



Is belief superiority justified by superior knowledge? ☆

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ABSTRACT

Individuals expressing belief superiority—the belief that one's views are superior to other viewpoints—perceive themselves as better informed about that topic, but no research has verified whether this perception is justified. The present research examined whether people expressing belief superiority on four political issues demonstrated superior knowledge or superior knowledge-seeking behavior. Despite perceiving themselves as more knowledgeable, knowledge assessments revealed that the belief superior exhibited the greatest gaps between their perceived and actual knowledge. When given the opportunity to pursue additional information in that domain, belief-superior individuals frequently favored agreeable over disagreeable information, but also indicated awareness of this bias. Lastly, experimentally manipulated feedback about one's knowledge had some success in affecting belief superiority and resulting information-seeking behavior. Specifically, when belief superiority is lowered, people attend to information they may have previously regarded as inferior. Implications of unjustified belief superiority and biased information pursuit for political discourse are discussed.

1. Introduction

Possessing accurate knowledge about oneself is notoriously difficult. Many people maintain inaccurate positive illusions about themselves (Taylor & Brown, 1988), evaluate their own abilities and traits more favorably than others' despite statistical improbabilities (Alicke, 1985), and fail to recognize their own incompetence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). *Belief superiority*, or the belief that one's own views are more correct than other viewpoints, is another instance in which people privilege something about themselves—their beliefs—over those of other people (Brandt, Evans, & Crawford, 2015; Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review; Raimi & Leary, 2014; Tappin & McKay, 2017; Toner, Leary, Asher, & Jongman-Sereno, 2013). However, no research to date has examined whether people who claim this sense of belief superiority are at all accurate or justified in this claim.

Is it possible that this sense of belief superiority is justified? Across psychology and philosophy, beliefs are typically defined as being rooted in a perceived truthful or factual basis (Fishbein, 1963; Fishbein & Raven, 1962; Schwitzgebel, 2015). Thus, for a belief to be superior—or more correct—than other beliefs, it should have a superior basis in relevant factual information. Following this logic, belief-superior individuals should possess more accurate knowledge than their more modest peers, or at least better recognize relevant facts when presented with them. There is a positive relationship between belief superiority

and *perceived* knowledge: Raimi and Leary (2014) found that participants who expressed belief superiority about hydraulic fracturing (aka, fracking) considered themselves to be better educated about energy and gas issues than the average American. But, whether belief-superior individuals are justified in their assessments of enhanced knowledge is still unknown.

1.1. Belief superiority

Belief superiority is a comparative cognition: The belief superior do not just think highly of their own beliefs, but think those beliefs are superior to other views on that topic (Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review; Toner et al., 2013). Although belief superiority resembles other types of self-enhancement (for a review, see Leary & Toner, 2012), the object of focus is one's beliefs, rather than positive characteristics about the self (e.g., competence, intelligence, or abilities). Belief superiority has been demonstrated with political beliefs (Brandt et al., 2015; Toner et al., 2013), religious views (Hopkin, Hoyle, & Toner, 2014), environmental issues (Maki & Raimi, 2017; Raimi & Leary, 2014), and more trivial issues such as etiquette (Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review). Belief superiority can also be a general psychological tendency that is not confined to a single issue (Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review). In each case, the extremity of one's belief—rather than the direction—predicts this sense of possessing

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beliefs that are superior to alternatives. When it comes to political beliefs—the focus of the present research—belief superiority is a bipartisan problem: Across many political issues, those with more extreme attitudes—regardless of ideology—are more likely to express belief superiority (Toner et al., 2013).

Belief superiority is correlated with various attitude strength constructs, including attitude confidence and certainty (Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007; Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review; Rios, DeMarree, & Statzer, 2014), but differs in a critical way: Belief superiority, by definition, is a *relative* comparison to alternative viewpoints, not just an assertion about the strength of one's convictions. Thus, one could be very confident or certain in a belief, but not necessarily believe it to be superior to other viewpoints; for example, one could be sure that Coca Cola is better than Pepsi, but not begrudge people who hold the opposite view. Alternatively, one could hold a belief without much confidence but still believe it to be superior to other views, such as a doctor who isn't sure that a particular antibiotic will cure her patient's infection, but believes that it is better than other treatments (Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review; Toner et al., 2013). However, the attitude correctness component of attitude certainty resembles belief superiority by similarly appealing to the notion that one's attitude or belief is singularly dominant. Furthermore, the leading measure of attitude correctness includes one item that asks people to compare the “rightness” of their belief to all possible attitudes, thus introducing a relative component to this construct (Petrocelli et al., 2007; Rios et al., 2014). It is unclear whether the inclusion of non-comparative items in the attitude correctness measure makes for a psychological experience that is substantially different than belief superiority's wholly relative wording, but neither construct has been studied in terms of how they relate to gaps in actual and perceived knowledge or information-seeking processes, the goals of the present research.

Belief superiority is also distinct from moral conviction, or a strong belief about whether something is moral or immoral (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005). A superior belief can apply just to one circumstance (e.g., “A progressive income tax in the U.S. reduces income inequality”); just because someone expresses belief superiority about one issue or stance does not mean that they ascribe similar superiority to all related beliefs (Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review). Conversely, a moral conviction is universal, asserting that a belief not only has objective merit, but that it is grounded in a greater moral truth that should apply universally, rather than just in isolated circumstances (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Morgan, 2014). Additionally, emotional experience is considered a factor in moral convictions (Skitka et al., 2005; Skitka & Morgan, 2014), but is not part of the definition of belief superiority (Raimi & Leary, 2014; Toner et al., 2013). Belief superiority *could* be motivated by a moral conviction, but could also have an entirely different basis (e.g., a perceived factual basis, the focus of the present research).

In addition to its construct distinctiveness, belief superiority has also been demonstrated to be consequential. For instance, thinking that one's belief is superior to other viewpoints predicts interpersonal strife: People high in belief superiority tend to act in maladaptive ways during relationship conflicts (for example, raising their voices or refusing to admit they were wrong; Raimi and Jongman-Sereno, under review), derogate strangers who hold opposing political views (Raimi & Leary, 2014), and treat conversations as a chance to profess their viewpoints rather than listen (Maki & Raimi, 2017).

But perhaps there is a hidden upside to belief superiority: It may be that people who think their beliefs are superior are actually correct in that self-perception. This would imply that the damage to social relationships from belief superiority might be somewhat offset by a true understanding of the world and a refusal to defer to misguided trends. For example, President Lyndon B. Johnson ignored the vehement opposition of members of his own political party when working toward civil rights legislation in the 1960s. Despite the bad blood that resulted,

he considered his beliefs—that no racial group is inherently better or worse than another—to be superior to those of the opposition and believed future historians would approve of his choices (Caro, 2012). Thus, belief superiority could be a result of a superior grasp of belief-relevant issues that guides action in reasonable ways.

1.2. The gap between perceived and actual knowledge

Although superior beliefs should (ideally) be supported by superior information, there are several reasons belief superiority might exist that have nothing to do with enhanced knowledge. People often exaggerate their own skills or traits, particularly when those traits are socially desirable (Alicke, 1985). Indeed, thinking highly of oneself, even unrealistically, can promote mental health and provide an effective buffer against negative or threatening information about the self (Taylor & Brown, 1988; although see also: Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Robins & Beer, 2001). Expressing superiority about one's views may even have social benefits: Overconfident people are perceived as possessing higher social status (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012). Additionally, research on motivated reasoning—particularly for political issues—suggests that thinking one's beliefs are superior could validate those beliefs and help to resist the negative effects of dissonance when confronted with disagreeable information (Festinger & Maccoby, 1964; Hart et al., 2009; Kunda, 1990). Thus, belief superiority may provide benefits, even without truly superior knowledge.

There are many reasons to doubt the claims by belief-superior people that their views are supported by better information. People are remarkably unaware of their own limitations and errors. For instance, people routinely underestimate their own bias (Pronin, Lin, & Ross, 2002), even when they consciously use biased strategies (Hansen, Gerbasi, Todorov, Kruse, & Pronin, 2014). Furthermore, participants who perform the worst across a variety of metrics exhibit the widest discrepancy between self-assessments of competence and actual performance (e.g., the “Dunning-Kruger effect”; Barnsley et al., 2004; Epley & Dunning, 2000; Kruger & Dunning, 1999). This gap between perceived and actual competence is generally attributed to a lack of metacognitive ability to recognize one's own limitations (e.g., Balcetis & Dunning, 2013); thus, if belief-superior people have inferior knowledge, they may not even be aware of it.

Errors in metacognitive ability may be especially likely when it comes to political issues that people care about deeply. For instance, many people overestimate their ability to provide strong justifications for their views about controversial topics, and this overestimation is even more likely for those who care strongly about that topic or hold extreme views (Fernbach, Rogers, Fox, & Sloman, 2013; Fisher & Keil, 2014). We suspect that the belief superior may exhibit similar deficits when asked to demonstrate superior belief-relevant knowledge.

1.3. Belief superiority and information pursuit

Even if belief superiority is not supported by superior knowledge, belief superiority could be justified by another process: superior knowledge acquisition. That is, even if the belief-superior cannot demonstrate a superior grasp of relevant knowledge, they may still seek out information about that topic in an even-handed manner that exposes them to a diversity of viewpoints. As a result, their belief superiority may reflect a reasoned conclusion after comparing multiple viewpoints. Thus, a secondary question in the present research concerns how belief-superior people pursue relevant information. Specifically, the belief superior could engage in three types of information-seeking.

First, belief-superior people may not seek out new information at all out of a perceived lack of need; after all, they already think their beliefs are superior and well-informed. Although possible, this trend is unlikely. Belief superiority is predicted by belief extremity and confidence, constructs that are tied to political engagement (Raimi & Leary, 2014; Skitka & Bauman, 2008; Toner et al., 2013); thus, belief-superior

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