Are beliefs voluntary? —— Research on the factors affecting belief

Karen Zheng Deng

Shenzhen College of International Education, Shenzhen, 518043, China

Abstract. Belief is regarded as a powerful emotion and ideology, which is people's views and beliefs about life and the world. It is an indispensable factor in the development of human society and can change a person's lifestyle, values and life goals. The origin of belief is not only related to the psychological needs of individuals, but also inseparable from social and cultural influences. In the course of the evolution of human society, people have gradually formed a belief system, from which various religious beliefs and sects are derived. This paper argues that beliefs are not voluntary because beliefs are not innate and invariably shaped by individual characteristics and one's place within society.

Keywords: beliefs; Influencing factor; unconsciousness; voluntary.

1. Introduction

Navigating the intricate confluence of unconsciousness, we are often compelled to confront what shapes our belief systems. These numerous external variables influence our internal cognitive landscape and often operate beneath the threshold of conscious recognition. Beliefs are distinct from facts because they cannot be immediately confirmed or verified. For example, thinking there isn't an apple under your seat right now is not a belief. You can easily check this by looking, which immediately confirms or denies the presence of an apple. Similarly, the statement "one plus one equals three" is not a belief because it is universally known and accepted that one plus one equals two. These examples illustrate the difference between facts and beliefs. Facts are objective and verifiable. They can be proven true or false through direct observation or universal consensus. On the other hand, beliefs are subjective and can vary widely among individuals. For instance, religious faith or trust in other people are beliefs that cannot be instantly proven or disproven because they are influenced by personal experiences and perspectives.

Nevertheless, by employing retrospection—a powerful analytical instrument—we can probe into where our beliefs emerge from and whether they are voluntary. Beliefs represent an ingrained ideology that is resistant to refutation within the confines of our existing cognitive framework. Meanwhile, to believe voluntarily is to think autonomously, choosing to believe not for the external effects and outcomes it produces, but for the good of the belief itself. In this essay, I argue that beliefs are not voluntary because beliefs are not innate and invariably shaped by individual characteristics and one's place within society. As echoed by Kant (1949), "we are instruments rather than authors of the purposes we pursue". Kant suggests that individuals are often driven by factors outside of their own control, as they are 'instruments' just following certain purposes rather than the "authors" or creators of those purposes. In arguing that beliefs are not voluntary, this essay explores the many factors that influence beliefs and limits individual autonomy over them.

2. The unconscious emergence of compensatory beliefs

When people feel insecure because of an ambiguous reality, often a compensatory belief arises. A compensatory belief is a generated attempt at an explanation for an inexplicable event to grant themselves a sense of security without consciously choosing to embrace the belief. These explanations can accommodate many observations, thus providing adequate predictions for the future which reduces the anxiety associated with uncertainty. A key example would be belief and faith in religions, where many people believe in various constructs as a view of the world and a source of

comfort. The existence of a God is an unverifiable belief but helps to increase one's sense of security. Hence, beliefs may not be voluntary but driven by an external environment of insecurity and ambiguity, as well as influence from others.

People with anxiety are speculated to be more likely to be susceptible to external information. Ellen Langer, a distinguished psychologist, based her research on the concepts of mindlessness and automatic behavior. She explored the tendency of individuals in a state of mindlessness or perceived lack of control to accept information unquestioningly, often without considering its source. For example, in a study conducted by Langer et al. (1975), the researchers explore how limited versus unlimited reading time would affect people's interpretations of complex texts. The findings reveal that individuals who experienced a lack of control were more likely to repeat and accept the provided information. Compared to participants with unlimited reading time, those with limited reading time were more likely to conform and be easily influenced. The comparative result indicates that under conditions of uncertainty and stress, people are more prone to adopting new information without critical thinking and thorough verification. Consequently, the study highlights that individuals often unconsciously and involuntarily accept beliefs when they are in environments that induce feelings of insecurity.

Persistent states of insecurity, which intensify feelings of powerlessness or lack of control, can increase an individual's susceptibility to misinformation, thus significantly influencing belief formation. When people feel insecure, they are more likely to accept false information without critical analysis. This is particularly evident in the case of beliefs associated with conspiracy theories. These beliefs can be seen as involuntary reactions to perceived threats to personal control, rather than entirely voluntary and rational choices. Van Prooijen and Acker (2015) support this idea by defining conspiracy theories as "explanatory beliefs, involving multiple actors who join together in secret agreement and try to achieve a hidden goal perceived as unlawful or malevolent." Essentially, conspiracy theories often rely on the idea that those in power deliberately hide the truth from the public. These theories can span a wide range of topics, from political events like the assassination of John F. Kennedy to scientific issues such as vaccination.

Research by Van Prooijen and Acker demonstrates that when individuals' sense of control is threatened, they are more likely to subscribe to conspiracy theories. For instance, a person who feels powerless may find comfort in the notion that there is a hidden, understandable reason behind complex events. Conversely, their belief in such theories diminishes when their sense of control is affirmed. This shift indicates that belief in conspiracy theories, which is a specific type of belief, can be involuntarily shaped by external factors related to one's sense of control. Consequently, the adoption of these beliefs could be seen less as a conscious, voluntary decision and more as an automatic, defensive response to regain perceived control over a threatening or bewildering environment. While this does not necessarily imply that all belief formation is involuntary, it does shed light on the complex interplay between control, subconscious processes, and belief endorsement.

3. Conformity

Conformity exerts a powerful influence over the involuntary nature of belief formation and represents a compelling research interest. Conformity, defined as the process of aligning one's thought patterns or behaviors with those established by a larger group or societal norms, fundamentally intertwines with the concept that the formation of belief is not an entirely autonomous process.

Conformity is a social phenomenon whereby people change their beliefs or actions toward the group norm (that is, the expectation and belief held by the group) in order to feel satisfied by others' approval and an increase in their sense of belonging. This restricts individual autonomy over beliefs. The famous French psychologist Gustave Le Bon (2002) gave a name for the tendency of conformity- 'law of mental unity of crowds'. Literally, the phenomenon suggests that individuals in a crowd lose their conscious individuality and are influenced by the contagious sentiments of the crowd. This

'collective mind' causes individuals in the crowd to act similarly, often irrationally, driven by emotions, suggestions and simple, exaggerated ideas. Thus, it has been proposed that the beliefs of people within the same group converge.

Informational social influence refers to the natural tendency where we conform our beliefs to what others are presenting because we perceive the rest of the group as competent and reliable. This influence could be enhanced when we are in doubt about our own cognition. In 1935, the classic study by Sherif illustrates that when a group of people were brought together and asked to say out loud their observation of what happened during the experiment, people's answers gradually converged after hearing other people's opinions (Sherif, 1935). This implies that when people are not sure about their own perspective, they tend to cater their beliefs to what others say. Jeness (1932) conducted a bean jar experiment which also highlights the effectiveness of informational social influence. In the study, participants estimated the number of beans in a jar individually and then collectively. The result shows that although the answer given by the participants through individual estimation differs greatly between the group, the answers they gave from group estimation are highly similar. Thus, this suggests that most participants intentionally changed their estimates because they take the rest of the group as more reliable. Under informational social influence, people are unaware of how their beliefs were altered by the group of people around them. Hence, people's belief is the outcome of manufactured ideas from others' opinions instead of voluntary ones.

The other type of social influence is normative social influence, where people conform to fit in with their group because they don't want to be excluded. Asch's famous conformity line study exemplifies this influence, where participants conformed to clearly wrong answers to align with the group's consensus. This shows that people's decisions regarding belief and cognition are often influenced by their surroundings, the actions of others, and social pressures. An experiment by Festinger & Carlsmith (1959) demonstrates this automatic inclination to reduce discomfort from cognitive dissonance, leading to altered beliefs. Although some people argue that normative social influence only affects the superficial actions of people instead of their inner belief, people automatically minimize cognitive dissonance by altering their private beliefs to match their public actions. Cognitive dissonance means that people's private beliefs are different from their actual public statements and actions. During an experiment by Festinger and Carlsmith, participants are asked to publicly state an opinion "X" contradictory to their private opinion of view "Y". By the end of the experiment, it was revealed that most of the participants really changed their private opinion to view "Y", which is to be the same as what they have said publicly. Thus, we could conclude that people's private beliefs are often altered by how they act externally in order to naturally minimize cognitive dissonance. As a result, normative social influence is able to control people's beliefs by manipulating their actions.

4. Self-regulation and surveillance

A wider view of conformity suggests that it rooted in a belief in constant surveillance and judgement of the collective. This implicit awareness propels individuals to adjust their behavior to align with the group's stipulated norms to secure acceptance and avoid exclusion. Indeed, the social groups we inhabit, our cultures, and societal inclinations restrict our freedom to independently form beliefs.

Yet, such self-regulation from societal norms provides a structure, a frame of reference within which we understand and interact with the world. It offers a sense of unity, identity,

and belonging. However, the challenge lies in recognizing these subtle yet influential forces of conformity, critically evaluating them, and finding a balance between the individual and the collective, between authenticity and acceptance.

To validate the argument above, Michael Foucault's model of the Panopticon illustrates how individuals engage in self-discipline even without constant surveillance. The Panopticon, derived from a prison design featuring a central observation tower, emphasizes how individuals internalize

surveillance and subsequently self-regulate their behavior. In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains, "He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection" (Foucault, 1977, p.202-203). This notion implies that even without immediate surveillance, prisoners, however still conscious of the ever-present potential for scrutiny, will align their behavior with the established rules, such as adhering to the prison's sleep schedule. Therefore, this conscious and constant self-surveliance embodies the desired conformity. Foucault's Panopticon serves as a metaphor for broader societal behavior and belief systems, where the prison symbolizes the subtle societal impacts on individuals. Consequently, it could be argued that ideologies permeate society, shaping our involuntary beliefs.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, beliefs are not voluntary but are influenced by external factors such as uncertainty, group affiliation, and social norms. Compensatory beliefs will arise unconsciously to provide a sense of security, while conformity restricts voluntary beliefs by aligning individuals with group norms. The Panopticon model further explains how beliefs are shaped involuntarily. By understanding these dynamics, we can recognize the complexities of belief formation and be aware of how beliefs may arise from individual autonomy, but are also ultimately shaped by a myriad of external influences.

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