

Evaluating internal and external dissonance of belief dynamics in social systems

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Extended Abstract

Belief dynamics are central to human society. Individuals depend on accurate beliefs to engage in appropriate behaviors (Hemmer et al., 2022; Yon et al., 2020), such as deciding which college or which job position to apply for. Additionally, beliefs are inherently social — successful coordination and cooperation are founded on shared beliefs, and people form groups based on deep-seated beliefs (Van Prooijen & Douglas, 2018; White et al., 2021). However, beliefs were traditionally often studied in isolation; psychological studies typically focused on a single belief of independent individuals. However, this approach is increasingly challenged. On the one hand, the network perspective of individual belief systems suggests that beliefs should be considered interconnected systems – a change in one belief is constrained by surrounding beliefs and leads to changes in other beliefs (Brandt, 2022; Dalege et al., 2016; Powell et al., 2023). On the other hand, a social network approach suggests groups can be viewed as a social network of beliefs held by individuals (Lüders et al., 2024; Sirbu et al., 2017). Therefore, it is proposed that belief dynamics should increasingly be understood as a “network within a network,” where the within-person belief network is embedded within between-person social networks (Galesic et al., 2021; Vlasceanu et al., 2023).

A fundamental force driving belief dynamics is the human endeavor to resolve inconsistencies within both individual and social networks (Dalege et al., 2016; Galesic et al., 2021). This concept is supported by classic psychological theories, such as cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) and Heider’s balance theory (Heider, 1958). However, the nature of the trade-offs between internal dissonance and social imbalance remains unclear. Existing models often presume that individuals have a fixed preference for resolving internal dissonance over addressing social imbalance (Galesic et al., 2021), but the validity of this assumption is debatable. In reality, individuals may navigate these inconsistencies in a more dynamic and context-dependent manner. Humans are capable of synthesizing advice and personal experience, typically leaning towards more reliable sources (Biele et al., 2009; Vélez & Gweon, 2019). For instance, if an individual encounters conflicting beliefs about a particular issue but the social consensus on that issue is clear, they may choose to align with the social norm. Conversely, if the social consensus

Social History And The Dynamics Of Belief

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