



Gabriel Mugny

Gabriel Mugny, honorary professor of social psychology at the University of Geneva, has passed away on October 5, 2021 at the age of 72.

Gabriel Mugny earned his PhD in psychology in 1974 at the University of Geneva, became assistant professor in 1984 and full professor in 1993 in the same university. He was chief editor of the *Swiss Journal of Psychology* (1998-2001) and the *International Review of Social Psychology* (2006-2014). He served as vice-president (1989-1991 and 2009-2011) and president (1999-2002) of the Psychology Section of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Geneva. He was also vice-Dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Geneva (2006-2012). In 1976 he was awarded with the *Prix Lucien Cellérier* at the University of Geneva for his work on socio-cognitive development. In 2013 he was named *Doctor Honoris Causa* at the *Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences* (Greece), and in 2016 he received the Medal of Honor from the *Association pour la Diffusion de la Recherche Internationale en Psychologie Sociale* (ADRIPS).

During his career, Gabriel Mugny has worked relentlessly to uncover the social-psychological mechanisms that lead conflict not only to negative outcomes, but also—from a social constructivist perspective—to found cognitive development and social innovation. Right from the beginning of his work in the early 1970s, Gabriel devoted his famous experiments to point out that conflict is a powerful tool that engages socio-cognitive processes, and that has the potential to elicit qualitative changes at the intra-individual, inter-individual, intra-group, inter-group and ultimately societal level (i.e., accounting for individual and social changes). Such an endeavor resulted in two major programs of research that have attracted a notable number of scholars.

A first program of research stemmed from the then-arising field of minority influence, initiated by Serge Moscovici, aiming at demonstrating that powerless groups may generate social innovation to the extent that they manage to create conflict and keep it alive through consistent behavior. Gabriel Mugny contributed to this endeavor by devising a theory of minority influence in which minority groups were represented as having two sets of conflictual relationships, one with the hegemonic power in a given society (a relationship of antagonism), and one with the population (a relationship of influence). In such theory, conflict is not conceived as a uniform and invariant concept; on the contrary, the theory posits that, depending on the identity of the target of influence, conflict may arise from a more intransigent, rigid behavioral style or from a more negotiating, flexible style.

Not only can conflict be related to a variety of behaviors, but it also results in social influence as a function of rather different socio-cognitive mechanisms. In later work he investigated several processes either facilitating or preventing minority influence. On the one hand, with Stamos Papastamou, Gabriel proposed the concept of *psychologization* as a strategy that reduces minority influence by attributing minority positions to some idiosyncratic psychological characteristics of the minority itself. On the other hand, with Juan A. Pérez, Gabriel developed the *dissociation theory*. This theory accounts for the conditions in which individuals get stuck in a threatening social comparison process between the stigmatizing social identity that derives from adopting the minority position, on the one hand, and the positive identity that derives from adopting the majority position, on the other hand. This theory also addresses the conditions allowing

individuals to engage in a validation process that should prompt a close scrutiny of the minority's positions, a specific process that in the end gives rise to the conversion process described by Serge Moscovici, i.e., resistance to overtly identify with the minority, along with a latent, non-conscious, internalization of its ideas. Thus, when social comparison and validation are non-dissociated, minority influence is less likely to occur. The fundamental contribution of this theory is to make it possible to predict that outgroup minorities—with which social differentiation is well-defined and social comparison is less threatening—may be more likely to induce influence than ingroup minorities. Again, Gabriel's work insisted on the importance of studying how conflict is handled in a multiform social space, which contributed to clarifying the differences between ingroup and outgroup minority influence.

A second, parallel research program in which Gabriel Mugny engaged in the early 1970s is the foundation of cognitive developmental social psychology, carried out with Willem Doise. This groundbreaking field aimed at showing the importance of social interaction in the development of children's cognitive schemes. Central to such development is again socio-cognitive conflict: social interaction can create a disequilibrium in the child's cognitive schemes that requires to reconsider the knowledge at hand, which may result in some progress. Otherwise stated, conflict can trigger cognitive development, which argues for an understanding of cognitive development as a form of social influence. Importantly, a longstanding stream of research has shown that conflict sometimes leads to progress and sometimes not. Over the years, Gabriel has stimulated an impressive number of studies that pointed out how conflict regulation is the crucial factor that determines what the outcome will be. Indeed, if conflict is regulated in an epistemic manner, by focusing on the conflicting points of the task that is being discussed, then cognitive progress is likely to ensue. If, on the contrary, conflict is regulated in a relational manner, by focusing on the relative status of the conflicting actors, then cognitive progress is less likely to ensue.

For many years, these two programs of research developed in parallel directions, although they accumulated convergent results on the essential role of conflict in social influence, be it minority influence or learning in interaction. But, in the middle of the 1980s, Gabriel Mugny started to build, together with his collaborators, what later would be known as the *conflict elaboration theory*. The basic goal of such an endeavor was to account for the massive number of diverse results that accumulated in the literature on social influence through the notion of conflict elaboration. Indeed, the theory proposed that, when confronted with different influence sources (majorities or minorities, experts or non-experts, ingroups or outgroups) on different tasks (facts, problems, opinion, preferences), people elaborate conflict in different ways. This theory provided scholars with a systematic model that allows to predict the type of influence that would result from a wide array of combinations of sources and tasks, thereby achieving a unitary view of how conflict, once elaborated, leads to change, and what sort of change. Or how it leads to no change. The theory also provided a framework that pointed to the unity of the lines of research that Gabriel Mugny had investigated in the past, and a roadmap for his doctoral students.

From then on, conflict elaboration has been used to account for a number of important social issues, to understand the structure of societal influences, to explain the emergence of learning in educational settings, and to tackle such fundamental issues as the development of knowledge. The work accomplished by Gabriel Mugny has shaped the landscape of the study of social influence at the international level. It is not difficult to realize the scope of Gabriel's scientific carrier, whose bibliography includes over 200 scientific publications, including 18 books.

Beyond his impressive academic career, Gabriel was most of all an extremely warm and caring person and colleague. He was humble and generous, fair and honest, considerate and respectful, pleasant, familiar and jovial. He never treated his assistants and doctoral students as subordinates,

but truly as colleagues and friends. He always supported and promoted his collaborators, and he always managed to create around him a rich and stimulating work environment for them, full of friendship and affection. Finally, Gabriel never stopped making us dream, not only because he was a scholar with a genuine passion for research and teaching—a passion that animated him until his last days, and that he was able to transmit to those who had the chance to collaborate with him—, but also because he admirably succeeded in bringing his extremely touching personal side into his work. Both his home and office doors were always open, literally speaking, either for long theoretical discussions about social psychology or for tasty and copious meals with the welcoming presence of his family.

As former students and colleagues of Gabriel, we have been fortunate enough to work in such a stimulating, vibrant and friendly atmosphere, and we are extremely grateful to him. We hope that we have managed to pass the same values and atmosphere on to our own students and colleagues. We will miss his presence, but he will remain in our memories, and his influence will last across generations.

By Fabrizio Butera, Juan M. Falomir-Pichastor, Jenny Maggi, Stamos Papastamou, Juan A. Pérez, Alain Quiamzade and Margarita Sanchez-Mazas