are constantly engaged in a joint negotiation of meaning and identity (Haslett, 1987). We are always assessing who our

counterparts are at the same time as we are working to understand what they are saying and what it implies. The more "expert" that we perceive the person to whom we are listening to be, the more weight we give to their words; *i.e.*, the more likely we are to believe and heed them. Put another way, as their expert status rises in our perception, the more believable their words sound.

The process can become self-reinforcing when someone whom we begin to believe weaves together an increasingly believable version of reality, a version that substantiates their claim to expert status. This dynamic can be seen to be part of what Berger and Luckmann (1967) described as reification in their explanation of the social construction of reality. This process is also at the heart of concerns about sensemaking articulated by Schutz (1973).

The self-reinforcing nature of this joint negotiation of meaning and identity is augmented by assessments of relevance. Relevance has multiple elements, as ably described by Sperber and Wilson (1986) in applying insights from psychology (e.g., Bateson, 1975) and linguistics (e.g., Lyons, 1977). Individuals attempt to determine the relevance of a statement to their understanding of the topic at hand, the referential meaning – *e.g.*, is the mechanic talking about <u>my</u> car? The individual is also attempting to assess whether the statement seems to be offered in their best interests, an inferential meaning – *e.g.*, is the cost of the repair within the realm of what I would like to pay?

These assessments contribute to the negotiation of expert status being self reinforcing. The more that an "expert" is judged by a listener to be worth listening to, the more likely that the expert's statements will be assessed by that listener to be "relevant", and *vice versa*. In other words, a successful negotiation of expert status occurs when the topics that the expert discusses are seen by the listener to fit – and build on -- the perception of reality that the listener is growing to accept. Simultaneously, success in the negotiation requires that the listener becomes more accepting that the expert's opinion is in the listener's best interest.

Again, understanding and alignment of interests are both judged. A negotiation of expert status moves toward consummation when a sense of

understanding and a perception of a worthwhile "relationship" develop hand in hand, in a dialectical process.

This dialectical process has strong parallels to how trust is built. Trust, according to fields ranging from philosophy to marketing research and organizational behaviour (e.g., Taylor-Gooby, 2006 and Usoro, Sharatt, Tsui, and Shekhar, 2007), requires that a "client" perceive at least two core elements in the expert – competence and benevolence. These two factors align well with Sperber and Wilson's conceptions of relevance. Competence suggests that someone can actually achieve what they are claiming they have the ability to achieve, which relates to understanding what the expert is saying and doing, a form of referential knowledge. Benevolence relates to the inferential judgement about whether one's interests will be served.

These factors, and the dialectical nature of the negotiation of expert status, align with the common sense perception of trust as having a self-reinforcing dynamic, that trust can be won over time and built on. To summarise, then, an expert can gain trust by evincing an identity that a client perceives in an increasingly favourable way.

Part of this process involves status by affiliation. The expert must be perceived as belonging to a community of qualified specialists. Such signals of membership include the diploma or certificate on the wall or acronyms signifying academic degrees and professional affiliations on a business card.

For this affiliation to be effective, the group in which an expert claims membership has to be viewed as worthy of esteem, capable of competence, and trustworthy. This collective identity issue has been illustrated well by cultural anthropologists studying, for example, Native American land claims (Clifford, 1988). Those assessing a land claim had to determine – (1) is this person indeed sufficiently related by blood to the tribe in question to be considered a member; and (2) is the tribe still a tribe, or have members so assimilated that they have lost their claim to tribal status, at least in the eyes of the law? The key point here is that identity of both (1) individual and (2) group are gauged.

These membership issues are related to questions of intrinsic and extrinsic facets of expert status. These factors have been analysed in literature in relation to experts and laypersons appearing on television (e.g., Thornborrow, 2001; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; and Kotthoff, 1997). The expert can bring to a television appearance the trappings of extrinsic expert status. The expert was invited onto television in the first place (*i.e.*, someone thought that they were worth listening to), and they have institutional affiliations, degrees, and other qualifications or experience that an audience would hear about from the host, such as high public office or authorship of a book on a high profile topic.

These extrinsic factors are resources that are applied in an assessment and negotiation of expert status in a particular setting. In that setting, the expert must negotiate to gain recognition as being what others have recognized them to be: relevant, competent, working in the interests of audience members, etc. Success in this negotiation means gaining intrinsic expert status. Intrinsic expert status may be granted in one situation but not in another. This dynamic means that expert status is "in the eyes of the beholder" and temporary, what is known as a provisional status (see Strathern, 1982).

The provisional intrinsic and more enduring extrinsic aspects of expert status are subject to mutually reinforcing dynamics. The more often that one gains intrinsic expert status, the more likely one's extrinsic expert status will grow as one's reputation spreads. In other words, individual selections of who deserves expert status provide fuel for collective beliefs about who deserves expert status.

This process becomes self reinforcing on a collective level when the metaphorical dance between expert and client on an individual level has the partners drawing closer to one another in a way that makes the expert look like an appealing dance partner for a larger and larger audience. A self-reinforcing negotiation of expert status at the individual level (described earlier as the expert painting a reality that makes them seem more relevant – they describe your problem in their terms in a compelling way) becomes self-reinforcing at the collective level via growth in an expert's reputation. That growing reputation contributes to what Berger and Luckmann would recognize as a reification

process. In sum, the construction of a version of reality that an expert gets a client to agree to in a particular conversation (intrinsic) can lead to a social construction of reality (extrinsic) through changes in how an expert is perceived.

While consequences of this process are often addressed, how this negotiation of expert status occurs in various settings has only been crudely characterized, and even those studies have addressed only a few settings. The interplay between intrinsic and extrinsic expert status also needs attention. What is known from fundamentals of discourse analysis – as discussed above -- is that the processes involve three key dimensions: (1) text -- the words and information exchanged; (2) actors -- and their multiple and evolving senses of identity; and (3) context -- historical, physical, and the flow of activity. These elements expand on the traditional focus in many fields when analyzing decision making, which is on information and how it is understood. These factors have also emerged in a "meta-paradigmatic perspective" on framing in research and practice on environmental conflicts (Dewulf, Gray, Putnam, Lewicki, Aarts, Bouwen, and Van Woerkum, 2009:155).

This triad – text, actor, and context – reminds us to attend to relational aspects of communication, e.g., status and affiliation. It also calls for a focus on social processes and their meanings, such as ritualistic elements in decision making. The statistician, Devons (1954), notably employed this perspective in a critique of the vain attempts at numerical forecasting by the British Coal Board. He likened the process to the divination practices of African witchdoctors – done to calm the nerves in the face of seemingly mysterious and capricious forces.

One can conclude that a solitary focus on cost-benefit analysis and calculated risks is an impoverished perspective. Analysis of decision making requires assessment of relational, symbolic, and ritual factors. That is, we should address not just text, but actors and context, as well. These three elements are all part of self-reinforcing dynamics at individual and collective levels in a range of arenas.

III. Evidence of this Negotiation in the Environmental Arena

Some would argue that the negotiation of expert status occurs in nearly every conversation. It is easy to recognize how it can happen in discussions with physicians, lawyers, and automobile mechanics. They compete for our business and for us to "buy into" their version of what our problem is and how we should go about solving it, such as by hiring them or heeding their advice. We then, of course, compete for their attention (Glaser, 1972). The negotiation of expert status can also be seen to occur when political leaders turn to advisors and publicly-known experts for policy advice. Also, larger audiences determine whether to believe and heed an expert on a popular talk show on radio or television.

Of interest here is how the negotiation of expert status affects paths of change in organizations, markets, and institutions. This section provides a couple of illustrations of the roles in these domains of the self-reinforcing processes involved in the negotiation of expert status. The examples here are meant to be models for the reader to use in identifying areas where similar dynamics would be occurring in arenas with which they are familiar. Illustrations from the environmental arena are followed by a brief overview of types of expert-nonexpert relationships where similar dynamics may apply.

Environmental Issues

Environmental issues were the focus in the fieldwork employed to illustrate my definition of communication between technical and nontechnical people as the negotiation of expert status (Rifkin, 1990). I monitored a regional board regulating the quality of water in streams, rivers, bays, and aquifers that received discharges from oil refineries, local manufacturers, chicken farmers, and other sources. Water Board members listened to testimony by their own technical staff and by specialists in clean up and mitigation hired by polluting companies. The Board members had to determine whether to believe their staff's depiction -- or that of a "discharger's" specialist -- of a site where wastewater had been discharged. For example, did a discharger represent an ongoing "threat to

pollute," or was the situation a more minor, one-off infraction? They were assessing the "reality" of the situation in terms of its implications for enforcing the law. They wanted compliance from polluting companies -- a speedy clean up and minimization of danger to local ecosystems and drinking water supplies.

This Water Board's technical staff won 99 out of 100 cases that I witnessed across three years of observation of monthly hearings. The Board and its staff had a secure expert-client relationship, albeit one that was constantly renegotiated and confirmed in each case. The staff proved that they were competent and reasonable, and the board members showed themselves to be intelligent and responsive clients who were working in the interest of the environment. The secure nature of the relationship was all the more interesting given that Board members were appointed by a Republican governor (a business orientated political party), and staff came from an environmental profession known to have a majority who were adherents to the opposition party, the Democrats. They came from opposite sides of the business-environment divide; yet they had built a secure working relationship. Within that relationship, the technical staff were able to make their descriptions of the physical world and what might happen to it acceptable to Water Board members.

In contrast, a colleague reported that a board whom she studied, who were appointed by the same state governor to address coastal issues, was in the opposite kind of relationship with its left-leaning technical staff (Pantell, *personal communication*, 1988). Board members were constantly siding with those testifying in opposition to their own technical staff, such as representatives of a property developer seeking to build in a coastal area. A stable relationship between board and staff could be said to exist, but it was a relationship of opposition. The technical staff for the coastal board were presumably no less expert than those for the Water Board, but they seemed to have failed to gain expert status in numerous situations.

These two examples illustrate what is likely to have been happening over the past two decades – and is still ongoing -- in relation to climate change. Though evidence of climate change has been accumulating for years, it must have taken key specialists gaining expert status in the eyes of powerful figures to

provide political visibility sufficient for climate change to rise in the priority list of politicians, governments, and business managers. The climate change issue, it can be argued, has now fit the clients' agendas, agendas that undoubtedly differ from those of scientists. Climate scientists can be seen to view the planet's ecosystems as being in grave danger. For their community of practice, measurements of physical reality play a dominant role. For decades, one can see that those measurements have not been convincing in and of themselves for the most powerful actors in the business and political arenas, much less a majority in the general population. In recent years, though, scientists and their allies can be seen to have satisfied expert status criteria in the worlds of media and politics.

This alignment does not mean that climate change is purely a social construct. Rather, it suggests that climate change and its experts are elements in a set of social constructs – ongoing battles between left and right, between business and environmentalists, between counterculture movements and government (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983).

Within these battles, the negotiation of expert status plays a role. Each side determines not only who is competent but who is "benevolent", who is likely to provide advice that aligns with their interests. Extrinsic expert status is visible in the media and identification of which expert is used by each side. Behind that extrinsic achievement, though, would have been a set of conversations constituting a negotiation of intrinsic expert status in a range of specific encounters, as previously characterized.

These two examples in the environmental arena – one carefully studied and one interpolated from the public response to climate change over three decades – suggest the role of the negotiation of expert status in influencing decisions, both micro and macro.

Elsewhere

Where else do negotiations of expert status occur? The provision of scientific advice on policy is one obvious site, and not just on environmental issues. Other policy arenas would include health care, information technology, transportation,

electric power, and social welfare, any arena where specialists are typically engaged. In charged political contexts, the negotiation of expert status also plays a role when one is considering the voice of the citizen, resident, neighbourhood activitist, or client for government services, who can each argue for a voice based on their experience and local knowledge.

A focus on the client in any of a range of settings can make expert status negotiations visible – such as when a client employs a lawyer, building contractor, mechanic, or physician. On the flip side, engagement of a client by a vendor (expert) is a focus in market research. For example, how does the phone company lure you into becoming a client, purely on price and service or by enacting rituals of advertising and customer service that make the company seem in your eyes to be competent and benevolent, as experts?

The nature of expert-client relationships is also critical when we have little or no choice, such as when a child faces their teacher or a player faces their coach. Sure, the teacher and coach have the authority of rank, but the student and player can still contest in their own minds how much credence they give to lessons and advice.

These examples suggest that the negotiation of expert status can occur not only in governance but in commerce, education, and a range of non-formalised interactions. One can generalise that the negotiation of expert status can be analysed in any situation involving the future – risk perception, risk communication, or learning.

IV. Conclusions, implications, and further research needed

A basic observation that began this paper was that when we are faced with uncertainty, we choose a voice of authority. That is, we do not just decide what to do; we decide whom to listen to. This assessment and selection process has been described here in general terms as a "negotiation of expert status." The negotiation process has been characterized as being self-reinforcing on a microscopic level – at the level of conversations -- with mezzo- and macro-scopic implications. That is, the intrinsic expert status achieved at the micro-

level in a conversation relies on, and contributes to, extrinsic expert status, which can be seen at a broader scale, as reputation.

The fact that expert status can be gained by certain individuals in certain situations through a range of statements and actions by themselves and others is not as salient an insight as is a realization of implications for decision making, which were alluded to in the opening statement. People who gain expert status in our eyes get to shape our understanding of things that we do not understand and our preferences for things that depend on information that we will never understand. In other words, experts define our view of "reality" and guide our decisions when we cannot fathom what that reality is. They engage with us in a negotiation of both meaning and identity. This process undermines the solidity of the link between an experts qualifications and their influence because an expert can now be seen to have only a provisional and negotiated status.

The characterization presented here of the negotiation of expert status should not come across as earth shaking. It is drawn from fairly fundamental theory in linguistics, psychology, sociology, and related fields. However, the process is something that we tend not to reflect on though we engage in it every day in many, if not most, of our conversations. Despite this ongoing engagement, our focus in decision making and in research on decision making tends to be on information. This focus seems driven by a working assumption that humans are some sort of information-processing machines. This paper suggests that we can be seen alternatively as relationship-orientated organisms, social and cultural beings who are influenced by the means and meanings of how we relate to one another. That is, we should consider – in discourse analytic terms -- the text of our interactions as we typically do, but also the actors and context. These latter two factors tend to be sidelined in our discussions and analyses of decision making.

Areas for further research evident from this paper include:

1. More extensive characterization of the negotiation of expert status at a micro-level, in conversations;
2. Study of the ties between intrinsic expert status and extrinsic expert status;

3. Analysis of the relative importance in decision making of assigning expert status and heeding a voice of authority versus an individual's assessment of information.

Interdisciplinary research would be fruitful, and that is the motivation to present this paper in this setting. Here, the basic question driving such research would be:

> How does the negotiation of expert status act as an element in self-reinforcing processes defined at a more macroscopic level in organizations, institutions, marketplaces?

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