Epistemic Motivation Is What Gets the Learner Started

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DeRue, Ashford, and Myers (2012) bring an important advancement to the study of learning from experience by providing a stronger and more stringent theoretical foundation of the learning agility construct. The aim of the current contribution is to further expand these theoretical underpinnings of learning agility by elaborating on the underlying psychological mechanisms that help explain *why* and *when* employees display learning-agile processes. In essence, we argue that to better understand both intraindividual fluctuations and interindividual differences in the processes underlying agile learning, we also need a more fine-grained picture of the starting and stopping mechanisms of these processes.

For reasons of conceptual clarity, DeRue et al. distinguished the behavioral and cognitive processes of learning agility from its motivational aspects. In their words, ''our proposed definition explicitly separates a person's willingness to do the things that represent agility from the definition of what it means to be an agile learner.'' We are, of course, sympathetic to their view, as the volitional aspect of learning is conceptually separate from the learning act itself. Consequently, in their focal article, they exclusively focus on the cognitive and behavioral manifestations of learning agility. However, there is a risk that by the rightful exclusion of the willingness to learn, the baby is thrown out with the bathwater, and the motivational underpinnings of learning from experience remain understudied.

The cognitive and behavioral aspects underlying learning agility deal with *how* employees formulate, test, and adapt hypotheses regarding their work environment to build, validate, and form new knowledge and skills. The motivational aspect of learning from experience has to do with the intensity and the duration of the knowledge acquisition process, or in other words, with the start/stopping mechanisms of learning-agile processing (Ellis, Mendel, & Nir, 2006; Kruglanski, 1990). More specifically, the motivational aspect deals with questions such as ''When do employees stop conducting cognitive simulations or generating counterfactual arguments?'' ''When do they stop seeking additional feedback?'' and ''When do they start reflecting about their own knowledge and start experimenting with alternative ways of working?''

Thus, if we do not only want to understand how employees high in learning agility differ in cognition and behavior from those low in learning agility but also when these differences arise, we need to pay attention to the basic motivational mechanisms that precede learning agile processes. A better understanding of when learning agile processes emerge is important because it will help organizations gradually shape learning environments that are customized to the needs of employees high or low in learning agility.

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In the remainder, we turn to Kruglanski's lay epistemic theory (Kruglanski, 1990; Kruglanski, Dechesne, Orehek, & Pierro, 2009) about the knowledge formation and modification process. We take a first step toward integration of these basic psychological principles on knowledge formation with the conceptual framework laid out by DeRue et al. In this way, we hope to provide a useful expansion of the theoretical framework of learning agility and point future researchers to important contextual influences in the experiential learning process.

Epistemic Motivation as the Basis of Learning Agile Processing

Kruglanski's lay epistemic theory (Kruglanski, 1990; Kruglanski et al., 2009) addresses the process whereby human knowledge is formed and modified. Essential in his theory is the presumption of fundamental interdependence between cognitive, behavioral, and motivational aspects of the knowledge formation/modification process. The initiation and termination of the process of generating and actively testing new hypotheses about a phenomenon largely depends on someone's epistemic motivation. Epistemic motivation can be understood as the inclination to achieve a thorough understanding of an experience (De Dreu, Nijstad, & van Knippenberg, 2008). When epistemic motivation is high, the learner gathers and processes information to a greater extent before he ''seizes'' and ''freezes'' on accessible evidence (Kruglanski & Webster, 1996). This extensive elaboration on a phenomenon eventually results in a greater expansion of the cognitive scheme (Ellis & Davidi, 2005).

Applied to the context of experiential learning, we posit that the cognitive and behavioral processing of an experience not only depends on someone's ability to learn quickly and flexibly from experiences (i.e., learning agility) but also on someone's inclination to learn from the experience (i.e., epistemic motivation). If learning-agile people are not inclined to gain a thorough understanding of an experience, the cognitive and behavioral processes leading to experiential learning may not be activated. Hence, we propose epistemic motivation as a necessary precondition for learning agile processes to take place. This activating function of epistemic motivation for cognitive and behavioral processes (e.g., feedback seeking, cognitive reflection, and counterfactual thinking) is well in line with established findings in the separate research streams that have looked at these processes. Feedback seeking behavior and counterfactual thinking, for instance, are spurred by uncertainty (Ashford, 1986) and errors (Morris & Moore, 2000), respectively. Uncertainty (De Dreu et al., 2008) and a focus on errors (Ellis et al., 2006) both trigger epistemic motivation, which in turn is positively related to active processing of a situation (De Dreu et al., 2008). Conversely, when uncertainty decreases or when the focus is put on successes, epistemic motivation drops, diminishing the likelihood that active processing of the situation takes place.

Challenging Experiences as Determinants of Epistemic Motivation

By conceptualizing epistemic motivation as a threshold mechanism for cognitive and behavioral processing of an experience, an understanding of its determinants can help shape a work environment that optimally activates learning-agile processing. Consider the assignment of challenging tasks or situations (McCauley, Ruderman, Ohlott, & Morrow, 1994). Challenging assignments create ambiguity. Current skills no longer seem to match with the demands of the task at hand (McCauley, Van Velsor, & Ruderman, 2010). This ambiguity is positively related to epistemic motivation because the learner wishes to achieve a desired state of knowledge (Kruglanski, 1990). Increased epistemic motivation fosters people to step out of their comfort zone of the daily routine and to start to actively process the situation (e.g., by seeking feedback or by reflecting). However, when an

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individual feels that the requirements posed by the assignment far transcend his level of learning agility, feelings of learned helplessness and dullness may emerge, which are negatively associated with epistemic motivation (Roets, Van Hiel, Cornelis, & Soetens, 2008). Hence, too much challenge may trigger eagerness to obtain closure without a thorough understanding of the assignment, leading to decreased cognitive and behavioral processing, and thus to less skill development (cf. DeRue & Wellman, 2009).

Similarly, by applying the epistemic motivation principle, specific propositions can be developed concerning the broader temporal context in which challenging experiences take place (Dragoni, Oh, VanKatwyk, & Tesluk, 2011). As the number of challenging experiences within a certain timeframe (i.e., situational density) increases, one has to deal with multiple challenging situations simultaneously. Given that learning-agile people can flexibly move across experiences without being overwhelmed by the demands set by the situations, we propose that they are inclined to thoroughly process experiences under low and medium levels of situational density. However, when the amount of challenging experiences within this timeframe further increases, (a) time pressure is induced as less time can be devoted to each separate task and (b) cognitive overload may emerge because there is not enough attention to subdivide among these different challenging tasks. Time pressure (De Dreu et al., 2008) and cognitive overload (Ford & Kruglanski, 1995) hamper epistemic motivation. Hence, we propose that when situational density exceeds a certain point, the likelihood that learning agile processes are optimally activated reduces.

In summary, we want to emphasize that a more stringent definition of learning agility, excluding the willingness to learn, should not tempt us to overlook the motivational processes underlying learning from experience. Drawing on Kruglanski's lay epistemic theory, we propose that when learning agile people lack epistemic motivation due to environmental inhibitors, they will not display the behavioral and cognitive processes that are proposed to be optimal for fast and flexible learning. To obtain a detailed understanding of learning agility, future research should take the start/stopping mechanisms of learning-agile processing regulated by epistemic motivation into account. Given the micropsychological nature of these basic learning principles, we believe that the research strategies to study learning agility recommended by DeRue et al. also need to be expanded by experimental lab research.

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