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Extreme Beliefs Do Respond to Evidence

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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). Given this literature, one might expect those with the most extreme beliefs and attitudes, that is, those who have the strongest prior theories, would be even less likely to revise their beliefs than those with less strong prior theories. However, Swiderek, Koslowski, and Bem (1997) have found that people are not as impervious to data as has been previously thought, and that the presentation of disconfirming evidence can indeed sway beliefs. In our study, we examine patterns of belief revision among groups of varying extremeness on the issue of capital punishment. We are asking whether people with more extreme beliefs are indeed less likely to revise their beliefs than those with less extreme beliefs.

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 applied in a biased way, 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. 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 were coded for extremeness of belief by examining patterns of responses during the first interview.

Our question is whether people with more extreme beliefs are less likely to revise their beliefs than those with less extreme beliefs. The 58 participants interviewed make it clear that, for the most part, this is not the case. Rather, in terms of aspects relating to capital punishment, participants with extreme beliefs, either pro or con, are as likely to revise their beliefs as are those with initially less extreme beliefs. On fourteen different ratings scales, the amount of change from the first interview to the second interview did not differ significantly between those with extreme beliefs and those with less extreme beliefs (p-values ranging from .161 to .889). On only three of the ratings scales, change was at least marginally related to extremeness (p-values of .010, .050, and .016); these three scales related to questions of capital punishment's impact on particular groups. Thus, overall it does not appear that the consideration and evaluation of disconfirming evidence is any more biased for those holding strong prior theories about capital punishment than for those who do not hold strong prior theories.

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