

Accountability for Actions: The Role of Belief Formation

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex relationship between personal beliefs and actions and argues that individuals should be held responsible for their actions rather than their beliefs. It examines the role of education, access to information, and emotional attachments in shaping beliefs and discusses strategies to mitigate the influence of misinformation and emotional bias. The paper concludes that with proper education and critical thinking skills, individuals can make more informed decisions and be held accountable for their actions.

Keywords

belief and action, education, misinformation, emotional attachment, group identity

1. Introduction

Whether we should be held responsible for our beliefs is a complex and controversial question. People's beliefs are derived from their experiences, allowing them to understand and navigate the world around them. However, there are times where certain beliefs can be more harmful than good. For example, during the COVID-19 crisis, it was undeniable that vaccines were helpful in curbing the spread of the pandemic. Vaccines are backed by science and research, yet beliefs of anti-vaccination put the public at risk and hinder the containment of COVID-19. Although freedom of belief is important, beliefs resulting from misinformation are detrimental to society and are especially compounded with the effectiveness of social media in spreading information (Benoit & Mauldin, 2021). If people do not follow misguided beliefs, the likelihood that their actions are detrimental to others decreases substantially. However, there are times where people cannot control what influences them. From access to information, genetic factors, upbringing, and a whole slew of influence, the question "Should I be held responsible for what I believe?" becomes difficult to answer, as people can be manipulated into believing the wrong things. Instead of looking at belief, I choose to look at the actions stemming from those beliefs. I believe that people are free to believe what they want, but it is what they do with that belief, their actions, that they should be responsible for. While we may not be able to directly change people's beliefs, there are methods to improve their ability to dissect the world around them and gear them with better tools for decision making. When presented with other beliefs, people geared with the correct tools are able to pass judgement on the validity and foundations of certain beliefs that, in turn, affect the actions they are responsible for.

In this paper, we explore the factors that impact a person's beliefs and what we can do to help people create more substantiated and thoughtful beliefs that could lead them to better actions.

Specifically, we explore the benefits of high-quality education and its ability to enhance critical thinking skills and rational evaluation of different ideas and sources of information (Naz et al., 2023). Gearing children

better tools to dissect the information, in our case, beliefs, allows them to make better judgments for themselves while learning to curb other factors of influence. Emotional attachments to beliefs are another factor that we will dissect. In combination with improving cognitive analysis through education, we can implement factors that help break down emotional attachments towards harmful beliefs. In a similar vein, exploring ways to dissect group identification healthily aids in curbing the likelihood of misguided beliefs manifesting. By changing the above factors, we are successfully able to mitigate the likelihood of misinformation leading to misguided beliefs. Beliefs are the catalyst for action, and before people can be fully responsible for their actions, we need to ensure that they are properly equipped with the right tools to dissect the beliefs that influence their actions. Doing so eliminates the possibility for external influence, and the person who committed the action is fully responsible for their actions.

2. Education and Access to Information

Education is fundamental to a well-functioning society. With increased levels of education and improved access to information, people are better equipped to address information and form well-founded beliefs. In the digital age, information is abundant but not always reliable. Ecker et al. (2022), Professor & ARC Future Fellow of the School of Psychological Science at the University of Western Australia, details the importance of building immunity to misinformation in *The Role of Education and Intellectual Activity on Cognition* (Parisi et al., 2012). Without a grounded educational foundation, individuals are prone to bias, misinformation and external factors that cloud their decision-making. Education fosters critical thinking, which is key to our debate in discussing whether people should be held responsible for their beliefs. Cultivating analytical skills and encouraging intellectual curiosity empowers people to form their own beliefs and opinions grounded in reason, evidence and understanding. Farah Latif Naz, a Doctor of Education at Bahauddin Zakariya University, highlights in the *Challenges and Benefits of Multicultural Education for Promoting Equality in Diverse Classrooms* that people of diverse backgrounds having access to quality education result in greater levels of understanding and appreciation for differences in culture, perspectives and ways of life. An increased level of education and increased access to quality information lead not only to more guided and grounded beliefs but also to diverse beliefs, allowing people to think freely while being able to accept other perspectives. As established above, quality education greatly impacts people's beliefs and their ability to accept differences in beliefs. With quality education, we can work towards confidently holding people responsible for their actions, which are grounded in their beliefs, as we have begun eliminating one of the potential factors that may cause misbelief and misguidance. Education enables people to make beliefs grounded in reason and information and makes holding people responsible for their actions more justitively and reasonably. While we have made it clear that proper education is needed before we can confidently hold people accountable for their actions, access to information is something that must also be addressed. Access to quality information is necessary, as people may have the right tools to dissect information but not the correct information to dissect. Given the plethora of information that exists in the digital age, it is necessary for quality education to work in tandem with quality information so that people can make qualified and grounded beliefs. Until people are well informed and well equipped, we cannot confidently hold people responsible for their actions without questioning external, uncontrollable influences. As we address the logical limitations that may hinder one's ability to form beliefs and take action, we can continue exploring another avenue, emotion, that affects how people form their beliefs.

3. Emotion

Emotional attachments can be both beneficial and detrimental in regard to influencing beliefs. These attachments work alongside a sense of community to provide a sense of belonging in security in shared experiences and beliefs. However, this has the potential to lead to stubbornness and difficulty in considering alternative viewpoints—the opposite of what we wished for resulting from quality information and education. Such attachment and negligence combined with incorrect and harmful beliefs (such as anti-vaccination, as discussed), creates a situation where a person's beliefs may be grounded more in their emotional attachments than their own personal analyses and logic. When one's actions are largely influenced by such emotional and external factors, it is difficult to reasonably hold them responsible for their actions, as their beliefs have external biases aside from their own. To address this issue, we must explore how we can dissect and influence reason for such emotional decision making. According to Manuel Garcia-Garcia Ph.D., a Global Lead of

Neuroscience at Ipsos and Professor of Consumer Neuroscience at NYU, in *The Role of Emotion in Human Decision Making and Implications for Brand Success*, Garcia states that there are two main ways emotions play into our beliefs and choices (Ipsos Neuroscience, 2020). Integral emotions—emotions related to the decision at hand—and incidental emotions—emotions unrelated to the decision—sway a person’s judgment and decision-making. When given certain information, people may rely upon their emotions and become influenced by these two factors when forming beliefs and taking action. To mitigate the impact of such emotions on decision-making, the paper suggests strategies such as focusing on reducing emotional intensity (through calming down and being clear and level-headed) or reducing emotional input into the decision, relying on the underlying logic and facts of the matter. Another method mentioned is deliberately trying to implement bias in the other direction, considering the other viewpoint from that viewpoint, essentially putting a person in another person’s shoes. While these strategies are good on paper, emotional attachment is deeply rooted in human nature and difficult to remove. While not guaranteed, we hope that the combination of such strategies, as well as improved levels of education and information, results in an overall decrease in beliefs influenced by emotional factors.

4. Community

As mentioned before, it is within human nature to maintain tight-knit social groups, as a sense of commonality and shared circumstances creates environments of safety and socialization. In *Taking a Closer Look at Group Identity: The Link between Theory and Measurement of Group Consciousness and Linked Fate* by Gabriel R. Sanchez, Ph.D., a Senior Fellow in Governance Studies at Brookings, and Edward D. Vargas, Ph.D., Associate Professor at the School of Transborder Studies at Arizona State University, we see that research on different racial groups shows relationships between an individual and their perceived beliefs of the experiences of their racial group. These individuals are more likely to rely on group-based interests when making decisions, and research has shown that this effect is particularly strong among African Americans (Sanchez and Vargas). These ideas extend beyond race and apply to the idea of group identification as a whole. However, as we have explored, external influences can be both beneficial and detrimental to beliefs and therefore actions. A shared sense of group identity can foster strong communities and encourage collective action toward common goals. While beneficial, it is easy for people to fall into a herd mindset, conforming to the beliefs of the group rather than having individual, logical thought. It is difficult to determine responsibility, as it is questionable whether the individual truly believes in what the herd believes or is being influenced by their herd. While it can be argued that humans are a product of their surroundings, there is still a level of responsibility that falls upon the herd rather than the individual for believing in potentially ungrounded and detrimental beliefs. For people to be held responsible for their actions, we must breakdown harmful beliefs that exist within certain groups while maintaining group identity as well. Improving education, accessing information, and implementing ways to regulate emotion are steps to help strip groups of their potentially harmful beliefs. Gearing the individual with proper tools allows them to analyse the information given to them rather than following herd mentality. Instead of forcibly breaking groups apart, this method helps members of groups find commonality in their logic and form communities grounded in fact. Groups formed in this way are more resistant to external influence and have beliefs grounded in evidence and logic. They’re free to believe what they want, but it is their responsibility to hold themselves accountable for the actions that stem from such beliefs.

5. Conclusion

As discussed, people should be held responsible for their actions rather than their beliefs to encourage freedom of thought while maintaining order. With proper improvements in education and access to information, people are geared with the logical means to dissect information. Introducing them to proper emotional regulatory techniques helps eliminate external influences that may interfere with their logic when presented with information. Herd mentality within communities can be steered towards more grounded and logical beliefs, if not before, eliminating risks that may arise from misguided herds. Only then can we confidently hold people responsible for their actions, as the actions they take are of their own volition, likely void of external influence. While it may be impossible to achieve complaint immunity towards outside influence, we can gear people with proper tools to work towards this immunity and hold them responsible for their actions. The flip side is a world of moral relativity where no one is to blame but everyone is to blame at

the same time. Such a world lacks responsibility and therefore order, resulting in discord to run rampant in the world. Holding people responsible for their actions allows freedom of thought and order to coexist. While there is still the chance for discord, the chance is slim, and the collective herd of humanity is still grounded in logic. Looking outside this discussion, we can extend what we see here to discussions of intergroup relations. There is much division and discourse in the modern world, and the use of such methods can help reduce such conflicts.

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Conflicts of Interest

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