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Reflection Alone Can Increase Consistency of Beliefs

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When asked to relate information that previously has only been considered separately, what do people do? Do we integrate the information, suddenly removing barriers and creating new connections? Or do we continue, as Bem (1970) suggests, to view the ideas as separate, internally consistent “belief bubbles” that have no need to be related? Koslowski (1996) has suggested that people may respond differently to apparent psychological (as opposed to logical) inconsistencies in their own belief systems than to new, factual information that disconfirms a belief.

To explore these questions, we examined people’s beliefs about the complex issue of affirmative action. Fifty undergraduate students were interviewed twice about their opinions about many aspects of affirmative action. They were asked a basic question to assess their opinion of affirmative action in general, followed by many specific questions about related issues such as the role of government, the value of racial diversity, and the consequences of such policies. At the end of the first interview, some of the participants were challenged on beliefs that they mentioned. That is, they were asked to respond to a statement suggesting that two responses they had given could be seen as conflicting. They were not provided with any additional factual information, but were simply asked to reflect on the opinions they had stated. For example, some participants were told, “You mentioned that you generally support affirmative action policies. In another section, you noted that you believe that people should not be evaluated based on their race. Some people have argued that these two points are incompatible because affirmative action policies require making some decisions based on race. Could you give some thought to that?”

Two weeks later, participants were interviewed again, asked the same series of questions as in the initial interview. For each question, participants gave both open-ended responses, and ratings of opinions on a 7-point scale. Here, we explore the ratings. We measured the change in ratings on each question.

There was no difference in magnitude of change on the basic opinion question about affirmative action (“What are your views and beliefs about affirmative action?”) between those confronted with inconsistencies and those who were not challenged ($p=.86$).

However, on the individual questions, those who received a challenge aimed at a particular belief were often more likely to change their beliefs more than those who did not

receive the challenge. While many of these differences did not reach significance, in most cases those who were challenged changed their ratings more than those who were not challenged. We used a binomial probability to test how likely it was for 19 of 23 responses would be in this direction, and found this to be a significant difference ($p<.01$). In addition, we looked at whether the direction of changes indicated that people were becoming more consistent in their thinking. Again, examining a binomial distribution we found that those who were asked to consider inconsistencies became more consistent ($p<.01$).

These results suggest that reflecting on apparent inconsistencies in one’s own thinking can lead to change in responses to particular questions, even when it does not affect a responses to a broader, related question. These findings further provide evidence that information is organized in separate “belief bubbles” that are not usually considered together. When considering issues, people can compartmentalize; they have separate “bubbles” of internally consistent information, that may be inconsistent with other internally consistent bubbles. When asked to reflect on ideas previously considered unrelated, people may change one belief while retaining related general beliefs.

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