



Domain-specific identity, epistemic regulation, and intellectual ability as predictors of belief-biased reasoning: A dual-process perspective

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Abstract

To explore the hypothesis that domain-specific identity development predicts reasoning biases, adolescents and young adults completed measures of domain-general and domain-specific identity, epistemic regulation, and intellectual ability and evaluated arguments that either supported or threatened their occupational goals. Biases were defined as the use of sophisticated reasoning to reject goal-threatening arguments and the use of cursory reasoning to accept goal-supportive arguments. Across two measures of bias, hierarchical regression analyses showed that domain-specific vocational identity and epistemic regulation best predicted reasoning biases. Neither age nor intellectual ability predicted significant variance in biases after vocational identity and epistemic regulation scores were entered into the regression equations. The results support the thesis that biases in specific domains can be explained both by domain-specific personality attributes and by domain-general metacognitive dispositions to monitor reasoning and decontextualize problem structure from superficial contents. A dual-process framework is proposed to explain the relationships among identity, epistemic regulation, age, intellectual ability, and reasoning biases.

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Introduction

Belief-motivated reasoning has been the subject of numerous investigations in social psychology (e.g., Kunda, 1990) but has received relatively little attention from developmental psychologists. In belief-motivated reasoning, strongly held beliefs skew the evaluation of relevant evidence. Specifically, belief-motivated reasoning occurs (a) when individuals are presented with evidence that threatens their beliefs and they use relatively sophisticated reasoning to discern means for rejecting or reinterpreting the evidence in a more favorable light and (b) when individuals are presented with belief-supportive evidence and they use relatively superficial “reasoning,” often based on the activation of general (e.g., judgment heuristics, stereotypes) and specific (e.g., personal experiences) semantic memories as well as assertions concerning the “truth,” to accept the evidence. The outcome of such belief-biased reasoning is belief and stereotype maintenance and, at times, belief polarization (Klaczynski, 2000).

For instance, in studies of the law of large numbers, children and adolescents often justify rejecting threatening information by citing the difficulties in making generalizations from small evidential samples; belief-supportive arguments based on similarly small samples of evidence are generally accepted by relying on heuristics (e.g., “She was there, she saw it with her own eyes”), stereotypes (e.g., “It’s true because poor people aren’t very smart”), and vivid experiences (e.g., “Every teacher I’ve known has been kinder than any doctor”) (Klaczynski & Fauth, 1997). Similarly, when asked to evaluate the quality of “scientific” research, adolescents detect threats to internal validity more often when the evidence contravenes a favored set of beliefs than when the evidence confirms those beliefs (Klaczynski & Gordon, 1996).

The paucity of research makes difficult the task of describing general age trends in belief-biased reasoning. Declines in biases from middle to late childhood (e.g., Klaczynski & Aneja, 2002), stability from late childhood through adolescence and into early adulthood (e.g., Klaczynski, 2000; Klaczynski & Fauth, 1997), and increases from early adulthood through later adulthood (Klaczynski & Robinson, 2000) all have been reported. In her research on scientific reasoning about evidence bearing on relatively weakly held beliefs, Kuhn and her colleagues (Kuhn, 1991; Kuhn, Amsel, & O’Loughlin, 1988; Kuhn, Garcia-Mila, Zohar, & Andersen, 1995) reported that, although reasoning biases decline modestly with age, biases nonetheless are characteristic of adolescents and adults.

Variables other than age may better account for individual differences in reasoning biases. First, although age-related changes in biases have been minimal or nonexistent, and although the developmental course of biases remains ambiguous, intellectual ability could affect the degree to which reasoning is biased. This hypothesis is quite plausible; if intellectual ability indexes limitations in computational capacity (Stanovich & West, 2000), then those of lower ability should have more difficulty

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