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Disagreements can be a healthy antidote for biases

December 11 2017

A personal bias can influence everything from the brands we buy to the way we treat other people, and in today's world, these pre-existing beliefs can lead to intense racial, political and religious conflicts.

What if there were a way to reduce this bias? Research from the College of Business at Virginia Tech University suggests that it's possible to activate a mindset that leads people to become open to questioning their assumptions. The study is available online in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

One of the reasons biases are so rampant is rooted in the human need for "cognitive consistency," which means processing information in a way that confirms preset beliefs, explains Ann-Sophie Chaxel, a professor at Virginia Tech and author of the study.

"Usually we think we are objective when we make decisions, but we are very subjective," Chaxel says. "People unconsciously distort information to confirm their pre-existing beliefs."

Chaxel explored whether she could lead people to reconsider their own beliefs by disrupting the cognitive consistency thinking process. She started by asking one group of participants to write short essays explaining why they agreed or disagreed with three statements that most people would disagree with, such as "Learning about the past has no value for those of us living in the present." This activated what is called a "counter-arguing mindset," which can help to reduce bias. Participants in

the control group wrote essays about neutral topics, such as "What is your idea of a perfect vacation."

Then she asked participants to choose between two laptops based on the descriptions of three product attributes—design, keyboard and features. The description of the first attribute clearly favored one of the laptops to give participants a "preliminary preference" for this one. After reading about the other two attributes of both laptops, Chaxel recorded the extent to which this preliminary preference impacted participants' evaluation of the following two product attributes.

The results showed people who had written about why they disagreed with statements were much less likely to be influenced by their preliminary preferences in the choice process. "By prompting people to disagree with three unrelated statements, they became much more skeptical about their early preference," Chaxel says.

In another experiment, people read product descriptions about new sports drinks that would be theoretically launched by Coke and Pepsi. This time, the descriptions were equally favorable, so participants selected a drink based on their pre-existing preference for one of the brands. As before, participants wrote essays explaining why they disagreed with three statements or about three neutral topics. Then they made their choice between two Coke and Pepsi products. Again, people who had written essays refuting statements were less likely to be influenced by their pre-existing preference for one brand.

These findings suggest that exposing ourselves to beliefs that are different than our own is one way counteract the tendency to become biased. "We tend to prefer being around people who share our opinions, but disagreeing is very healthy," Chaxel says. "Sharing our beliefs with people who have opposing views is a natural way to create a counter-arguing mindset."

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This study will appear in the January, 2018 issue of the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

More information: Benefiting From Disagreement: Counterarguing Reduces Prechoice Bias in Information Evaluation, DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1003 , onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 … 2/jcpy.1003/abstract

Provided by Society for Consumer Psychology

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