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Reasoning about Empirical Inconsistencies

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Many polls have found that people often hold inconsistent beliefs without recognizing the inconsistency. For instance, some people support a flat tax but would not like to lose any of the tax deductions they currently enjoy. What happens when people are asked to consider such inconsistent beliefs simultaneously? Do the beliefs become more integrated and consistent over time? What is the process of thinking that can lead to such belief change?

This study explores these questions by looking at reasoning strategies people use when faced with inconsistencies in their belief systems. Other researchers have studied logical inconsistencies, such as reasoning about syllogisms. Logical inconsistencies, in which it is simply impossible for two conflicting statements both to be true, cannot be resolved. Most studies have found that people are impervious to disconfirming evidence (Koslowski, 1996). The present study, however, examines empirical inconsistencies, which can, in principle, be resolved, given contextual information. For example, the apparently inconsistent facts that all dogs I have known bark, yet this particular dog does not bark, can be resolved by learning that the particular dog has a problem with its vocal cords. Knowledge of context allows one to realize that the original premise assumes that all dogs are physically capable of barking, and therefore to resolve the inconsistency.

Examining reasoning at the micro-level, the present research focuses on two specific questions. First, does pointing out inconsistencies lead someone to give more consistent and integrated responses, or to be confused and thus give more fragmented responses? Further, if greater consistency does obtain, is it because some beliefs are relinquished or modified? Second, do the reasoning strategies used change over time, as people think through an issue more thoroughly? For example, does denial of the inconsistency decrease while differentiation among cases increases?

College students are asked to reason about the complex, emotion-laden issue of affirmative action, at two points in time. During the first interview, they are asked an extensive series of questions requiring them to describe in detail their opinions about many aspects of affirmative action and to rate their beliefs (e.g., "Do you think that the government has a responsibility to guarantee equal educational opportunities to all citizens?"). Immediately after this initial interview, participants are confronted with inconsistencies in statements they have made. For example, some students are asked, "You mentioned that you think that affirmative action policies have had a positive impact, and that racism is a significant problem in the U.S. In another section, you note that you are opposed to considering race in hiring, promotion, and admissions decisions. Some people have argued that it is difficult to justify both of these points because if affirmative action has had an impact, and if racism is still a problem, then affirmative action polices such as these should continue in order to help reduce racism. Could you give some thought to this argument?" (Participants in the control group are simply asked to think further about the issues.) At a follow-up interview one week later, students are asked the same opinion questions as in the initial interview, and then confronted with the inconsistencies expressed in this second interview.

Pilot data suggest that people give more integrated responses after being confronted with inconsistencies because they have modified some of their beliefs. Similarly, with time, they come to use more sophisticated reasoning strategies to support their beliefs. Initially they may deny information or dismiss it. However, in a later interview, they are more likely to incorporate more points, and base reasons on differentiation of specific aspects of a belief and higher-level principles. The data gathered so far suggest that people are not always impervious to evidence challenging their current beliefs. It also documents that developmental change can occur when people reflect on their existing knowledge.

References

Koslowski, B. (1996). *Theory and Evidence*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Acknowledgments