Cognitive Authority: Are You Attending to this Double-Edged Sword?

Description

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Malak Khader and Nicole Bank

An older gentleman was already at the pharmacy when I arrived to get my COVID vaccine booster. This patient had arrived at his scheduled appointment for his second COVID shot. When I arrived, the patient and the pharmacist were arguing as the pharmacist was insisting he had arrived one week too early for his second dose of the vaccine. The pharmacist was steadfast, the patient was to wait 28 days between doses. Initially, I was surprised the patient was so bold as to take on a licensed pharmacist. As the argument developed, I realized the patient was weighing conflicting information from different information authorities. On the one hand, the information system had automatically scheduled this appointment for his second dose. Additionally, the patient was under the impression (from other sources not revealed to me) these doses were to be administered 21 days apart. On the other hand, this licensed pharmacist was insisting they were to be administered four weeks apart. Frustrated, the patient pulled out his phone and searched on the CDC website as the pharmacist took a break and checked me in. The patient then came back to the pharmacist showing the CDC recommends this particular vaccine was to be administered 21 days apart. In the end, the pharmacist indicated he was looking at the wrong week on the calendar and agreed to administer the second vaccine. Who would you believe? The automated information system? The licensed pharmacist? Your gut?

—Who do you believe when information authorities are in conflict?—

In this fast-moving world, we are presented with choices, passing judgements, and updating knowledge at
a blurring rate. Who do you believe when information authorities are in conflict? Are you aware of who has cognitive authority over your choices? Because we are so busy, we often don’t take the time (or have the time) to slow down and notice what is driving our narratives and actions. Many of our decisions are automatic or set on autopilot: what we have for breakfast, the route we take to work, who we call for advice. For most decisions, we default to actions consistent with sources that have cognitive authority. Although cognitive authority plays a role with our daily routines, it tends to be a subtle role because we trust the system we set in place for ourselves. However, we need to be more aware of the role cognitive authority plays with information that is more spontaneously sought, especially prominent information that continues to develop over time like the pandemic or various other news stories.

What is cognitive authority and who has it?

Cognitive authority is the influence a person may have over the thoughts or actions of another person. Sometimes this authority is given due to a person’s credentials, expertise, or even relationship and reputation with the other person. Although cognitive authority is usually associated with a person, other entities such as organizations can also hold cognitive authority; examples of this would be your trusted news sources, health institutions, and trusted brands.

**Cognitive authority is not always bad. Here are some benefits to cognitive authority**

Cognitive authority can be influential and beneficial due to efficiency. We rely on cognitive authority due to the convenience of access to information. Having information readily available eliminates work that usually goes into information seeking, retrieving, and validating; with cognitive authority, all the steps are already complete. Cognitive authority can be beneficial when information comes from trusted sources. These sources have been previously vetted by the person and make judgement and decision-making easier. The way a person vets a source can vary depending on the information need and the importance of the information.

The pros of cognitive authority:
• Information comes from trusted sources
• Past information has been evaluated by the information receiver
• Information sources have a reputation for their expertise
• Information sources are convenient
• Information sources are easily accessible

Why should we be aware of who has cognitive authority over our actions?

Although cognitive authority has its benefits, it can also be detrimental. One should always be aware of who or what has this influence over them. Over the course of a lifetime, many people and entities gain cognitive authority over one’s actions. Similarly, people tend to trust new, like-minded people even if there is no history of accurate information provided. This influence can be harmful because a person may still trust some sources and believe the information given is true, even if it is not. Trusting inaccurate information gives way to the dissemination of misinformation. Information verification is an important step toward building a network of trusted information sources.

The cons of cognitive authority:

• Information from a trusted source can still be wrong
• Information tends to be trusted when the information giver is like-minded to the information receiver

Whatever or whomever has cognitive authority over your choices, actions and judgements we just ask that you slow down a moment and notice. Cognitive authorities have a strong influence over what we do, but they don’t have to be permanent.

Four steps to evaluating cognitive authority in your life

Ask yourself these four questions:

1. What is the information provided by this source?
2. What are the sponsors and motives of this source of information?
3. Does this information align with or conflict with my other sources of information?
4. Does this information align with or conflict with my own personal knowledge and experience?