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Beliefs Are Like Possessions

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I propose a theoretical perspective on the nature of beliefs, a perspective with novel features. I want to argue that for most people, in many important cases, "beliefs are like possessions." I will begin by explaining briefly what led me to this argument, and then gradually detail the propositions composing the theoretical perspective. Finally, I will outline the psychological consequences of the proposed view. Along the way, I suggest several lines of research that might confirm, refute, or reshape it.

The view I will present has incubated in my thinking for many years, spurred by two considerations: first, puzzlement over certain rather mysterious results in the literature on persuasion; and second, a reanalysis of the way people might acquire and exercise their beliefs[1] and attitudes.

THE NATURE OF PERSUASION

Consider the role of reasoned argument in persuasive attempts to change beliefs. A naive view is that when plausible reasons or grounds for a proposition are presented, they act like rhetorical vectors that move beliefs in their direction. In this view, while any single argument might be ineffective, the repetition of a variety of plausible arguments is the very stuff of persuasion. Counter to this view is the experience that most of us have had in trying to disabuse friends and acquaintances of their seemingly peculiar attachments to beliefs in UFO's, astrology, the afterlife, conspiracy theories of politics, or whatever. Often our barrages of reasonable arguments fall on entirely deaf ears.

The Weakness of Arguments in Persuasion

There are a number of results in the attitude change literature that directly or indirectly cast doubt on the naive view of the role of reasoned argument. I will briefly discuss a few of the most striking of them, listed in Table 1.

TABLE I

Reasoned Argument vs. Other Factors in Persuasion

The weakness of argument

- Argument memory doesn't correlate with attitude change
- Mixed evidence polarizes partisan opinion
- Disconfirmed beliefs perseverate
- Issues hardly matter in presidential choice

The strength of other factors

- Attractiveness of the communicator
- Coorientation of communicator and audience
- Sympathy toward the communicator
- Confident style in debating
- "Heuristic cues" in persuasion
- The boomerang effect of insult

Attitude change and argument memory

It was assumed in the early days of persuasion research (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953) that audience members who were most persuaded by a communication would also be the ones who had learned more of its arguments. Thus, memory for arguments should correlate with attitude change. The early studies that did not find this relationship were explained away, but gradually it became apparent that, in general, there is at best only weak and erratic correlation between memory for arguments and degree to which one is persuaded of the conclusion (Greenwald, 1968). McGuire (1985) has recently put a more optimistic face on the relationship, but still admits that the correlations are "weak." There are various ways to rationalize this correlational failure, but it remains at best somewhat puzzling, and conditional on a whole host of mediating factors (Eagly & Chaiken, 1984).

That memory for several — or indeed any — arguments is not necessary to the support of a conclusion is also suggested by research on public reactions to presidential debates. When asked to recall anything they can of what either candidate said, approximately half of the respondents can remember nothing specific (Sears & Chaffee, 1979). Yet, 70 to 80 percent adjudge one or the other candidate a winner, typically along partisan lines (Kinder & Sears, 1985, p. 712).

Effects of mixed evidence on partisan opinion

Lord, Ross, & Lepper (1979) presented fairly extreme partisans for and against capital punishment with a mixed bag of evidence, some of it tending to support the case for a crime deterrence effect, some tending to refute it. If the two types of partisans had been even-handedly responsive to the evidentiary arguments, they would both have moderated their views on capital punishment. Instead, the results showed increasing polarization of views, both sides becoming even more partisan. This suggests severe boundaries on the ability of reasoning to modify partisan views.

Effects on a belief of disconfirming its grounds

The extreme case in which evidence might be expected to alter belief is the situation in which the grounds for a belief are totally infirmed. The clever experiments by Ross, Lepper, and their students cover this case. In one of them (Ross, Lepper & Hubbard, 1975), subjects were brought to believe through false feedback that they were good (or bad) at a novel task: distinguishing real from fake suicide notes. Thereupon, the deceptive nature of the feedback was fully explained, with emphasis on the irrelevance of the feedback to true ability at the novel task. Nevertheless, subjects persisted in substantial degree in their belief in their ability (or lack of ability).

A related "belief perseverance" effect has been reported in a survey study of attitudes toward capital punishment (Ellsworth & Ross, 1980). Respondents strongly supportive of capital punishment were asked if there was one fundamental reason why. A vast majority replied, yes, they supported capital punishment because it deterred crime. Then those respondents were asked, "Suppose you saw completely clear evidence that capital punishment does not deter crime, would you still support capital punishment?" Over 90% said they would.

This outcome implies that arguments bolstering strong beliefs may function as rationalizations, rather than reasons (the beliefs being held because of factors outside the realm of argument). Indeed, the whole dissonance theory tradition emphasizes the importance of rationalization: "Man is a rationalizing animal," said Aronson (1969, p. 3) in summary of the dissonance literature.

The weakness of issues in presidential choice

It was often remarked in the 1984 U.S. presidential race that while Walter Mondale campaigned on the issues, Ronald Reagan ran on vague themes of leadership and happy talk, ignoring the issues. Although public majorities favoured Mondale's side on many issues, Reagan won easily, implying that the issues were far less consequential than the vague themes.

While analyses of 1984 data on this question have not yet been published, Abelson, Kinder, Peters & Fiske (1982) compared the influence of several factors on candidate preference in the 1980 presidential primaries and general election. A crucial category consisted of "candidate-centered" factors, namely judgments of each candidate's perceived traits, and reports of the feelings aroused in the respondent by each candidate. It was found that in the voting public at large, trait judgments and reports of feelings were the two best predictors of overall preference. In fact, they were four or five times more important than the liberal vs. conservative stance of the respondent on a package of major issues (Kinder & Abelson, 1981; Markus, 1982).

The Influence of Superficial Factors in Persuasion

The power of feelings and trait attributions to influence voting decisions is reminiscent of other results in the literature on persuasion and attitude change. Seemingly incidental or "peripheral" factors (Petty & Cacioppo, 1982) often have a surprisingly large influence.

Attractiveness of the communicator

Such a superficial factor as physical attractiveness has been shown to be influential in persuasion (Horai, Naccari, & Fatoullah, 1974; Dion & Stein, 1978; Chaiken, in press). Mills and Aronson (1965) staged a persuasive situation in which either an attractive or unattractive female speaker either eagerly volunteered or was arbitrarily chosen to urge a particular side of a controversial issue to a male audience. The attractive speaker was more effective than the unattractive speaker, especially in the volunteering condition. It was as though the male audience members were willing, even eager to please the attractive communicator by letting her influence them.

Other types of communicator attractiveness besides the physical have also been shown to increase persuasion (Eagly & Chaiken, 1975; Kelman, 1961; Sampson & Insko, 1964).

Coorientation of communicator and audience

When the speaker shares group membership characteristics with the audience, persuasiveness is enhanced. Prototypic examples of this phenomenon are the study by Mazen (1968), in which pregnant women communicators were the most effective in influencing an audience of pregnant women concerning their breast feeding intentions, and the research of Stoneman and Brady (1981) on children as TV models for food commercials aimed at children.

Sympathy toward the communicator

There is a curious exception to the classical generalization (Hovland *et al.*, 1953) that expert communicators are more effective than inexpert ones. A seasoned courtroom lawyer named Wellman (1962) has noted a paradoxical effect of the relative expertness of a witness under heavy cross-examination. The influence on the jury of the testimony of a professed expert declines sharply when the opposition lawyer carries out a tough attack on notable flaws in that testimony. But when the witness claims not to be an expert in the matter at hand, a similar tough attack serves to *increase* the influence of the witness.

To my knowledge, no published experimental study of this informally reported courtroom phenomenon has appeared.[2] There has been, however, a demonstration of a related sympathy effect by Aronson & Golden (1962). Their study introduced four different communicators: a white or a black engineer or dishwasher. The communicators urged on white schoolchildren that the study of mathematics was important. The white engineer was more effective in persuading the audience of this conclusion than was the white dishwasher, as one might expect from his expert status. But the black dishwasher was as effective as the black engineer – presumably because the audience felt sorry for him.

Yet another demonstration of a sympathy effect is by Sloan, Love & Ostrom (1974), who showed that political speakers become more influential when hecklers try to interrupt them.

Confident style in debating

In a study by London, Meldman, & Lanckton (1971), natural two-person debates were run under instructions that the participants try to reach agreement, given inputs which disposed them initially to disagree. Each participant had to compromise to some degree and the degree of yielding was found to be predictable from differences in the debating styles of the two participants. Specifically, expressions of confidence, such as "of course," "the fact is," etc., were more characteristic of debaters who yielded less, and expressions of doubt such as "maybe," "I suppose it's true that," were more characteristic of greater yielding.

This is a correlational result, subject to several interpretations. One interpretation is that confidence wins debates, and this is the construction we will place on it for present purposes. The result has also been obtained experimentally (e.g., by Miller & Basehart, 1969), supporting the idea that confident style plays a causal role in persuasion.

"Heuristic cues" in persuasion

Chaiken (1982, 1985) has argued that under many conditions, people exert little cognitive effort in judging the validity of the arguments in a persuasive communication. Instead, audience members may base message agreement on "quick-and-dirty" application of superficial cues to whether the communication deserves to be persuasive. This notion is similar to what Petty and Cacioppo (1982) call the "peripheral route" to persuasion.

For example, Petty and Cacioppo (1984) found that for a personally remote issue, subjects were more persuaded by messages containing nine rather than three messages, regardless of the quality of the arguments. Chaiken, Axsom, Hicks, Yates and Wilson (1985) have shown that this effect has a superficial basis. If certain groups of subjects are merely told that a six-argument message contains ten arguments, they are more persuaded than if told it contains two. The purported heuristic here is "length equals strength." Another heuristic (Axsom, Yates & Chaiken, 1985) is that if a communication audience gives enthusiastic applause, then the message must be valid.

The boomerang effect of insult

Abelson and Miller (1967) followed up the observation by Coleman (1957) that in community controversies, name-calling typically further polarizes the opposing sides. To test experimentally the hypothesis that insult produces negative persuasion, they arranged two-person debates in which a confederate insulted the subject during persuasive exchanges on a controversial issue. Subjects who had been insulted became more extreme in their attitudes, moving away from the position argued by their opponent.

Many of these effects have strong intuitive plausibility, to be sure, yet they operate outside the sphere of rational influences on persuasion, and this requires some kind of theoretical explication.

THE FUNCTIONS OF BELIEF

Many social psychologists and sociologists have noted the generally rather low correlations between attitudes and behaviour (LaPiere, 1934; Schuman & Johnson, 1976; Wicker, 1971), and various explanations and interpretations have been offered (e.g. Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977; Campbell, 1963; Snyder, 1981). In my own review of this area (Abelson, 1972), I observed that people very often do not get the chance to exercise their sociopolitical attitudes and beliefs. I noted that attitudes may get created to justify one's behaviour, as dissonance theory predicts, but that opportunities for behaving in accordance with attitudes are relatively rare, and are often missed when they do occur. As I put it, "we are very good at finding reasons for what we do, but not so good at doing what we have reasons for." How many of us think that unemployment is too high, or that the Soviet Union seriously violates human rights, or that Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua is hysterical, but take virtually no action on these beliefs?

Indeed, let us ask what the purpose of beliefs is. The usual answer is that they serve a social reality function — they are tools that enable us to act competently in the world around us. If you believe that a certain restaurant is excellent, you will tend to go there to eat. If you believe that a particular person is hostile toward you, you will tend to avoid him. If data arrive that falsify these beliefs, the individual will change them. But it is important to distinguish between *testable belief*, belief about objects within the immediate experience of the person that allow appropriate action and feedback, and *distal belief*, belief about objects only remotely experienced or not sensibly verifiable. You may well believe that big oil companies take advantage of consumers, or that prisons are dangerously overcrowded, but those beliefs are not subject to simple reality testing or to the exercise of productive response. Even in day-to-day experience, certain normative beliefs do not lend themselves to corrective falsification; for example, the belief that one should never eat from plates that have not been kept kosher.

Distal beliefs seem almost useless. They are tools that don't objectively do anything. Yet it is clear that people are expected to have them and, indeed, do have them. Public opinion surveys ask about all sorts of distal matters ranging from arms control to Reagan's visit to Bitburg. People almost always answer these survey questions, and at least sometimes their answers enter into systematic enough relationships to support their psychological validity (Turner & Martin, 1985). Given that people have distal beliefs, what do they do with them? Since reality testing does not enter into distal beliefs, what other psychological functions control the adoption, exercise, and change of such beliefs?

We social scientists are trained to try to treat distal beliefs as scholastic objects, as products of mental skill. Ideally, we are supposed to scrutinize them, to shape them, to be sceptical about them, to debate them. Beliefs are regarded somewhat like riddles to be decoded gradually by group inquiry. But our experience with riddles is not widely prevalent in the general public.

In what other ways can one treat distal beliefs? Can a person derive some clues about how to deal with distal belief objects from well-learned reactions to other objects? My answer is yes. I have already tipped it off in the title, "Beliefs are like possessions." Virtually everyone has had a great deal of experience dealing with possessions, and many orientations toward possessions can be generalized to belief objects.

METAPHORIC SUGGESTIONS IN LANGUAGE

Let us play a little with the metaphoric idea that beliefs are like possessions. A first test of whether a metaphor has currency in the thinking of a society is to see whether the metaphor is coded in the language, a notion advanced in some detail by Lakoff and Johnson (1980). They trace numerous mappings of complex ideas into elementary, readily experienced images.

For example, take the metaphorical understanding of social power relations by a mapping of persons or roles onto a vertical line, with the powerful at the top, the powerless at the bottom. Metaphorically, "Power is Up." We speak of the "highborn," of "higher ups" in an organization, of "climbing the ladder of success," a "rising young executive," "reaching the top," and so on. The metaphor is naturally somewhat crude, leaving out many subtleties, but that is the nature of all metaphors (Gentner, 1983).

Turning now to the potential metaphor, "Beliefs are like possessions," I ask whether there exist linguistic expressions encoding such a mapping. First of all, note the common phrasing that someone "has" a belief. Going further, let us explore several semantic aspects of property possessions: One obtains things, one keeps them, one values them and sometimes loses them. Listed in Table 2 are several common phrases pertinent to each aspect.

TABLE 2

Linguistic Expressions Using a Belief-Possession Metaphor

Having	—	to have a belief
Obtaining	—	to acquire a belief
		to adopt the view that . . .
		he inherited his views from . . .
		she found God
		he received the Holy Spirit
Keeping	—	to hold a belief
		to hold onto a belief
Valuing	—	to cherish a belief
		I'm reappraising my position
		you don't appreciate my position
Losing	—	to lose your belief in . . .
		to disown your belief
		to abandon your belief
		to surrender your principles

For the *obtaining* aspect, there are expressions such as "to acquire a belief," "to inherit the view," and so on, as though beliefs were things that figured in some sort of social or physical transfer process. For the *keeping* aspect, one commonly encounters the wording that someone "holds a belief," or "holds onto a belief." Reference is made to *valuing* by such expressions as "to cherish a belief" and "I'm reappraising my position." The *losing* aspect is especially rich in metaphorical phrasings, including "to lose your belief in . . .," "to abandon your belief," "to surrender your principles," and so on. Each of these categories gives some support to the "possession" metaphor.[3]

Note that the metaphor apparently breaks down in certain respects. Unlike possessions, beliefs seem to be free. To get them, you don't have to buy them. You can invest them with a certain value once you have them but if someone else wants them too, you don't have to give them up. There is virtually no reference to buying, selling, trading, or stealing in the linguistic encoding for beliefs. I return in a later section to the question of whether there aren't, indeed, some costs involved in belief acquisition, but for the moment let me elaborate the implications of treating beliefs as a kind of commodity which people can obtain and control without any necessary cooperation from others.

BELIEFS AS FREE COMMODITIES

What, then, does a person do with these free belief commodities? One finds or adopts beliefs with personal or social appeal. Other beliefs were received in childhood before one had much say in the matter. One shows off one's beliefs to people one thinks will appreciate them, but not to those who are likely to be critical. One is inclined to ornament beliefs from time to time, especially when communicating them to others (Tetlock, 1983). If anyone is critical of them, one feels attacked and responds defensively, as though one's appearance, taste, or judgment had been called into question. One occasionally adds new beliefs to one's collection, if they do not glaringly clash with those one already has. It is something like the accumulation of furniture. One is reluctant to change any of one's major beliefs. They are familiar and comfortable, and a big change would upset the whole collection. Beliefs that have been handed down from parents might constitute an exception. If one is young and trying to establish an independent identity, one might want to chuck out inherited beliefs and everything that goes with them, and start all over again on one's own. Also, if fashions in certain beliefs change, and one is the kind of person who likes to keep up with fashions, one may change one's unfashionable beliefs.

Really having beliefs vs. merely borrowing them

This point of view about beliefs makes much of the significance of "having" a belief. A problem for this view — and for social psychology generally — is that people often express opinions that they don't really "have" in any proprietary sense. Every culture provides a repertoire of rhetorics from which people may borrow to voice opinions in various situations — a kind of free public library from which beliefs may be taken out on loan.

Bem's (1967; 1972) self-perception theory, at its extreme, can be taken to assert that people never have attitudes or beliefs; they merely invent appropriate things to say to suit the circumstances surrounding the occasions on which they are asked about them. Originally greeted with great scepticism (e.g., from Jones, Linder, Kiesler, Zanna, & Brehm, 1968), this Bemian point of view received striking support from two experimental attitude change studies (Bem & McConnell, 1970; Goethals & Reckman, 1973). In these studies, people didn't recall what their supposed attitudes were before they changed them, instead reporting that they previously believed what they now believed. The implication is that the "attitudes" were initially so superficially held that they didn't even leave a trace in memory. This sounds like Orwellian Doublethink (Orwell, 1949), but it seems to occur naturally without the intervention of Big Brother.

It appears that attitude responses on questionnaires are often constructed on the spur of the moment, rather than by reference to some deeply entrenched mental constructions. For social psychologists, this phenomenon carries the name "non-attitudes" (Converse, 1970; Rosenberg, 1968), attitude questionnaire responses so flimsy that people can't even remember they made them. It is important to note, however, that not *everyone* on a survey gives non-attitude responses. In particular, people who respond consistently over time to the same question are candidates for the real "possession" of an attitude or belief. (And, of course, a memory displacement phenomenon cannot be demonstrated when attitudes don't change.)

What is needed for a beliefs-as-possessions theory is a specification of conditions likely to induce a proprietary orientation toward a belief, a set of factors tending to move the individual from a state in which a belief is "borrowed," as it were, to one in which it is "possessed."

Table 3 lists a number of circumstances hypothesized to induce a proprietary sense toward a belief, with the consequence that one then behaves toward it as toward a possession. The logic of all the listed circumstances is that they are factors which would also pertain to the ownership of physical objects. The rule we have used is that whatever implies a state of ownership induces a state of ownership.

TABLE 3

Circumstances Inducing Possession of a Belief

Public commitment to a belief
Suffering for a belief
Explaining a belief
Elaborating a belief, or tracing its origins
Defending a belief
Attributing longevity to a belief
Becoming aware of the value of a belief

Public commitment is the first factor listed. An individual who with apparent sincerity espouses a particular belief to a public audience must seem to that audience really to have that belief. The individual, aware of this reflected appraisal, will also tend to regard the belief as intrinsically possessed. This, of course, is one of the central phenomena (Helmreich & Collins, 1968) covered by dissonance theory in its treatment of "counterattitudinal advocacy." The extent of attachment to a belief following public commitment no doubt depends on a number of variables (see Kiesler, 1971) such as the irrevocability of the commitment and the degree to which it is truly public.

Suffering for a belief is a clear source of evidence to the self that one has the belief and accords it value. The development of a favourable attitude toward a mediocre group one has suffered for in order to join is another of the stock phenomena of dissonance theory for which there is good supporting evidence (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Gerard & Mathewson, 1966). This "fraternity initiation" scenario of dissonance theory is not the only embodiment of the dynamics of suffering. Tomkins (1965a), in a detailed biographical study of the development of antislavery beliefs among prominent abolitionists, argues that vilification for the tentative public expression of their highly unpopular views was a key factor in the solidification of those views.

Explaining or *describing* one's beliefs in detail implies that they have permanence, and this should tend to freeze them. The previously discussed belief perseverance phenomenon demonstrated by Ross, Lepper, and Hubbard (1975) provides a paradigmatic example. In their study, a new belief was introduced and then the evidence supporting it was totally withdrawn —yet the belief survived. In accounting for this survival, the authors point out that during the introduction of the particular novel belief, subjects may have had a spontaneous tendency to invent explanatory justifications for why they held the belief. These justifications, independent of the evidence for the belief, would tend to survive the withdrawal of that evidence. The belief could then be rederived from the justifications. This speculative account was directly supported in a subsequent study by Ross, Lepper, Strack, and Steinmetz (1977). Subjects were given a biography to read and told that the protagonist had, say, joined the Peace Corps. Half the subjects were then invited to explain this action from details in the biography. All subjects were subsequently informed that the Peace Corps information had been arbitrarily tacked on for experimental purposes to a genuine biography of someone who might or might not later join the Peace Corps. Subjects who had *explained* the arbitrary Peace Corps information were much more inclined to predict that the protagonist really would join the Peace Corps, compared to subjects who had not been given the explanation task.

The present account of why explanation works to freeze beliefs is different from (though not necessarily incompatible with) that of Ross, Lepper, and colleagues. They rely on the rederivability of the original belief from its corollaries, following removal of the original evidence. I am asserting here that the mere *act* of explaining a belief stabilizes it enough to survive the evidential removal, because explaining your belief implies that you really hold it. A challenging research design question is how to distinguish these two theoretical views.

My account, it should be noted, also implies 'that other tasks besides explanation would also serve to freeze beliefs. For example, *elaborating* a belief at great length, as might occur in an open-ended depth interview, ought to activate the same proprietary dynamic. Also, where appropriate, *tracing the origins* of a belief — where one found it, or from whom one got it — should have a comparable freezing effect.

In related vein, the act of *defending* a belief should confer greater permanence upon it. The experiments by McGuire and Papageorgis (1961) on inoculation against persuasion come to mind. They showed that giving people the opportunity to exercise "refutational defences" against an attack on a belief served to protect the belief against a later, alternative attack.

It is interesting that several of the factors discussed thus far might well, in some circumstances, operate in concert. A person could be publicly committed to the elaboration, explanation and/or defence of a belief, possibly thereby suffering in the process. It would, of course, be predicted that this combination would serve powerfully to solidify the belief in question. The well-known attitude change effects of role-playing (Janis, 1968) can be interpreted in such fashion.

Attributing longevity to a belief is a somewhat different factor. Here we are speculating, having no research to appeal to. The notion is that if someone is led to believe that she has long held a belief, then she will infer that, and thereafter act as though the belief were firmly possessed. An intriguing and simple experiment is thereby suggested. Suppose we ask one group of subjects — call them the Now group — for their present opinion on some distal topic. We ask another group — the Then group — what their opinion *used to be* on the same topic. As noted above, people without firm opinions will tend to answer retrospective opinion questions on the basis of present inclinations. Thus, both Now subjects and Then subjects will, by and large, answer on the basis of present opinion. But the Then group, by claiming longevity for their opinions, will accord them greater dignity. Therefore, opinions in the Then group should subsequently have greater permanence in the face of persuasive attack, than opinions in the Now group. This phenomenon, should it occur, would be a kind of second-order Bem effect working to undo non-attitudes rather than to uncover them: Ask a person what his opinion was, and he invents one based on transient cues in the present situation. Once having invented it and *projected it backwards* in time, it acquires real permanence.

Our final listed factor is generic, with several specific interpretations. As I will discuss in the next section, beliefs, like possessions, are assumed to provide value to their possessors. To discover that a belief has value, therefore, can give it the status of a possession. Some of the factors previously listed may involve an individual's *becoming aware of the value* of a belief. To suffer for a belief or to spend effort defending it both carry the implication that the believer must have some investment in the belief object.

Another way to become aware of belief value is to realize that one is prepared to give up alternative beliefs in considering the new belief. If the previous beliefs had value (it will be assumed that all beliefs have value, as discussed in a later section), then giving them up entails a cost. If one has paid a cost for something, then it should perforce seem like a possession. One might call this phenomenon "buying into a belief." (Note here the relatively rare occurrence of a "buying" image in a linguistic expression connected with belief.) I know of no experimental literature relevant to this phenomenon — though I can imagine an esoteric possible experiment. Of course, there are accounts of "conversion experiences" (Ullman, 1982), which might be combed for psychological aspects of the exchange of one set of beliefs for another.

BEGINNINGS OF A THEORY OF BELIEF VALUE

Physical possessions obviously vary a great deal in value. Some objects, like houses, cars, and furniture, are expensive and are usually well protected by their owners. At the other extreme, objects that are broken, or cheap, or expendable are regarded by their owners as relatively worthless. If beliefs are possessions, then beliefs should also vary in value. Table 4 lists a variety of psychological sources of belief value. We discuss each of these in turn.

TABLE 4

Psychological Sources of Belief Value

Functionality	
Instrumental	(What the belief promises, via mediation or wishfully)
Expressive	(Who the belief says you are: your groups, experiences and feelings).
Attributes	
Sharedness	(Is the belief in favour with other people?)
Uniqueness	(Does the belief imply unusual taste?)
Defensibility	(Can the belief be justified as sound?)
Extremity	(Is the belief sharp, intense, "the most"?)
Centrality	(Does the belief fit with other beliefs?)

Sources of value

A crucial distinction is whether beliefs are *instrumental* or *expressive*. This is a major distinction in "functional theories" of attitude (Herek, 1985; Katz, 1960; Smith, Bruner, & White, 1956). Instrumental beliefs and attitudes are oriented toward real-world outcomes for the individual, while expressive or "symbolic" (Sears, Lau, Tyler, & Allen, 1980) beliefs and attitudes centre on the subjective life of the individual — his or her group attachments, feelings, and experiences. It is interesting that the same dichotomy may be important for possessions. Research to be reported in a separate publication shows that one of the most salient distinctions among different types of possessions is between instrumental possessions such as radios and meal tickets, and sentimental possessions such as lockets and diaries.

Instrumentality refers to anticipated rewards in the self-interest of the individual. Political dialogue is filled with instrumental beliefs — assertions that particular policies are wise (or foolish) because they will (or won't) result in personal or national benefits such as increased economic well-being. Much contemporary theorizing about attitudes heavily emphasizes the instrumental function that beliefs play in support of attitudes (e.g., Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). Clearly instrumentality is an important source of belief value, although the position taken here is that there are many other important value sources.

Beliefs vary in their *wishfulness*. Some beliefs convey reassurance or other positive feelings in seriously problematic areas: for example, belief in an afterlife or in the efficacy of prayer, or belief that a Star Wars defence system would work. Wishful beliefs are instrumental without necessarily providing a mediating chain of steps leading objectively to the pleasing outcome. Such beliefs have a built-in advantage over their sceptical opposites, because of the natural appeal of wishful thinking.

Beliefs which serve expressive purposes have a self-defining character. They may relate the group identity of the individual to some issue in the world, as in "Good Christians oppose homosexuality", or they may simply celebrate group membership, as in "Black is beautiful". When expressive beliefs are stated, there is often the intent to imply that the belief-holder has good character and good judgment, or a highly developed moral or spiritual sense. Thus to make a public claim that abortion is murder or that women have the right to control their bodies implies the unstated premise that the individual is the kind of person who cares enough about human life or about free choice to fight the good fight while others remain callous, blind, or misguided. "Our cause is just," say many true believers, wherein they hope to increase their influence among the uncommited, but also to invite praise for their own high degree of moral sensibility.

The particular issue stands which give pride to the individual adopting them of course depend on the psychic fit or "resonance" of the issues with the personality. Among the many authors who have written about such resonance are Lane (1962), Roseman (1985), and Smith, Bruner and White (1956). Tomkins' (1980) "script theory" attempts to give an ontogenetic account of how personal scenarios can become magnified and find metaphorical expression in attachment to sociopolitical causes. (See also Abelson's (1981a) speculations on metascripts.) Also related to personality needs, but much more nomothetic in spirit are Tomkins' (1965b) analysis of characterological leftists and rightists, and Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson, and Sanford's (1950) treatment of the authoritarian personality.

An important self-defining aspect of some beliefs can be to give the individual a basis for meaningful social action, thus providing social potency, a sense of making a difference. The possible styles of action could be quite various, ranging from terrorism to nonviolent protest to political action committees, and the actual connection of actions to results could be consequential or merely illusory. Illusory potency is an interesting phenomenon: as long as the actors feel they are making a difference, their cause is sustained even if their actions in fact go unheeded. Well exemplifying this category were the Vietnam protest marches aimed at a stonewalling President Nixon. Elms (1979, p. 49) gives a charming example of a California student-organized plan to stop an atomic test explosion via collective wishing.

The instrumental or expressive function provides the value basis of a belief. But the *amount* of value depends upon several attributes of the belief. To generate a list of such attributes, one may ask what attributes give possessions their value — focusing on social psychological attributes, rather than on strict determinants of economic value. A partial list might include whether the possession is in fashion or favour with other people; whether the possession implies that the owner has unusual taste; whether the possession can be deemed a sound investment; whether the possession is distinctive, top-of-the-line, "the most"; and whether the possession fits in well with, and enhances other possessions of the owner. These factors I respectively label as sharedness, uniqueness, defensibility, extremity, and centrality. Their applications to the belief domain are now discussed.

Sharedness with valued others is a prime source of belief value. Shared beliefs bring people closer and provide a basis for collective action. Sharing the beliefs of others also avoids the stigma of not keeping up with the crowd. It is important that the other people with whom the belief is shared are of value to the individual — that they are positive reference persons in the classical terminology of social psychology (Newcomb, Turner, & Converse, 1965). In many types of social groups, an important reference person is a mystical or charismatic leader (Kanter, 1972) whose beliefs are associated with the possession of other valued things (such as wealth) or attributes (such as spirituality). When many members of a cohesive ethnic and/or religious group share a belief with each other and with an esteemed leader, the belief will tend to have high value. And, when the members of such a group share a *wishful* belief, its value will be very high indeed. Shared wishfulness is the stuff of which mass movements are made (Hoffer, 1951; Naipaul, 1982).

If, on the other hand, there is disagreement within a group about a belief, the value of that belief will be sharply limited (unless the group subdivides along partisan lines (Coleman, 1957)).

An extreme case arises when an individual's belief is discrepant from those of *all* other members of his or her social group. One might suppose this to lead to a severe loss of belief value. Assuming that the belief is defensible (see below), however, *uniqueness* may paradoxically impart high value to a belief. An unshared belief is special to the individual; it establishes his or her independence and uniqueness (Santee & Maslach, 1982), as well as possibly implying that the individual has good taste, or has cornered the market on some rare commodity (Brock, 1968). Note that physical possessions can come ready-made in some standard form, or be custom-made for or by an individual. In the beliefs as possessions metaphor, it is through the latter image that the value attaching to uniqueness applies.

Sharedness and uniqueness seem to be two rather distinct sources of belief value, corresponding roughly to what Abelson (1981b) has labeled "deindividuated" and "individuated" beliefs or attitudes. There is a method by which an individual can have it both ways at once, by sharing the essence of a belief, but embellishing it somewhat in what seems to be one's own way. In the "group polarization" phenomenon explicated by Myers and Lamm (1977), subjects do precisely that. After exposure to a group discussion by like-minded individuals on a controversial issue, most subjects tend to position themselves a notch more extreme than the perceived consensus. It is as though they are saying, "I agree, and I'm even a little out front of the others."

With respect to belief *extremity*, it is plausible to assume that tepid moderation deprives beliefs of their cutting edge. Their other sources of value, whether wishfulness, sharedness, uniqueness, etc., become weakened. (Consider, for example, the value of the belief, "Mondale is sort of O.K."). Extremity is conceived as a value-multiplying factor: at a minimum it could be zero, wiping out all other sources of value. At the other end of the extremity scale, the exaggeration of beliefs sharpens their psychological effects, increasing their value over the value attaching to their more moderate counterparts. However, a negative secondary effect may accrue to too much extremity.

Overextremity may damage belief value by decreasing the *defensibility* of the belief. In general, a ridiculous belief that is nearly indefensible is robbed of virtually all the value it might otherwise have. On the other hand, a belief buttressed by apparently solid arguments regains its full value. Defensibility is not constant over the course of possession of a belief, however. Presumably with experience "having" it, with social encouragement, and with other factors, defensibility would typically increase with time of possession. It is a plausible hypothesis, too, that if there is social pressure toward increased belief extremity within a group, its members would gradually learn how to make a more extreme position defensible.

The belief value factors thus far listed all pertain to beliefs considered one at a time. But of course relationships between beliefs are of importance, too. If a belief is inconsistent with cherished other beliefs, this can create distress and difficulty for the individual (Abelson et al., 1968). Thus our final listed belief value factor is *centrality*: the degree to which the belief fits into and supports a number of other beliefs of the individual.

The drive toward value increase

The time course of various sources of belief value during belief possession is of interest. Each source of value implies a set of vicissitudes controlling its size. Sharedness, for example, can be increased by recruiting new believers. Uniqueness can be increased by elaborating one's position in a distinctive way. And so on. The mutability of belief values provides opportunities to believers to increase the values of their belief possessions.

There seems no reason to suppose that believers wouldn't want to get more value from their beliefs if they could. Therefore, I postulate a *drive toward value increase*: Believers are motivated to act in such a way as to increase the values of their beliefs, from whatever sources these arise. In general, then, belief value will tend to increase during time of possession. Occasionally, the environment will not cooperate, and belief value losses will be forced on individuals if belief defensibility declines through some blatantly damaging evidence, or if sharedness drops through publicized defections. But the main restraint on belief value increases is the effort involved: proselytizing, sloganeering, inventing new wrinkes, etc. are expensive in time and energy. It follows that a little extra push may be needed to get people, individually or collectively, to take advantage of opportunities to increase their belief values. An important such push comes when beliefs are threatened by others, inducing psychological reactance (Brehm, 1966, 1968) and making belief value salient.

We arrive thus at the *value/threat hypothesis*: *When threatened, beliefs tend to increase in value, via whatever sources are most malleable and useful.* Threatened individuals or groups will tend not only to increase the value of their own beliefs, but will attempt to decrease the apparent value of the beliefs held by the threatening party. They may for example characterize opposition beliefs as ignoble and not widely shared.

One function served by religious, political action, and public affairs organizations is the allocation of collective effort to the increase in the belief values of their members. Since sharedness is an important source of belief value, an obvious organizational programme plan is to solicit new members and "educate the public." I have assembled a collection of public affairs brochures for other purposes (Roseman, Abelson & Ewing, 1985), and it is striking to what extent "bringing our message to the American people" is a popular activity. Proselytizing is also an important method of dissonance reduction when beliefs seem to have been disconfirmed (Festinger, Schachter & Riecken, 1954).

Suppose new recruits were not available to a movement, say because a certain ethnic identity were necessary to membership, and all appropriate ethnics had already joined? What collective methods of belief value increase would be popular, especially under the motivating conditions of high threat? I think that the value sources of self-definition — especially self-efficacy — and of belief extremity are crucial here, and one might expect the movement to become more frenzied in its activities, and hardened and perhaps violent in the extremity of its positions. With two rival belief groups, consequences of the absence of a neutral population of potential recruits could be very grave. Northern Ireland, Lebanon, and Cyprus, among others, come to mind as places where almost everyone is identified with one of the sides, the threat level is high, and the potentials for moderation are poor.

Costs associated with belief adoption

There are at least two kinds of costs associated with the adoption of a belief: *opportunity costs* and *sunk costs*. By an "opportunity cost," economists refer to an alternative benefit which is given up by virtue of a particular action. If you pursue an attractive but time-consuming avocation, for example, you sacrifice time which might be used to earn money. In the belief context, there is the possibility that the adoption of one belief might forestall the opportunity to possess other beliefs. How could this be? Batson and Ventis (1982) discuss the case of recruits to a cult who know at some level that to obtain the beliefs the cult will bring them, they must abandon all potential future beliefs incompatible with the cult's lifestyle.

More common is the situation in which present beliefs must be abandoned in order to adopt new ones. Since the present beliefs have some value, their abandonment is costly. I refer to this as the "sunk cost" attaching to the loss of present beliefs. Presumably an individual would not abandon present beliefs if their sunk cost exceeded the apparent value of the beliefs which would replace them.

If such a cost-benefit calculation is roughly realistic, it would explain the virtual irrelevance of rational argumentation in persuading someone to abandon a possessed belief. What the target person needs is the assurance that a new belief would have values exceeding those of the present belief. But with a potential new belief, even if it is otherwise attractive, new sources of value such as sharedness and self-definition may not be nearly as apparent to the target individual as the comparable values of the existing belief. Thus, determined resistance is not at all a surprising reaction to persuasive attempts.

The role of consistency

I am not saying that people committed to beliefs blindly reject all communications to which they are exposed. After all, they might encounter arguments supporting their existing beliefs, or a persuasive case on some new issue unconnected with any prior commitment. A crucial question, therefore, is how the individual judges the consistency of new arguments with old beliefs.

There is a role for argument processing in the judgment of belief consistency. I hypothesize that under conditions of belief possession, consistency is processed in a way that is not particularly rational. That way is by *adherence to the balance principle* (Heider, 1958; see also the form appropriate to persuasive arguments by Abelson and Rosenberg, 1958). The target individual will reject any otherwise defensible proposition that creates an imbalance in his belief system, or else will distort it so as to create balance. If a defensible proposition is already in balance with existing beliefs, it will be accepted.

Balance in a set of beliefs depends upon the positive or negative evaluation of the objects of belief, and the perceived positive or negative relations between them. Good actors are seen as doing good things, and bad actors as doing bad things. Assertions that accuse good actors of bad acts threaten the believer with the loss of the value associated with believing in the goodness of the actor. Therefore, such assertions will be denied or distorted. Many years ago, I explicated a small catalogue of mechanisms by which believers can avoid dilemmas created by potential belief imbalance ("Why does God suffer little children to die?"). This catalogue included denial, bolstering, differentiation, transcendence (Abelson, 1959) and rationalization (Abelson, 1963).

Analysis by social psychologists of mechanisms for maintaining cognitive consistency was much more popular two decades ago (Abelson et al., 1968) than it is at present. In part this loss of interest in consistency maintenance was because of widespread scepticism that humans were general consistency seekers (Zajonc, 1968) — and the fact that evidence in favour of cognitive balance principle has been checkered and controversial (Cialdini, Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, pp. 376–77). What I am arguing in the present paper (see also Abelson, 1983) is that cognitive balance has a special role to play in the maintenance of belief possessions. But cognitive balance plays a very limited role with tentative beliefs lacking subjective value. Inconsistencies can be tolerated, sometimes even welcomed, in these cases. "Rational" inferences and arguments are able to occupy more of the individual's attention.

In sum, we are postulating a two-process model for how people deal with persuasive arguments. Under conditions of low involvement with the beliefs in question, the typical target individual will respond moderately appropriately to rhetorical points, looking to the question whether to adopt the new beliefs. Once a belief is possessed, however, it will be defended through the mechanisms of cognitive balance maintenance, at the possible expense of respect for the logic of the arguments.

Those notions are reminiscent of Janis and Mann's (1977) treatment of the motivational conditions surrounding the phenomenon of "biased scanning of evidence." By being specific about the factors leading to belief possession, and by specifying cognitive balance as the hallmark of defensive responding, we are in good position to undertake empirical tests of a two-process model.

IMPLICATIONS OF BELIEF-POSSESSION THEORY

Accounting for the anomalies in the literature

I began this paper by reviewing a number of results in the attitude literature that seem highly anomalous if one regards persuasion as a process of conveying reasoned argument. I then gradually introduced my theoretical views on beliefs as possessions. Belief-possession theory emphasizes the value implications of holding beliefs, downplaying the role of rational argumentation to the minor possible contribution of bolstering the defensibility of beliefs (insofar as defensibility in the individual's social milieu even depends upon being especially rational).

If the value loadings of beliefs are what matter, this can help explain such phenomena as the near irrelevance of argument memory to successful persuasion, and the pre-eminence of "candidate-centered" beliefs in Presidential campaigns. (I assume here that beliefs about candidates as people are easier to spread and give satisfaction to the mass public than beliefs about issues and how the candidates relate to them). In the belief polarization phenomenon of Lord et al., (1979), subjects committed to meaningful positions are postulated to accept only what is balanced with their previous positions. With the belief perseverance effect demonstrated by Ross et al., (1975, 1977), I hypothesize that the mere process of explaining a novel belief to oneself gives it proprietary status. The withdrawal of its evidentiary grounds is irrelevant to its existence as a possession (albeit its value might be lowered by a decrease in its defensibility).

Many of the variables previously listed as superficial influences on persuasion can be understood in terms of belief value. The communicator of a belief is a highly salient reference person to the communication target. Therefore, the value attaching to sharedness will in the short run be heavily dependent upon the value of sharing the belief with the communicator. If he or she is attractive, or similar to the audience member, or deserving of sympathy — all "superficial" influence factors — the communicator will have greater weight as a positive reference person, and belief value will increase. In a related vein, if the communicator displays confidence and pride in a belief, thus appearing to accord it high value, the value of sharing the belief with him or her will be greater.

The other superficial phenomenon listed — a boomerang effect from insults — can be understood in terms of the value/threat hypothesis. Insults are personally threatening, and the simplest method under immediate control for increasing belief value is to make one's position more extreme.

Special emphasis of the theory

The reader may have noted throughout this paper the frequent invocation of ideas familiar in social psychology: dissonance theory, self-perception theory, the positive reference group, the functional theory of attitudes, and so on. It is nice to have all these old themes make an appearance. It is reassuring to think that social psychology may have more unity than is commonly supposed.

While utilizing familiar ideas, the model of beliefs as possessions carries with it a new emphasis, and a set of concrete and testable propositions. Let us consider matters from the perspective of the persuader who wants to induce a belief in a target person. For the art and practice of persuasion, the moral of the theory would seem to be that to give someone a new belief, you've got to "sell" it to them as something they would find of value, and you have to get them to exercise it a bit and make some commitment. This is analogous to an automobile salesman pointing out the attractive features of a new car and letting the customer experience them with a trial spin. . . .

If, on the other hand, the person already has a belief which you want them to replace, persuasion is very difficult. You must be sensitive to their possessiveness, and gently suggest some alternatives which might provide improvements. They've got to gain more than they give up.

The specifics of belief salesmanship are important. I have hypothesized several conditions for belief induction (Table 3), and specific sources of belief value (Table 4). The "marketplace" aspect of beliefs as possessions is also crucial: Beliefs are objects which provide values to their owners. The bases for these values have little to do with the probable truth of the beliefs. This is a crucial fact both psychologically and sociopolitically. Competitions between ideologies depend substantially upon which belief system provides greater value to its proponents. The analysis of the ebb and flow of the values of various beliefs is an important connection between individual psychology and mass politics.

If it should seem depressing that rationality might have so small a role in the public fate of beliefs, I hasten to emphasize an aspect of the theory which has thus far been largely implicit. It is not inevitable for beliefs to be treated as possessions. I have already mentioned one subculture — that of academia — in which beliefs may often be treated somewhat differently than in the culture at large. Among academics, there is in principle more of a skill component in the act of believing, with greater attention to the logical consistency between arguments, and more emphasis on the desirability of reality tests, difficult though they may be. There is also a norm of openness to belief challenge, and (hopefully) a respect for the potential validity of such challenges. Ideally, in such an environment beliefs are treated as products of an *openly shared skill* (see Quillian, 1970). This is quite different from treating beliefs as possessions.

No doubt there are other frameworks for beliefs (as territory, for example), but we will not pursue these here. Rather, we will close by pointing out that even within the belief possession metaphor, there is room for a lot of personal and cultural variation because of variations in kinds of experiences with possessions — including the learning of differential sources of value for possessions. Some people grow up with very few personal possessions, and some have so many that they get bored with them and are forever wanting new ones. Some people mainly value those things that everyone else has, and some primarily those that are unique. Some people admire mass-produced objects, and some only enjoy things they have made themselves. And so on. Each of these observations suggests a hypothesis about how these different types of people will learn to be correspondingly different in their treatment of beliefs as possessions. Some of these hypotheses may seem implausible — and may in fact be false — but they illustrate the rich potential of the theory to generate research that would not otherwise be attempted. The ultimate survival and shape of the theory of course depends upon whether enough of its predictions are supported.

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NOTES

[1] By "belief" I mean a conjectural proposition about some object in the world. If held by an individual, a belief has psychological consequences when recalled and especially when socially expressed. Belief differs from knowledge in several ways (see Abelson, 1979) which need not concern us here. For present purposes, I take an "attitude" to be an evaluative belief, that is a belief that an object is good or bad in some way(s) (Zanna & Rempel, 1984), ordinarily accompanied by an affective response to the object.

[2] An unpublished study (never written up) was carried out in a high school near New Haven in 1963 by Carlsmith and Weiss, using a debating rather than a courtroom scenario. Precisely the interaction effect specified by Wellman was obtained.

[3] It is an open question to what extent similar expressions occur in languages other than English.

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