



Reports

Determined to conform: Disbelief in free will increases conformity

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HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ Disbelief in free will is associated with more conformity.
- ▶ Reported belief in free will is negatively correlated with reported conformity.
- ▶ Inducing participants to disbelieve in free will increases conformity.

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ABSTRACT

Does disbelief in free will reduce people's willingness to exert the effort needed for autonomous thought and action rather than simply conforming to group norms? Three studies tested the hypothesis that disbelief in free will would be associated with greater conformity than a belief in free will. In Study 1 (correlational), participants who expressed a greater belief in free will reported that they were less likely to conform in a variety of situations than participants who expressed greater disbelief in free will. In Study 2 (experimental), participants who were induced to disbelieve in free will conformed significantly more to the opinions of ostensible other participants when judging paintings than participants in free will and control conditions. In Study 3 (experimental), participants who were induced to disbelieve in free will conformed significantly more to experimenter-provided examples than participants in a meaning-threat control condition, as well as more than those encouraged to believe in free will. These findings suggest that belief in free will contributes to autonomous action and resisting temptations and pressures to conform.

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Introduction

Many situations offer powerful cues to guide behavior, but people can and sometimes do resist these so as to act based on their own inner thoughts, feelings, and motives. As highly social creatures, humans find it easy to copy the behavior of others, and (for better or worse) conformity is a common pattern. People also respond to subtle social cues that tell them how to act in standard ways. Yet deviance, defiance, and novelty-seeking creativity are also part of the human repertoire.

The questions of whether and in what sense humans have free will have been discussed for centuries. Although philosophical views about free will have become quite complex and subtle, laypersons tend to see free will as being able to act based on one's own inner thoughts, feelings, and choices, rather than being driven by external pressures (Monroe & Malle, 2010; Stillman, Baumeister, & Mele, 2011). The present investigation tested the hypothesis that people's degree of belief in free will would contribute to whether they acted based on inner thoughts or simply went along with external cues. Specifically, we predicted that conformity would increase (while

effortful, creative, original thought would decrease) as people's belief in free will declined.

Psychology has recently begun to investigate the effect of people's beliefs about free will on their behavior. It seems unlikely that psychology experiments will establish whether people have free will, but such studies can show whether people who believe in free will behave differently than people who do not. The value of such research does not depend on metaphysical truths about the reality of free will. Psychology has a long history of investigating how people's beliefs affect their behavior, regardless of the truth of those beliefs. As examples, research on positive illusions, just world beliefs, and self-esteem are almost entirely concerned with the effects of a belief on behavior, independent of the objective truth of those beliefs.

Previous research has shown that a belief in free will, whether pre-existing or experimentally manipulated, can affect behavior. Vohs and Schooler (2008) found that participants who were induced to believe that they did not have free will were more likely than others to take advantage of an opportunity to cheat. Subsequent research has demonstrated that a disbelief in free will is associated with more aggression, less helping, failing to change behavior after transgressions, and relatively poor work quality, even as assessed by a supervisor (Baumeister, Masicampo, & DeWall, 2009; Stillman & Baumeister, 2010; Stillman et al., 2010). The effects of free will on behavior are not due to changes in perceived accountability, feelings of

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agency, Protestant work ethic, conscientiousness, or locus of control (Baumeister et al., 2009; Stillman et al., 2010). Instead, it seems that reducing people's belief in free will makes them less willing to exert effort as needed for volition and self-control. The apparent deficit in effortful volition led us to think that disbelieving in free will should promote conformity and weaken creativity.

Forming one's own opinion and asserting it require effort. Nonconformists and political minorities often bemoan the laziness of a population that seems unwilling to expend the effort to generate, much less express, a unique opinion. Nonconformity requires effort in a few different ways. First, nonconformists may have to expend effort to ignore or deliberately resist the influence of others. Research has shown that making a decision on an Asch-style task in the presence of others' conflicting opinions requires more effort than making a decision without knowledge of others' choices (Kahan, Polivy, & Herman, 2003). Second, forming and expressing an opinion require the person to consider multiple options and find a basis for choosing one above the others, and this process is effortful and depleting (see Vohs et al., 2008). Last, individuals who choose not to conform may be asked to justify their behavior (e.g., Tetlock, 1983; Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989). Agreeing with majority consensus rarely needs to be explained, and so deviating from the majority carries the risk of further demands for mental effort. For all these reasons, people can save themselves considerable effort and energy by going along with the crowd.

We proposed that a disbelief in free will would make individuals disinclined to exert the effort necessary to form and express their own opinions. The first study tested the hypothesis that high trait disbelief in free will would correlate with a tendency to conform to others in general. The second study was an experimental test of the hypothesis that induced disbelief in free will would cause an increase in conformity to ostensible judgments of peers, specifically in the context of evaluating abstract art. The third study tested the hypothesis that inducing people to disbelieve in free will would make them conform to salient examples (provided by the experimenter) on a creativity task. This study also addressed an alternative explanation that any threat to people's beliefs, rather than just specifically messages denying free will, would decrease their likelihood of forming their own opinions. Across these studies, we defined conformity broadly so as to encompass both copying the behaviors of others and copying the forms of response presented in social cues. People can resist such tendencies and think for themselves, but it is often easier just to conform. We reasoned that disbelief in free will might reduce the inclination to put forth the effort to think for oneself.

Study 1

Method

Participants

Thirty-nine participants (22 women; mean age = 37.8) were recruited for participation through Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk. Mechanical Turk is an on-line service where individuals can solicit help with various tasks, including completing surveys, in exchange for a small payment.

Materials

Conformity scale. The conformity scale is an 11-item self-report measure assessing individuals' tendencies to conform to those around them (Mehrabian & Steffl, 1995). Participants were asked to respond to questions such as "I tend to rely on others when I have to make an important decision quickly" and "I don't give in to others easily" (reverse-coded) on a scale of 1 (not at all true of me) to 5 (extremely true of me).

FAD-Plus. In order to measure belief in free will, participants were given the FAD-Plus (Paulhus & Carey, 2011). The FAD-Plus consists of 27 items designed to measure four constructs related to free will: free will, scientific determinism, fatalistic determinism, and unpredictability. For the free will subscale, participants were asked to respond to statements such as "People have complete control over the decisions they make" and "People have complete free will" on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Procedure

Participants completed the conformity scale, the FAD-Plus, and some demographic questions on-line. The order of the conformity and FAD-Plus scales was counterbalanced.

Results and discussion

There was a significant negative correlation between belief in free will ($M = 3.54, SD = .75$) and conformity ($M = 2.46, SD = .56$), $r(37) = -.34, p = .03$. Participants who expressed a stronger belief in free will reported conforming less than participants with a weaker belief in free will.

We also checked the other subscales on the FAD-Plus. There was no significant correlation between conformity and scientific determinism ($M = 3.06, SD = .54$), $r(37) = .08, ns$, or fatalism ($M = 2.52, SD = .71$), $r(37) = -.07, ns$. There was a significant negative (and unpredicted) correlation between people's belief that the world is unpredictable ($M = 3.17, SD = .64$) and their self-reported conformity, $r(37) = -.37, p = .02$: The more unpredictable the world seemed, the less people reported conforming. It is possible that believing that the world is unpredictable is associated with believing in more free will, insofar as other people's free choices might make the world seem unpredictable. Supporting this, the unpredictability and free will subscales of the FAD-Plus were marginally correlated, $r(37) = .28, p = .08$.

It may be surprising that, although free will belief predicted participants' self-reported conformity, belief in scientific determinism did not. Theoretically, some might assume that a belief in free will should necessitate a lack of belief in determinism. However, previous research has found no negative correlation between self-reported belief in free will and self-reported belief in determinism (Paulhus & Carey, 2011). Individuals do not seem to assume that determinism necessitates a lack of free will. Even in studies where researchers present participants with hypothetical deterministic scenarios, where individuals' values are determined entirely by their genes and environment, the majority of participants still indicate that the characters in that world have free will (Nahmias, Morris, Nadelhoffer, & Turner, 2005). Individuals' belief in their freedom seems to be somewhat unimpeded by their beliefs about the strength of the causes of their behavior.

Two drawbacks to Study 1 must be noted. First, self-reports of conformity are not entirely reliable, insofar as people may claim to conform or resist conformity due to social desirability issues, wishful thinking, or lack of awareness (Nolan, Schultz, Cialdini, Gollstein, & Griskevicius, 2008; Pronin, Berger, & Molouki, 2007). Second, the finding is correlational and hence precludes causal inference. Study 2 sought to rectify these concerns.

Study 2

Study 2 was designed to test the hypothesis that disbelief in free will would cause an increase in conformity. Adapting procedures developed by Vohs and Schooler (2008), we sought to create experimental groups that differed as to the degree of belief in free will. Instead of merely passively exposing participants to statements supporting or denying free will, as in the original procedure, we had participants read the sentences and then re-state them in their own words. We reasoned that the active construction of sentences stating such views would constitute a good way to prime the thoughts, as

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