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Disconfirming Evidence and Beliefs about Capital Punishment

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In the literature on disconfirming evidence, researchers typically find that people are impervious to data that call into question their beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979). However, one can argue that a particular circumscribed belief (i.e., capital punishment is good or bad) is imbedded in a broader network of beliefs (i.e., capital punishment is or is not a deterrent; capital punishment is or is not biased against members of particular groups, etc.). The usual disconfirming evidence deals only with the circumscribed belief in question, leaving the broader network relatively intact. Disconfirming evidence might affect people's beliefs differently if it calls into question both the broader network of beliefs and the circumscribed belief (Koslowski, 1996). In our study, we provide participants with evidence that disconfirms both the broader network of beliefs and the circumscribed belief. We are asking two questions. One is whether Abelson's categories (1959) provide an exhaustive description of the reasoning strategies people use when confronted with disconfirming evidence. The other is whether evidence that disconfirms both the broader network of beliefs and the circumscribed belief is more likely to produce belief change than control information.

Participants included college students with a range of beliefs about capital punishment. During an initial interview, participants were asked questions that draw out, and were asked to rate, their beliefs about six aspects of capital punishment (e.g., whether it is a deterrent, whether it is biased, etc.). Participants were then presented with evidence that disconfirms each of their stated beliefs (whether pro or con) and were asked to reconcile each piece of evidence with their stated beliefs (participants in the control group were simply asked to think further about the issues). During a second interview two weeks later, participants were asked questions probing any gaps or apparent inconsistencies found in the first interview (e.g., "You said that capital punishment is a deterrent because it scares people. You also said that criminals do not care about losing their lives. How would you reconcile those two statements?"). Participants were asked again to describe and to rate their beliefs about capital punishment. Interviews were audiotaped for later coding. Participants' responses to disconfirming evidence were coded in terms of the reasoning strategy used in each instance.

Our first question is whether Abelson's categories (denial, differentiation, bolstering, and transcendence) exhaustively describe the reasoning strategies used in response to disconfirming evidence. The 60 participants interviewed make it clear that Abelson's categories are not exhaustive. In fact, nearly every participant used at least one response that does not fit well into Abelson's categories. Categories not described by Abelson include: neglect (ignoring rather than actively denying the disconfirming evidence); differentiation with explanation ("We're talking about two different things, and the difference is..."); offering alternative hypotheses to account for the disconfirming evidence; and interjecting methodological concerns ("I'd like to know more about the sample and whether they controlled for confounding variables."). The last two categories are particularly interesting, suggesting that participants are reasoning more like scientists than might be expected based on prior research.

Our second question is whether there are categorizable differences between participants who are swayed by disconfirming evidence and those who are not. Interestingly, participants who are "on the fence" with regard to capital punishment seem to respond to disconfirming evidence by solidifying their beliefs in the direction they were originally leaning, rather than in the direction of the disconfirming evidence. Also, although participants who initially express extreme beliefs tend not to be swayed by the disconfirming evidence, it appears that this is not due to lack of consideration of the evidence.

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