

Beliefs Are a Package Deal¹

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Marriage is an almost universal institution. In the US, 90% of the population has been married at some point in their lives (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). Universal institutions are not often questioned since universality is assumed to reflect a social benefit (Wasserstrom 1977). In the case of marriage, this assumption has been called into doubt by some scholars, yet the institution remains strong. The political critiques do not gain ground because they do not address deeply held beliefs. To understand why marriage remains such a strongly valued institution, we need to look beyond a political critique to the cognitive underpinnings. Social change depends on transforming ingrained attitudes that uphold social institutions. In this paper, I argue that changing institutions with undesirable social consequences, such as marriage, requires changing the underlying belief packages, which combine conceptual and nonconceptual content and explain the research from psychology better than any single notion of a belief-like mental state. They also help us clarify why institutional change is so difficult from a cognitive science perspective in addition to the political perspective. If we want to lessen the importance of social institutions, we need to work on the political as well as the cognitive level.

1. Marriage: An Evil and Discriminating Institution

The consequences of the social tolerance of marriage are horrendous, especially for women. As philosopher Claudia Card argues, marriage is an evil institution because it easily becomes a trap – sometimes a deadly one – where violence becomes obvious only after it was perpetrated

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(2007, 31). Abuse within marriage cannot be prevented without dissolving the institution. Even if we do not go as far as Card, it is clear that marriage discriminates between those who are married and those who are not, whether they are in this position by choice, circumstance, or legal limitations. The U.S. General Accounting Office has counted over 1,138 federal laws that use marital status for allocating rights and benefits (2004). These benefits range from tax advantages to hospital visitation rights. Unmarried people are excluded from these benefits simply by virtue of their marital status.

As Bella DePaulo, Wendy Morris, and colleagues document, singles face stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. They capture these in the term “singlism” (2005; see also DePaulo 2006, Hertel et al. 2007, Greitemeyer 2009, Morris et al. 2007, Morris et al. 2008). Morris et al. (2007) summarize empirical research that indicates that married people are viewed in a more positive light than single people. They are characterized as happy, loving, kind, and secure. Single people are seen as lonely, insecure, and unhappy. Being single is not viewed as a state to choose permanently (Gordon 2003): Singles are always looking for a partner. These stereotypes have concrete consequences. In addition to the federal laws, the research of Morris et al. shows that singles face discrimination when leasing a home.

Discrimination is hardly socially desirable, as the intolerance of discrimination in an increasing number of social categories reflects. Yet, marriage is not being questioned. Its discrimination is not only tolerated but also not acknowledged. Unlike other prejudices, such as racism, singlism is still very much normatively accepted (Crandall & Warner 2005). This acceptance is based on assumptions that suggest that marriage is an institution desirable for

individuals and society. These assumptions form a powerful package that makes questioning this desirability socially unacceptable.

Within philosophy, beliefs are considered propositional attitudes. A propositional attitude is attributed to an individual with a specific attitude about a proposition, for example, what is believed² (Bermúdez 1995, 193-194). Stereotypes are a particular kind of belief: They are traits, characteristics, or qualities that are attributed to a group or members of that group (Schneider 2004, 24). Research on stereotypes suggests that their content is more complex than the philosophical belief definition implies.

2. Evidence from Psychology

Research in social psychology, especially on implicit association and priming, indicates that stereotypes are deeply seated, can be automatically activated, their content influences behavior, and they seem to contain several mental states. Implicit association tests reveal that despite the years of socially counteracting racial stereotypes, we still make implicit association between African-Americans and negative images (Gendler 2008b, 577). This suggests the prevalence of subconsciously held stereotypes, reflecting the legacy of social norms that still influence behavior. Priming activates mental states temporarily using external cues often without the awareness of the person (Williams, Huang, & Bargh 2009, 1260). The primes can be used as a prompt for experiments in social psychology – such as particular words. Or they can occur in everyday life as an environmental trigger – something we observe, such as a wedding band. Priming effects have been found in most psychological phenomena, including belief, judgment, and social behavior.

² This is formalized as S A that P. For example, Peter [the subject S] believes [the attitude A] that marriage makes a person happy [the proposition P].

The two-stage process model developed by John Bargh and Tanya Chartrand (1999) affirms the linkage between several mental states (466). First, an environment-perception link automatically captures perceptual information, which is converted into behavioral tendencies, which can be primed directly or indirectly by environmental factors, including people. The more frequently exposed, the more likely these links form and the stronger the behavioral tendency (469). Frequent exposure to similar messages and situations creates – unconsciously – motivations to reach certain goals, form specific beliefs, or make particular judgments. Research shows that we make unconscious evaluations of what we perceive that can later impact our behavior (474-475). For example, we might evaluate attending a wedding as a good experience, so our mental representations of the wedding are stored with a “good” evaluation. This positive association can later influence how we judge marriage. All of these tendencies can be unconsciously held and triggered (473) impacting our behavior and evaluation of people and situations (475). If this is the case, it is unlikely that primes activate only one mental state. They are likely activating a belief package. If primes trigger more than one mental state, we need a model for the development of such a belief package, which can help us explain the impact of stereotypes and false beliefs on our behavior.

3. Perceptual Process

The key to understanding stereotypes is to analyze their content, which results from our perceptual process. According to Philosopher Fred Dretske (1981) perception is similar to a funnel: There is a vast amount of information that is coming into our system through perceptual experiences – experiences involving our senses. Dretske calls this analog information (26). This analog information is similar to a picture that conveys a gestalt

impression of a scene rather than specific information about a detail. It is nonconceptual data that has not been conceptually reduced or forced through the mental funnel as described in the next section.

To illustrate this model, imagine a little girl, maybe four years old, playing the card game “Old Maid” with her parents and some friends. She is having a lot of fun beating her friends by ensuring that she is not the loser with the Old Maid card. Nobody realizes that the card game is not just fun. It also implies a loose association: Old maids and losers. This association enters the girl’s mind as a gestalt message of the whole game. She gets this message even if she does not yet know what old maids are. This information still comes in, as Dretske suggests.

Similarly, when a young boy attends a wedding, the whole wedding will be captured in analog information, maybe as an iconic representation (Fodor 2007), including the boy’s emotions – associating weddings with fun thus making them more attractive. This information is stored as content and might be accessed again at a later point.

Dretske provides a starting point but his framework is not rigorously defining “content.” What exactly does it mean for a state of our mind to have content? In most philosophical accounts, content is defined as whatever is in a “that” clause of a belief or, more generally, a propositional attitude: I believe that marriage is good for society. Philosopher José Luis Bermúdez (1995) suggests that a mental state has content if it represents the world – it describes how the world is. He argues that the notion of content requires that we explain what a representational state is (195). Bermúdez sets forth four criteria for representational states to generalize the notion of content (200). Representational states function as intermediaries between experiential input and behavioral output (criterion 1). They are cognitively integrated

(criterion 2). They are compositionally structured so that their elements can be recomposed into other representational states (criterion 3). And they can misrepresent (criterion 4).

4. Concept Application and Categorization

Let us return to the young boy's perception of the wedding scene because during his perceptual process something important happens: Categorization and concept application. Applying concepts to perceptual information forces it through the funnel of Dretske's model. We are converting the analog signal into digital information by synthesizing, generalizing, and abstracting the analog data (Dretske 1981, 30). Although this abstraction is not necessary for perception itself, it is necessary for using the information as the basis for knowledge or beliefs. For example, the boy might interpret a woman dressed in white as the bride. This process reduces the amount of information because we no longer view the person as an individual but rather as a member of a group. According to psychologist Gordon Allport, the categorization process is a natural, inevitable process of perception (Allport 1954/1979, 20). The underlying process of categorization can happen at different levels of our awareness: Conscious vs. nonconscious processes. A conscious process requires more effort and tends to be slower. We involve our conceptual capacities – cognitive faculties that use concepts such as bride – to bestow meaning; for example to describe the woman dressed in white as *bride* thus about to get married. We are fully aware of this process and intent to act in a certain way or make specific choices (Bargh & Chartrand 1999, 463). In contrast, there are two nonconscious, automatic processes (463-464). After we have intentionally learned a concept, the process of applying it becomes automatic. A process can also happen completely automatic. For example, we perceive our environment in its richness largely automatically without having to consciously

make the effort to see every single thing. These automatic processes happen nonconceptually, although it can initially involve concepts. And these processes develop very early in a human's life. For example, 7-month old infants can differentiate between male and female voices. Two months later, they categorize faces into male and female (Mackie et al. 1996, 46). Thus infants categorize before they can articulate the concepts. This automatic process also lays the foundation for mental scaffolding, which becomes particularly important in the study of stereotypes because basic concepts – such as male and female – form the lowest ranks of the scaffold of stereotypes (Williams et al. 2009). To understand this process, it is helpful to differentiate beliefs – mental states that are at least potentially conscious – from states that are nonconscious and do not involve concepts. These states might, however, involve a vague notion, such as warmth or nurturance, which an infant might develop through her experience of breast-feeding.

5. Nonconceptual Belief-Like States

It is unlikely that the infant applies an adult concept of “male” and “female” to the faces she sees. But as the research shows, she can differentiate them. Thus, there must be mental states that are pre-conceptual that might feed into conceptual states either later in a child's development or during belief formation in an adult. According to philosopher Stephen Stich (1978), there is a psychological mechanism that gathers perceptual information into subdoxastic states, which are then used in the formation of beliefs about our environment (503). Subdoxastic states are distinct from beliefs based on two basic belief properties not present in subdoxastic states: Beliefs are accessible and inferentially integrated. When asked, belief holders can report the content of their beliefs once made conscious (504). There is no

clear mechanism to make subdoxastic states conscious like there is for unconsciously held beliefs (506). Most beliefs are formed inferentially, that is, we infer beliefs from other beliefs. As a very simple example, if I believe that the wall is white, I have made inferences from my beliefs of what constitutes the color white and what a wall is. Subdoxastic states can play a role in inference but, in contrast to beliefs, this role is very limited to a “narrow range of beliefs” (507).

Using Bermúdez’ criteria for mental states, we can characterize subdoxastic states as representational states, thus, they are states with content even though this content is nonconceptual. Although Stich sees subdoxastic states as parts of the causal chain to belief formation (501), from his examples it is clear that they could be used to explain behavior directly. He postulates, for example, that we can sort sentences into grammatical and ungrammatical even without being able to explicitly state a rule. Subdoxastic states function here as explanatory intermediaries between input and output (criterion 1). Despite limitations, Stich notes that subdoxastic states are integrated, a contention supported and expanded by Bermúdez³ (211-212; criterion 2). Since they serve³ as input to belief formation, they must be structured such that they can be recomposed (criterion 3). And clearly, our intuition about grammar, for example, can be wrong: Subdoxastic states can misrepresent (criterion 4).

Through Stich, we learn that there are nonconceptual mental states that are belief-like, which serve as input to beliefs but are not themselves beliefs. These subdoxastic states are integrated with other subdoxastic states. As I noted, Stich does not claim that subdoxastic states directly influence behavior even though his examples lend themselves to that claim.

³ Bermúdez refers to subdoxastic states as “subpersonal computational states.”

Philosopher Tamar Szabó Gendler (2008a & 2008b) makes this claim outright in her work on aliefs.

6. Belief-Like States' Impact on Behavior

Gendler proposes a new category of mental states, aliefs, which differentiates and summarizes existing categories providing us with a more powerful explanatory tool. Aliefs – innate habitual propensities to respond to a stimulus in a particular way (2008b, 557) – are more primitive than beliefs and form earlier in the development of a child (575), like the facial recognition in infants mentioned previously, which might be based on an alief like “Female. Food! Approach!” Aliefs are often tied to our evolved self-protection mechanisms – at the foundation of our mental scaffold – and therefore can have a strong influence on behavioral dispositions. Unlike Stich’s subdoxastic states, they do not need to be inputs to beliefs to influence behavior. Most of the time, they work in tandem with our beliefs but sometimes they can pull us into a different direction. As Dretske pointed out, there is a lot more information that we take in than we consciously process. What we explicitly intend might compete with other input that tells us to do the exact opposite (Gendler 2008a, 640). The most basic representational state contradicts the conscious belief. Aliefs capture this input and thus explain the resulting behavior, which does not match the overt belief but rather the alief primed by the environment at the same time as the belief.

Aliefs expand the content of the mental state Bermúdez addresses by adding an action-generating and affect-laden dimension to the representational content. A person alieves when she is in a mental state with representational content that is also affective with a behavioral

predisposition⁴ (2008b, 559). Thus, Gendler’s work allows us to claim that there are belief-like states – aliefs – that have explanatory power for behavior in their own right, not just in a causal chain of belief formation. Singlist aliefs might take the form of “Old maid. Loser. Avoid!” – also demonstrating the danger of an “innocent” game. The messages conveyed can, when combined with other influences, form stereotypes. Such aliefs would then drive someone to avoid being single, pursuing an intimate relationship no matter what cost.

The affective dimension of aliefs reflects the unconsciously triggered evaluation that automatically creates approach tendencies toward what is perceived as good and avoidance of what is bad (Bargh & Morsella 2009, 13). What is considered good and bad, though, is culturally determined.

7. Cultural Influence

So far we have talked about the cognitive processes related to mental states. These processes do not exist in a vacuum. They interact with the social context of the actor, which form more inputs to the belief package (Tuana 2001). We have seen that playing a card game can create the alief “Old maid. Loser. Avoid!” But where does the avoidance tendency come from? This alief could not develop unless the culture at large devalues singles. These are the seeds of singlism: The ideas that single people are somehow deficient and unsuccessful. They are not the only beliefs and aliefs that culture imprints into our brain, though (Ambady & Bharucha 2009). The flip-side of singlism is couplemania – the overvaluation of the couple. As DePaulo, Morris and colleagues have documented, both are strong cultural forces triggering neural

⁴ This is formalized as: A person alieves r, a, b. For example, Peter – from the example in footnote 2 – might alief “Married people are happy. Happiness is good! Pursue!”

responses such as aliefs, which channel our categorization into avoidance and approach behavior (e.g., DePaulo & Morris 2005, Morris et al. 2008).

Culture does not just magically influence our behavior. Culture lumps together values, practices, and beliefs of people who share at least some parts of an identity, like living in the same nation (Halloran 2007). Cultural influences stem from the messages we store that become part of our social identity and then determine what goal we pursue based on which beliefs or aliefs are activated (i.e., primed by the environment). Goals can be tied to our self-concept or our group membership. However, we can best understand goals within their political and social context (Oakes 2001). Ego-justification could lead a man to believe that he is lovable and therefore seek out a marital partner (Jost et al. 2004, 887). This goal reflects the social context of the predominance of the couple⁵. Once married, group-justification can lead to perpetuating favorable images of married people (Jost et al. 2004, 887), such as the (false) claim that they are happier, healthier, and wealthier (DePaulo & Morris 2005). System-justification captures the interplay of beliefs, aliefs, and other mental states with culture via the social and political context (Jost & Banaji 1994; Jost et al. 2004). System-justification provides legitimacy of the status quo to both high and low status groups. The preferential treatment of couples, especially married ones, through legal benefits based on marriage or domestic partnership is justified by claims of the superiority of coupled people (DePaulo 2006). If these cultural messages influence our goals unfiltered, most of us will have a strong goal to find a partner. Thus, the cultural messages reduce what is primed to culturally acceptable mental states, like the alief “Married. Happy. Pursue!” These culturally influenced goals, therefore,

⁵ His friends could also support his lovability belief. Marriage is not the only way that someone can feel loved.

pick out certain aspects of the belief package, which stores these goals together with other mental states. Philosopher Richmond Thomason suggests that storage happens in modules, integrating related mental states more closely.

8. State Storage

Thomason (2009) draws on computer science and artificial intelligence to provide a model of state storage and integration. He suggests that beliefs are compiled for an occasion, rather than stored as ready-access beliefs. Instead of having a certain belief stored, we store belief-like attitudes – elements that can be formed into beliefs when an occasion arises that requires a specific combination (5). When we are in one mental state, we can access others that have been stored or are co-occurrent, integrating several mental states with representational content. This on-the-fly construction of beliefs can be habitual – Gendler’s aliefs – or they might be the result of thorough reasoning. Traditionally, modular accounts assume one belief as input to a formula. Thomason instead proposes that the input is a family of beliefs (6). These families are structured reflecting an order to the beliefs within the family. The beliefs in a module might not be completely formed, which suggests that the elements stored in a module⁶ can be nonconceptual.

The research summarized by Bargh (2006) strongly suggests that we store related information in modules – otherwise primes would not produce a wide range of effects (148). The same prime would consistently produce the same effect if no associated aliefs or beliefs would tag along. As Bargh notes: “Priming effects [...] come in packages” (152). Beliefs and

⁶ It is important to differentiate this account from the brain modules heavily criticized by primate researcher Frans de Waal (2002). The brain modules of evolutionary psychology de Waal dismisses are conceptualized as concrete, separated, and inborn parts. Following Thomason, I am envisioning here modules that loosely connect similar mental states.

aliefs about marriage and singlehood are likely stored together. A conscious decision to marry might be driven by the belief that marriage makes people happy but also by the alief “Single! Lonely! Avoid!” This alief strengthens the behavioral tendency of the belief, consistent with cultural norms.

Combining Thomason’s proposal with the idea that nonconceptual content is also stored, we can paint a picture of a belief package. The belief package loosely groups beliefs, aliefs, and subdoxastic states into thematic modules, which are likely determined by the experiential situation in which the information was first gathered. We hold many integrated beliefs and aliefs, thematically stored in modules. For example, a person’s mental states regarding marriage might be grouped together based on an experience at a wedding. New information is added to this module based on similarity of content. Whenever a module is activated, all of its contents are activated and can at least potentially influence our behavior. That, of course, presupposes that mental states can impact behavior.

9. Acting on Mental States

Philosopher John Perry (1979) demonstrates how a belief causes specific action only if it is concretized by indexicals – for an individual at a point in time at a specific place. Without individuating beliefs, beliefs have no causal effect (18). Action happens by personalizing the prime: For me, now, here. This action is most suitable for pursuing a personal goal, which might be directly related to the experimental context of the prime (Bargh 2006) or reflect cultural neural imprinting. Maybe someone believes that people should get married when they are under 30. This has no impact on his behavior, though, unless it is individuated as “I am 29. I should get married now.” Similarly, action can happen through a strong individuated alief such

as “My birthday. 29! Marry now!” is likely to drive him into marriage. Thus, indexicals situate beliefs and aliefs in the here and now of a specific individual.

10. Beliefs as Packages

At the beginning of the paper, I claimed that stereotypes are more complex than the traditional philosophical definition of beliefs. And I postulated that they are upholding the unjustified desirability of marriage. We are now in a position to substantiate these claims.

Understanding stereotypes as belief packages shows the varied influences on stereotypes – from basic cognitive structures that categorize the analog information we take in to system justification that digitize this information to legitimate the status quo. Mere categorization does not lead to stereotypes. Belief packages do. Categorization, such as the culturally imposed married versus single categories, simply associates people with certain groups. It forms the bottom rank of our mental scaffold, stored as a subdoxastic state. It does not lead to action. There needs to be more for that: Culturally sanctioned aliefs that impact approach or avoidance behavior. Through games like Old Maid, we learn “Single. Lonely! Avoid!” The alief “Married. Happy! Approach!” is imprinted in us through messages in media and academic research (DePaulo 2006). Through repetitive exposure to these aliefs, we store them with the categorizing subdoxastic states. They influence our goals. Individuation through indexicals turn the package into action.

If we combine this couplemanic belief package with the belief that universal institutions are socially desirable and with the observation that marriage is almost universal, we end up with the belief that marriage is social desirable despite evidence to the contrary. The message

of marriage's universality is reinforced by the ubiquitous presence of wedding bands, which are thus reinforcing the subdoxastic state suggesting marriage is universal.

Belief packages also explain why stereotypes are so deeply rooted. We cannot eliminate stereotypes by changing one thing. We need to change the whole package that underlies – for the context of this paper – devaluation of singles and overvaluation of couples. This, then, points toward a more holistic approach to stereotype prevention: We could achieve that through valuing all of our relationships – romantic and otherwise – equally. This could happen within more intentionally communal living creating new beliefs like “Community. Happiness! Pursue!”

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